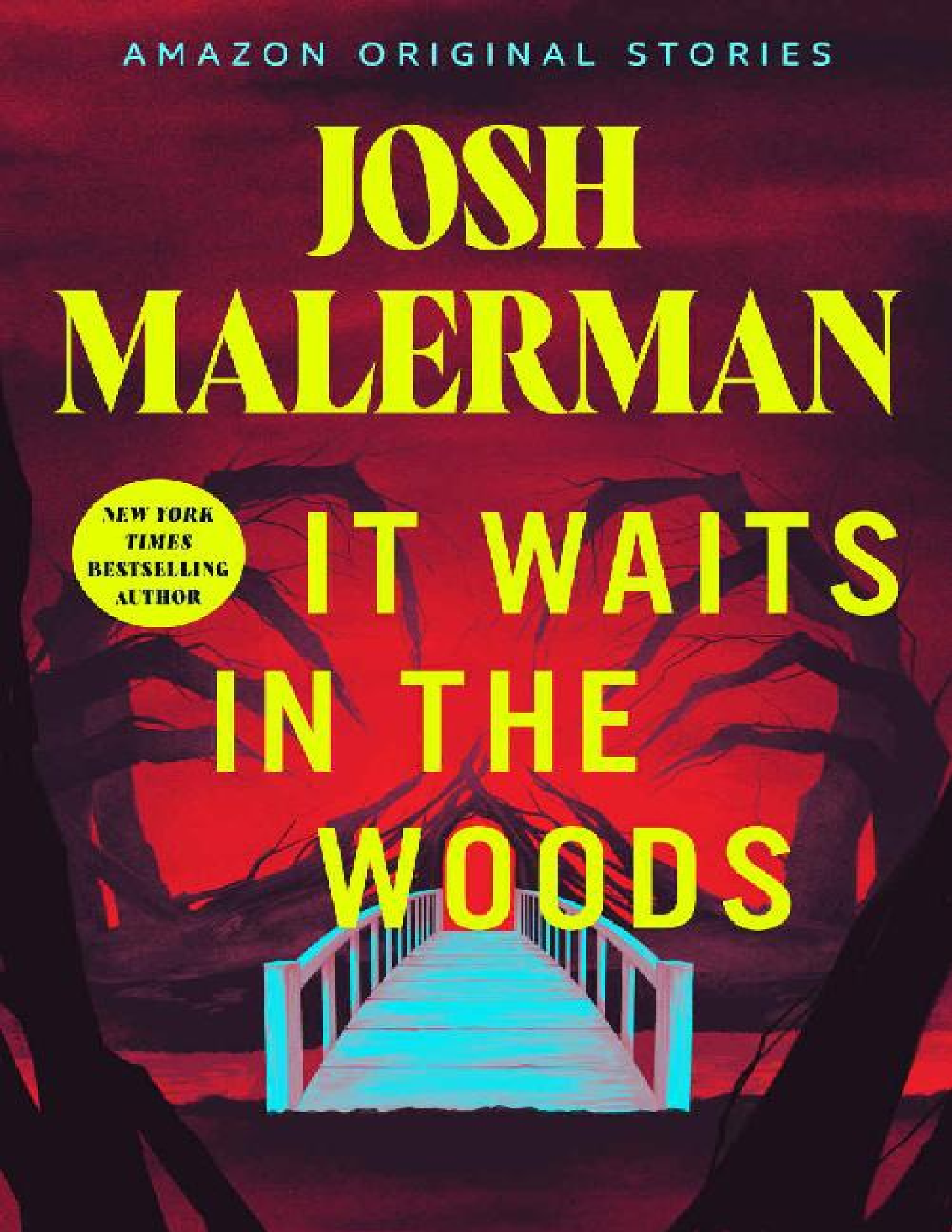


AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

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IT WAITS IN THE WOODS



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1

Unsettling stories started coming out of Central Michigan's Ucatanani National Forest in the late 1970s. They were the kind of spine-tingling tales sprung from grade school field trips and carried on campfire smoke. In the 1970s, chaperones were well prepared to calm their students, able to predict which kids were eager to pass on these stories before the school bus even entered the woods. But while the adults understandably underestimated the veracity of what children were saying happened in the UNF, they failed to notice how these stories were particularly . . . unique. Rather than the expected lore featuring an old crone living in a cottage deep within the forest or a madman in a flannel shirt who kills unsuspecting teens with a knife, these hushed tales all centered on a simple bridge. A white bridge with yellow trim outlining the many curves of its handrails, the paint old and chipped, the footboards in bad shape. It wasn't necessarily a long bridge, though long enough to span a space deep enough to be bridged. This edifice was the first unsettling detail the kids spoke of: *It's flat to the forest floor*, many said. *It goes up into the branches of a tree, like a ladder*, some insisted. *It stands on one end, pointing straight up to the sky*. This last suggestion was a whispered hit with young listeners. But nothing quite topped the claim the bridge had once been found buried—as if some unknown builder had tried to connect two locations underground. Still, as abstract images of the mythic structure consumed young minds on their way into the forest, it was the second part of the legend that most couldn't bring themselves to utter at all.

There was, allegedly, an entity, a creature, the *demon imp* who owned the bridge and was certainly close by if ever the white-and-yellow carvings were seen through the trees. The legend said that it was not so much strong, but smart and cruel, and stalked its prey in the woods. The one constant description of it was this: it'd lost its face and longed to find a suitable

replacement.

