

Christopher Malo

*Fall*

He had found the perfect hiding place. No one would be able to see him. On the edge of the woods running alongside of the clearing, Francis had managed to cover himself with leaves and branches. If he peered around the large oak tree he would be able to see anyone coming for him, and with the clearing to his back he knew no one would be coming from that direction. He tried to lay as still as possible. The rustling of the dry leaves when he moved even slightly sounded like thunder to him, and he was sure if any of the other kids from the neighborhood got too close, it was the noise that would end up giving him away.

It had been at least ten minutes since Randy began counting off from a hundred and the rest of them scattered to find their hiding places in the woods. Most of the kids hid around the house, or ventured into the woods only slightly. But the boundaries of the playing field were established years ago, handed down by older brothers and sisters, and Francis was within them. From Heartt Street to Woodstead Avenue, the houses and woods behind them, all the way to the little stream on one side, and the clearing that was to his back. This place was one of his favorites, but he used it sparingly. There were a few older kids playing this day, so Francis had to choose a spot he didn't use often. The fact that it was late fall, the leaves and twigs that had found their way to the ground, only added to an already great place to bury himself.

Francis pictured Randy creeping around the neighborhood looking in all the obvious spots. He figured he had another fifteen minutes before Randy would start looking in the woods and didn't

want to take any chances so he concentrated on keeping his body perfectly still. Laying flat on his stomach the only thing that moved were his eyes. As he took in the skeletal nature of the trees at this time of the year he noticed movement about fifty yards away on the far side of the field. At first Francis thought it was a deer looking for food on the forest floor. But then it started to move vertically, almost up the trunk of a tree. Francis finally placed the figure as a person, not a deer, and his eyes became glued to the silhouette as it climbed up onto one of the thick, sturdy branches twenty feet from the ground. The childhood game of hide and seek became a far distant memory as Francis remained perfectly still, eyes transfixed.

Francis guessed from the clothing that it was a man, but he couldn't make out any features or anything to give away his age. He seemed to be fiddling with something on the branch he was sitting on. Francis lost interest as he assumed the man was probably carving his and his girlfriend's initials into the tree. It was almost a rite of passage, something he had come across in his many travels through the branches of the woods. Little etchings of love that likely outlasted the love itself.

Francis stopped his vigil, remembering the game of hide and seek he was involved in. A quick survey of the forest showed nothing threatening. Slightly bored and feeling safe in his spot again, he turned his attention back to the man in the tree. The man adjusted what Francis assumed was the collar around his neck on this cold autumn afternoon, and then sat there. Both the man and Francis sat perfectly still in their respective places. And what Francis saw next shocked his being, and sent a rush of sickening adrenaline through his entire body. Without any noise or warning, the man fell from the tree. But his fall to the ground stopped violently as if he was

grabbed by the heavens above. By the neck. It was then that Francis realized that the man had not been carving anything into the branch, but instead had been fixing a rope to the branch. The same rope that was tied and wrapped around his throat.

What was even more violent than the sudden stop in his momentum, was the man's reaction. It was not a sudden, life ending move, but a move that suddenly filled the forest with fury. Spastically his arms and legs began to kick and punch at an unseen force. It almost looked as if he was having second thoughts as he frantically tried to clutch the rope and pull himself up to let air into his lungs. While his efforts were first filled with panic and energy, that energy seemed to be slowly sapped from him, slipping away with his life.

Francis would never be able to explain his inaction. Not that he would ever talk about what he had born witness to. He stayed in place until the man had remained still for a good ten minutes. He wanted to slip away from his hiding place, revealing to no one that he had been that close, let alone a witness to the hanging. The coming days newspapers were filled with stories about the suicide, as well as trying to piece it together. When some of the kids told their parents they had been playing hide and go seek in the neighborhood near there, they were all interviewed by the detectives. Francis never uttered a word.

Despite all the other kids visiting the place of the death, a location that was also now handed down from generation to generation as neighborhood folklore, Francis never went back to that part of the woods again. In fact he never played the game of hide and seek again, for fear of what he might find.

Years later he would justify his lack of intervention as only being a child. As an adult, Francis would often wonder what was going through the man's head as he sat on that branch. He was sure that the man had no idea that he was being watched. He probably thought that his choice was going to solve all his problems and when he finally took his own life it would be all over for him. Which might be true. But it would never be over for Francis. It would never be the same. The resolution for one person's nightmare in death, only gave life to the nightmare for another.