

## Taken

AARON WORTHINGTON'S thirteen birthday had turned out to be a grand disappointment. He'd asked for thirteen presents—a *reasonable request*, he thought, *one for each year of life with such a wonderful son*. But his rich dentist parents had only come through for twelve of them.

Aaron couldn't believe it. And one of the gifts—the 10-gigabyte MP3 player—had frozen without ever having played a single song.

He had thrown such a tantrum (a justifiable animated complaint, he called it) that his parents had sent him to bed early. He'd begrudgingly brushed his teeth with that awful bubblegum-flavored medicine toothpaste they made him use and marched to his bedroom. He stood in the doorway and looked back over his shoulder at his father, a broad-shouldered, balding man whose prominent brow and square chin seemed to hang over Aaron like high cliffs.

"C'mon, Dad, can't I just stay up for one more hour?" he pleaded.

"You spat on the floor and kicked your new MP3 player halfway across the room," Aaron's father explained, his deep voice deepening to a growl. "Do you have any idea how much those things cost?"

Aaron didn't know and didn't much care. "But, Dad, it's my birthday." He had barely said the words when he was airborne, lifted up by the shoulders and dropped lightly into his bed by the window. He lay there, his fingers laced behind his curly, reddish-brown hair and holding his breath. But all that seemed to do was hurt his scalp and fill his

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mouth with medicine-toothpaste gas. He let out the air at last and felt ridiculous.

“You know, that stopped working on us when you were six.”

Aaron glared at his father, who shook his head, flicked off the room light, and headed down the hallway.

Aaron sat in angry darkness for a few heartbeats until slowly, the frustration bled away to discomfort. “DA-AD!!” he yelled. “You forgot to put the hall light on!!”

“Turn it on yourself!” came the muffled reply.

Aaron bounced on his bed and crossed his arms. But the darkness was still there. Why his parents had to buy the creepiest old house in this stupid neighborhood, he had no idea. Actually he had some idea. It was the biggest house in the neighborhood, practically a mansion. But it was creaky, full of shadowy corners and chilly drafts. And no kids his age lived nearby, well, except that dweeb Tommy Bowman two doors down. Aaron couldn't be expected to hang out with someone who didn't even have cable TV.

The floorboards shifted in the hall. The wind kicked up outside. Aaron couldn't stand it. “DA-AD!!”

Yellow light at last filled the hall outside his room. “About time,” Aaron muttered as he turned sideways and faced the window-side wall. A sliver of glass was visible between the drape and the window frame, and not far beyond, the Jack-knife tree loomed in the shadows. By day he could see that it was just an odd, gnarling bulge and a broken-off limb in the crook of the tree. But at night, it looked as if a man with a knife crouched up in that tree waiting for the right moment to come for him.

And the Jack-knife tree wasn't the only scary tree. All of them, especially when the leaves had mostly fallen, looked like dark, towering beasts, demons blacker than the night sky behind them. Aaron watched the trees sway in the wind a few moments more than he should have. He

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flipped onto his stomach, but that did no good. Aaron imagined one of the trees' branches, twisted, black, and groping. A gnarly hand reaching for the glass. Aaron turned on his other side.

That's when he noticed the closet door was still open.

"DA-AD!" he yelled again.

"WHAT?" his father yelled from far below.

"You left my closet door open! Could you please come close it?"

He hadn't really meant to say *please*. It just slipped out somehow.

"Are you KIDDING me?" his father bellowed. Aaron could almost see the veins sticking out on his father's reddening face. "One more word and you'll be in bed early for the whole week!!"

Aaron kicked his feet and let out a whine anyway. It didn't improve his situation in the least. The bifold doors of the closet yawned open just a few yards away from the side of his bed. The hanging clothes dangled in the darkness like spirits jostling to escape. The shelving unit looked like waiting vaults of a crypt, and the jars of coins on the top shelf seemed now to hold slithery specimens, wriggling actively in their clear prisons.

**CLICK.**

Aaron flipped on his bedroom light. Just clothes. Just shelves. Just jars of coins. He darted over to his closet, banged his pinkie toe on the bottom of the bedpost, and somehow managed to slam the closet doors shut. He fell backward into his bed and howled.