The imp's name was *Opso*, an appellation that ought to have rendered the creature silly but somehow served to enhance its menace. Anytime something or someone disappeared in the woods, locals brought up *Opso* in hushed conversation and, years later, in texts. Anyone old enough to have been around when the name first crossed the lips of locals said its origin was an innocent carving in an aged maple tree. A small-breed dog owner's ode to their best friend:

 *My Lhasa Apso*

Story went: a young boy on a field trip saw the carving, believed it to be a reference to (and proof of) the demon of the UNF, then ran for his chaperone, breathlessly relaying the horror. Others reasoned coming up with a silly name was a joke of sorts to blunt the edges of serrated fear people felt when entering those heavy woods. *Opso*, however it got its name, was a vain creature, the story went, who lamented its lack of a face. It waited in the woods, by its bridge, impatient for an unsuspecting person it could trick into following it across, hungry for a fresh face. Some warned that when a particularly strong beam of sunlight reflected off a surface deep in the woods, it was the demon's mirror. The glass that tormented it, the reflection therein constantly demanding it find a new, fitting face.

Talk of *Opso* especially came on the rare occasion a grisly event occurred. A hunter, Jonathan Hitchens, had been found dead in the UNF, his chest and neck ravaged, his face completely chewed from his skull. Police identified the cause as a wild-animal attack, but at Hitchens's closed-casket funeral, people whispered.

However it came about, the name *Opso* stuck. And it became as unnerving a thing to say at birthday parties as *Bloody Mary*.

Kids' games.

Only . . .

Most myths have one foot in a reality so distressing mythic decorations are necessary to hide a greater horror, even as they keep the story alive. The not-so-distant truth was, among the many hikers and campers who disappear in wild spaces, one particular child went missing in the UNF without any logical explanation. A fourteen-year-old girl named Amanda Jennings.

Because Amanda disappeared decades after the initial wave of Opso hysteria, the myth—the demon’s name and the image of a white bridge—was then more deeply embedded in the minds of adults. Two of these adults, Brian and Linda Jennings, refused to partake in any discussion involving the legend; their daughter had been kidnapped by a madman, or a madwoman, while she was sneaking beers in the UNF at midnight. They knew she had been there because she’d texted a friend, Kari Auckland, asking her to meet her in the woods, promising beers she’d carried on the two-mile hike from home.

But Brian and Linda never brought up the legacy of suspicious disappearances that haunted their childhood. One thing Amanda’s parents didn’t mind discussing publicly and privately was their older daughter’s culpability: had fifteen-year-old Brenda not been distracted by her own group of friends, Amanda “might still be here today,” a quote from a televised interview that was circulated in the media far and wide. Yet, despite their cringeworthy finger-pointing, the Jenningses became a local symbol of sympathy. Photos of Amanda that were posted around the neighboring towns often included the entire family, a quartet impossible not to feel sorry for. Brian Jennings’s innocent eyes behind his horn-rimmed glasses, the prominent teeth in Linda Jennings’s naive smile, and the two sisters, arm in arm, a red circle around Amanda to let people know exactly who was missing.

At the time, Brenda was used to her sister playing a starring role; she’d been the one to encourage it. Amanda Jennings had been the lead actor in the three short movies Brenda had already written, filmed, and edited on her phone. These films had garnered enthusiastic respect from Brenda’s teachers, her peers, and her parents. Mrs. Bronston of the English department even phoned Brian and Linda to say she suspected “a true talent.” But so did Mr. Mayweather from math. In the communities surrounding the UNF, the Jennings sisters were considered special, smart, talented. In one of their films, Amanda played three separate roles. In another, four. Those who saw the movies were surprised at their delightful storylines, thoughtful camera angles, and seamless editing. “Expert slice-of-teen-life cinema” is how one school counselor described Brenda’s work. And Brenda prided herself on writing scripts. She knew the arcs of narratives and was good at predicting what would come next in a film. But perhaps best of all, she was endowed with a precocious sense of benevolence: there was room in the space of

moviemaking for all. Brenda Jennings was Amanda Jennings's biggest fan. Anybody who knew the family knew that.

This included the friends Brenda had been ecstatically filming the night Amanda went out into the UNF alone. Very quickly following Amanda's disappearance, the videos Brenda had taken from that night became evidence: teenagers laughing, ribbing each other, discussing dreams. The Ucatanani County Police reviewed every clip. A quote from sixteen-year-old Dennis Emerson interested them greatly, if only momentarily. In the video, one can hear Brenda asking Dennis what he hoped to "accomplish in this life." To which the boy with long black bangs responded:

Hey, as long as I don't disappear, it's all a success, right?

Amanda was reported missing hours later.

Those same police (and officers from neighboring Miskaloosa County) searched the UNF with the rare vigor found in small-town law enforcement. For the first five days, Brian and Linda Jennings accompanied dozens of men, women, and dogs into the forest for ten hours a day. On that fifth day, Brenda came. By then she'd already become a sympathetic figure in her own right; not only was she just fifteen, and had lost her only sister, but her parents had blamed her in a televised broadcast. She walked with the search party, her phone in her pocket, too shaken to film.

For Brenda, her phone was close to holy, or the holiest thing she believed in. She cared about what it captured; it *mattered* what the camera saw. If the lens were to pick up a negative mood from an actor she was filming, the entire movie would be tainted. To say nothing of the device used to film it. Looking for her sister—for evidence of her disappearance—she walked those woods with empty hands, undistracted in any way, her ears open to everything the other members of the search party had to say.

One of the things she overheard that day was a brief story about a demon named Opso. An old legend, Brenda understood, concerning a bridge and a mirror deep in the woods. A demon's mournful cries, a lament in the moonlight, the clip-clop of demon feet on weak, eroded wood. An entity, Brenda heard, with a strange name and an even more unsettling goal: to find a face to replace the one it was missing.

As the search continued, the flashlights were brought out, and the militant optimism necessary for such expeditions dissolved. Brenda found herself chilled by more than the Central Michigan summer night.

The legend made sense to her, in its way—something terrible had taken

her sister. Why not this? More importantly: the story resonated. It remained.

There was something about the face detail. Opso's desire for one. Brenda nearly spoke up when she overheard that bit. There was a reason beyond their sisterly bond she'd decided to cast Amanda in every movie she'd ever made: Amanda Jennings had a magnificent *face*. As expressive as it was honest. As wise as it was young. Whatever lines Amanda delivered, Brenda believed them.