"AARON ROTHCHILD WORTHINGTON!!!"

"I just shut the closet door, like you said, Dad!" Aaron clinched hot tears in the corner of his eyes and clutched his foot.

"That's IT! I told you what would happen. You're going to bed early for the rest of the week!"

"No, c'mon, Dad!"

"And do me a favor, would you, Son?"

"What?"

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“Grow up a little.”

Aaron threw a pillow out of his room.

“And get your light out!”

“How did he know—oh, never mind.” Aaron hobbled out of bed. Just before clicking off the light, he noticed a little black spider on the floor between the bottom of the door and his dresser. That was okay. Spiders didn’t scare Aaron. He grabbed a sock off his desk and tossed it at the arachnid.

*CLICK.* The light went out.

He turned back toward his bed and began to wonder if anything could be under it. Before his imagination could conjure up anything, Aaron leaped back under the covers and lay still.

His heart pounded as he lay there in the new silence. He pulled another blanket up to his ears. It was a hot evening for October in Maryland. Aaron didn’t care. The blankets were protection, a hiding place. Aaron snuggled in farther and nestled his head in the down pillows. Then he froze.

There’d been a creaking sound. It wasn’t the floorboards of the hallway this time. It wasn’t a shifting of his bed. It wasn’t the heat clicking on. Those creaks were bad enough, but Aaron knew all those sounds. This creak had come from outside. Aaron waited. There it was again, a high undulating sound like someone opening an old door or tearing a dead limb off a tree.

*A TREE?*

Aaron’s mind took off like a bottle rocket, exploding in dark tree images. If he heard it again, Aaron would yell for his dad. He waited. Nothing but the *cbirrup* of crickets.

Aaron exhaled.

This was just silly.

Here he was thirteen years old and afraid of night sounds? He laughed quietly to himself . . . and swallowed. He even glanced over

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his shoulder at the window. Now that his eyes had adjusted to the lack of light, it didn't look so dark.

Aaron shrugged and laughed again. *I bet I could even look out that window*, he thought. *It's just the outside, same as daylight*. Aaron sat up and let the covers fall from his chin. He looked at the still curtains and the vague printed images of baseballs, footballs, and basketballs. Aaron wiped a bead of sweat off his forehead and hunched onto his knees. He'd just take a quick look to prove to himself . . . and to make sure.

He reached both hands toward the curtains and grasped a fold on either side. Then, squinching his eyes shut, he parted the curtains. Aaron opened his eyes and saw the glass of the window, but the reflection of the hall's light kept him from seeing anything outside.

He moved closer and squinted into the darkness . . . it was really dark, as if someone had draped a tarp over the back of the house.

There was something there.

Aaron started to scream and back away. Huge gnarled limbs broke through the glass, and great knobby hands caught Aaron just before he would have fallen off his bed.

Aaron screamed a high, shrill wail as the tree branch curled hard around his waist.

"Si-lence!" came a deep, raspy grunt. Aaron screamed all the more and struggled against the pain.

"Listen to him whine!" came another voice. This one had an eerie whistling quality to it. Aaron turned his head and saw the shadowy form of a man. He had white hair that seemed to glow in the moonless night, and his hands . . . it looked like he had knives for fingers. Aaron screeched and flailed his arms.

"I told you this isn't the one!" the shadowy man hissed.

"But . . . he is the age . . . and has the curly hair."

Aaron felt his head clutched as if it were in a vise and saw finger-knives on either side. "No, there are no scars on his ears."

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“Ugly . . . human . . . thing.”

“Throw the brat back.”

Aaron felt weightless for a moment, bounced off his bed, and crashed hard on the floor.

Aaron’s father, red-faced and wide-eyed, came to Aaron’s room a few seconds too late. He found Aaron’s bed empty except for rumpled covers and broken, black twigs. Aaron lay weeping on the floor, trying in vain to squeeze under the bed.

“The Jack-knife tree . . .” Aaron sobbed. And that was all anyone could get from Aaron for a long time.