That face was on her mind as the officers passed through each other's beams, as they spoke of having searched this swath of forest once already. It was on her mind as her parents gripped one another's hands, as they called Amanda's name until their voices grew hoarse and, Brenda thought, less powerful. And it was on her mind in the back of the car, too, as the Jenningses drove the two miles home through the hollow night.

You don't have a good side, Brenda had once told Amanda, eyeing her sister on the screen. *Because you don't have a bad one.*

Brenda had read about world-famous actors whose faces were symmetrical. She imagined herself and Amanda as a new-world Scorsese and De Niro. She'd even tacked two movie posters on her bedroom walls: *Raging Bull* and *The King of Comedy*. It was the latter that unnerved her on that drive home from the UNF. As she glanced out the window, still unable to look at her phone—the device that held the most recent images of Amanda Jennings—she thought of Robert De Niro's psychotic laughter, echoing out there in the forest. A madman's plight, a delusion made manifest. She thought of how most terrible things in life began as terrible motivations.

And she thought of the story the officers had exchanged on the search through the dark woods. Opso and the bridge. Maybe she'd heard the name when she was younger? She'd been to the UNF before, with school. Had someone brought it up then? Brenda couldn't recall. But looking out the car window, it all felt so possible. She'd talked about this sort of feeling with her friends the night Amanda went missing.

I think some movies work because you believe they're really happening. I don't even know if a writer can set out to make something feel so real. It doesn't have anything to do with a realistic story. No matter how unbelievable they are, some stories ring true.

From a storytelling perspective, elements of the Opso myth were just odd enough to be taken seriously. Who would've come up with the bridge? And why? Why not a secret cave? A more interesting tree house? A

disturbing hole in the forest floor?

But a bridge . . . to nowhere . . .

And what kind of local legend included late-night wails of self-loathing?

The drive home was a quiet one.

Brenda tried to shake off thoughts of a faceless demon. At fifteen, she was the variety of young that was aware of it. She looked to adults for solutions. Let the police do their job. Her parents could sort out what was promising news and what wasn't. But the guilt . . .

They hadn't been *wrong* that she'd taken her eye off her sister five nights ago. Wrapped up as she was in filming her friends, was it any wonder? And Amanda had always been reliable: at six she'd been found at 3:00 a.m., standing at the kitchen counter, a bag of M&M's the only thing before her. When Linda Jennings asked what she was doing, Amanda had said she was waiting to ask permission. This story became legend in the Jennings house. Brenda couldn't deny that five nights ago, Amanda had seemed restless. And Brenda would come to understand that even good kids look for an opportunity to break some rules. Was it any wonder Brenda found hope, dark as it was, in the myth of Opso and the UNF?

Maybe Amanda hadn't been found because everyone was looking for the wrong kind of kidnapper. Maybe if they took this myth more seriously . . .

Maybe.

But by the time Brian Jennings pulled the family car into the driveway and cut the engine, and after two minutes or more of the remaining family members sitting in silence, Brenda's *maybe* had started to lean toward a *Why not check it out?*

People continued to talk as if Amanda might be *anywhere*. Everyone cited the importance of "the first forty-eight hours." But Brenda wondered . . . Weren't the next forty-eight just as important? And just as loaded with possibilities? And the next forty-eight after that, continuously, until this was solved? How far could the kidnapper go? How big was the world? In those days the world felt very big, indeed. And Brenda and her sister, too small. Eventually, though, the early days of piqued despair gave way to a blighted wasteland in which no hope could be detected where it once had been. Brian and Linda lost it before the police did. They stopped calling for updates. Officers phoned the house instead. Brenda responded more often than her parents. On one call she brought up the story of the demon Opso.

The police humored her. Inasmuch as they listened, claimed to write her concerns down, and even went as far as to call it “an interesting theory.” Brenda had no misgivings; she felt no anger. In truth, she had just wanted to say the thing’s name. To hear any truth in the two syllables, spoken months after her sister went missing. To her surprise, as it spilled out of her mouth, through the phone, and into the patient policeman’s ear, it felt just as plausible to Brenda as it had the day she’d joined the search party. She was equally dismayed and encouraged by this. She dreamed of bridges upside down on the forest floor, as if whatever walked upon them went places nobody had imagined.

These dreams, these ideas, this theory all grew bigger as the months since Amanda’s disappearance became years. And by the time Brenda Jennings turned eighteen—her sister, Amanda, having been missing for almost three years—she resolved to look into the myth herself.

Some stories simply rang *true*.

So, freshly eighteen, free of a family home that had grown increasingly morose, increasingly hostile, and increasingly unbearable, Brenda Jennings packed what she thought she’d need and headed for the Ucatanani National Forest to search for her missing sister.

By then the idea of a bridge and the creature that owned it were not just parts of a local legend: they were exactly what she was setting out to find.

2

Seeing the gear in the back of her used Pontiac Vibe, it was easy to imagine she'd accumulated it for this purpose all along. Some of these things had been purchased or borrowed before Amanda ever went missing. Her phone was sitting on the front seat, but in the trunk: the wireless RØDE audio gear, the tripod, the small generator (fully gassed), the camping stove, the tent, the binoculars, the blankets, the headphones, the nonperishable food. She'd put most of it together in a daze, as if the idea of entering the UNF was purely instinctive. It was certainly unspoken. And who would Brenda have talked to about it anyway? Obviously not her mother and father, the pair who had yet to apologize for what they'd once said on television. And the friends who had been with Brenda the night Amanda went missing had eventually faded into the background of a noiseless life. Or perhaps Brenda had done the fading. The prophetic Dennis Emerson went particularly fast. Had he left town? Brenda wasn't sure. In the weeks following Amanda's disappearance, any details of the big wide world had grown fuzzy.

It wasn't until she caught herself eyeing her parents' wheelbarrow in the garage that she understood not only did she have a plan, but she'd begun putting it into place. That wheelbarrow now took up much of the space afforded by the folded back seats. She imagined herself rolling her gear along the same routes she'd walked with the search party, but the UNF was a big place. She'd need to go where people had never been. Places they didn't know to check.

Brenda needed to *know*.

The fact that another young woman had recently gone missing wasn't entirely lost on her. Brenda would've said she didn't have the emotional space to worry about a girl named Kimberly Jackson, a girl whose face was plastered all over—a picture Brenda intentionally avoided when walking

downtown. The details were familiar: a solo walk at night, a family caught off guard. She'd heard the girl was taken *near* the woods, not in them, though. And she believed the hand she, personally, had been dealt was bad enough to excuse her from worrying about people other than her own.

The sorrow of others would have to remain just that.

Yet, there she was. Packed and inspired. Ready, it seemed, to begin a sojourn she hadn't recognized had begun.

It was early September, and Michigan summers had grown longer and longer since her childhood, but September was one of those months that could fool you. Scarves and boots, gloves not mittens. Brenda was going to need her fingers to operate the camera on her phone. The stove. The recording gear. The last thing she put into the car was Larry. A featureless mannequin head she and Amanda had used in the final film they'd made together. With the right lighting (and the right wig and hat), Larry worked as a living character, someone to whom Amanda was supposedly confessing, her perfectly symmetrical face in dramatic tears. It had been her best performance yet, and Brenda had felt sure there were even better ones to come. She figured if Larry had been good enough to fool the camera, he could convince whatever she might run into out there that she wasn't stupid enough to go out alone.

Eyeing Larry now, Brenda felt a rush of sadness. They'd laughed between takes about Larry. Brenda had "coached" him. Amanda had named him.

Larry.

And the memory of the two syllables still carried with it the lilt of Amanda's voice. Amanda on set. Amanda before the camera. Amanda talking to Larry as though he, too, had to endure the rigors of moviemaking.

Brenda shut the back hatch of the car. Looked up to her small apartment and the one window that faced the road. She'd been renting the place a paltry two months since turning eighteen, before she'd decided it was time. Moving out of her family home was clearly a big part of the unspoken plan. While her parents hadn't talked much to her in the last three years, they might've asked after the wheelbarrow. The contents of her car. Where was she going? What would she need with a tent and a stove? That looked like camping gear. People camped in the woods. Was Brenda planning on camping in the UNF? Was Brenda so unfathomably coldhearted as to attempt to *enjoy* herself in the very place her younger sister went missing? Not that Brian or Linda Jennings

seemed capable of connecting thoughts in this manner these days. They seemed to exist in a mutual fog.

Brenda had told nobody and had no goodbyes to give.

Behind the wheel at last, she started the car.

Charger? Yes.

Audio? Yes.

Binoculars? Yes.

Food? Yes.

Tent and bedding? Yes.

Journal? Yes.

And one more thing, too.

Gun. Linda Jennings's gun. The one she'd bought six months after her daughter disappeared from the UNF. Just as thoughts of a psychopath having intentionally targeted Amanda began to float to the surface of her increasingly watery mind. Maybe he'd target Brian and Linda next. Maybe not.

Brenda didn't know how to use the thing. She rationalized stealing it made sense, because Linda didn't know the first thing about it either. Brenda was providing a service, in a way, wasn't she? Removing something dangerous from a dangerously absent-minded house . . .

But it didn't matter. There was no reason to explain any of this. All that mattered was Amanda had been taken. From a tract of woods not a dozen miles from the meaningless apartment Brenda had rented. All that mattered was that earworm . . . mind worm . . . the myth she'd heard and the scant details of the myth, elements no ordinary person would've come up with.

If there was one thing Brenda knew, it was story.

She eyed her phone on the passenger seat.

Three movies starring Amanda were in there. Brenda hadn't made one since. Hadn't had anything close to inspiration. The opposite, really.

Until now. Maybe. Yes, maybe now.

She picked up the phone, opened the camera app, turned the lens on herself, but not with the selfie function. No self-respecting filmmaker cared more about how she looked than the resolution of the shot itself.

"Hi, Amanda," she said. "Looks like you're still the star of my movies."

She aimed over her shoulder, caught a glimpse of the wheelbarrow, the tent bag, the gear. Then she trained the lens on the gas gauge.

"It's only eleven miles," she said. "I'm sure we'll get there."

She breathed in. She almost said its name.

But like the negative vibes she feared somehow influencing the footage, even the lives of those involved with any movie, she couldn't bring herself to say something so sinister.

Opso.

Wasn't she hoping to find it? Wasn't she hoping to find that bridge, upside down or otherwise?

"Here we go, Larry," she said, the camera over her shoulder again, the mannequin head in view. "Action."

3

While it felt like she'd pushed the barrow far into the woods, her phone's GPS told her she'd gone only half a mile. It wasn't easy terrain. The wheels were solid, and the weight was within reason, but with the fallen branches, the roots, she was sweating hard. Also, she was alone. And while she'd spent a lot of time in her bedroom in recent years, she'd never had this much space. There was more than just dark nostalgia out here: there was fear. She'd searched for her sister among these trees, yes, but she'd also heard the story of the creature and the bridge. And while Brenda Jennings was brave enough to enter the UNF alone, she hadn't been prepared for how different this time around would be. The sounds, for example; the distant cracks of small sticks, the birds in the leaves that still clung to the branches. Even the wheels of the barrow added a consistent hum, a rhythm she hadn't expected to abide by.

The distance between trees felt bigger. The spaces out there. The sky seemed higher, rendering Brenda and her gear small.

Still, if there was one thing her sister's disappearance had granted her, it was a lack of heightened emotions. Brenda hadn't gotten too excited, too riled up, or too scared in a long time. And what could she encounter out there that could be any worse than what had already happened?

She thought of Kimberly Jackson, the girl whose photo she'd barely eyed, the posters like blurry rectangles stapled to every telephone pole in town. Did Kimberly have a sister? And was that sister experiencing the same numbing?

Was this grief's only gift? The eradication of the highs, by way of leveling the lows?

When the GPS told her she'd gone more than a mile, she paused and took her notebook from the barrow. She didn't know exactly when she would be exiting this place, but it did occur to her it was important to know how to

get back. So she took a screenshot of the GPS screen, the path she'd taken, then drew it on the page. She took photos of the surrounding trees, then described them. What if the generator died out here, and then the phone? What if the phone broke? She eyed the woods. The trees were tall with thick trunks. Canopies of dark-green leaves like the branches held solid-colored umbrellas. She saw no deer. She didn't think bears lived in the UNF, but she didn't know. She should've checked. Of course. But she wondered if Amanda's disappearance had affected her the same way it had their parents. Was she moving through her own fog? Wheeling clothes and blankets into the woods, hoping to find there a setting as dark as her heart had become?

But she was hoping to find one thing and one thing alone: a bridge.

The UNF had ravines, some big enough to be dangerous. Brenda had heard mention of cliffs, not unlike the cliffs of Lake Michigan, hours west. It wasn't unreasonable to think she'd find a bridge. People had to cart things in and out of forests all the time. Rangers, scientists, whoever it was that inspected the health and well-being of the trees. Surely there were numerous wood bridges in the forest, not to mention shacks, tools, vehicles. As she restarted her trek, pushing the barrow once more, she tried to remember what the UNF had been like back when she came on the school bus. It had all seemed so drab then. Trees and leaves. Stones and moss. She did remember that some boy had tried to frighten her with a story about "big yellow spiders," but Brenda found no truth in those tales. She'd been with a large group of students and two teachers, who'd guided them. Had she seen any shacks back then? Any four-wheelers? Any shovels?

The wheelbarrow tilted hard to the left, and Brenda made to right it, but she was too late. Her gear spilled to the ground.

Just then she heard a distant cry.

A noise so simple and crystalline it sounded prerecorded. The kind of effect she might have searched for online, to add to one of her movies.

She pulled her phone from her pocket, opened the camera.

"Heard something," she said, framing the woods ahead. She remained silent, just as she would've if this were a take.

It felt good, in that moment, to be filming again. How long had it been?

Looking at the screen, listening closer now, she felt that the forest was more detailed—alive. As if the cry had unlocked other as-yet-unheard sounds. The wind in the treetops was cleaner. The customary snaps and cracks from smaller life came through even louder. She imagined her fingers

on a mixing board, raising the levels for the film.

“Animal or man?” she asked, her voice so obviously human out here. She made to speak the demon’s name but stopped herself. Then: “I’m being silly,” she said. “I can’t document what I’m doing without mentioning what I’m doing.” She breathed deep. Heard the forest with perfect clarity. Said, “Is it you, Opso?”

The forest did not answer. It could’ve been a bird, what she heard. Could’ve been wind. She finished packing the gear back in the barrow with more precision this time.

She didn’t know exactly what was on the other side of the forest, but she understood it was more Michigan. Still filming, she said, “I could look all this up, the coordinates, the miles. But I don’t want to go where everyone else has been. I don’t want to search where we searched already.”

A big sorrow grew within her—something she hadn’t felt in years. Speaking of the search, being back where it had started and ended: it should’ve been more than enough to break her down. She wouldn’t have been faulted for turning the barrow around, heading back. It suddenly felt like she’d come there only to grieve.

Brenda set the camera on top of the gear so she could use all ten fingers on the wheelbarrow handles. She didn’t speak as she went, hoping, as all documentarians do, to catch something indelible by chance. She didn’t think about eating, though she had food. Rather, she relished the growing tightness in her muscles, the work, the sweat. Brenda didn’t think searching the woods should be any easier than making a movie. You had to work for the big things. You had to reach out and take your accomplishments—like all the great filmmakers and artists. It was a mindset she seemed to have been born with. People told her she had *drive*, but Brenda found the word cold. She wasn’t *driven*. She just knew what was important. Why would she hang out in drugstore parking lots like the other teens in town when she could film a movie instead? Why text crushes all night? Why scroll meaningless memes? Why stare critically at digitally altered selfies when there was real art to be made—some actual truth to capture in all its imperfect glory? Behind that grief was something that felt good. The return of . . . inspiration? Yes. Brenda hadn’t wanted to touch a camera for three years. Yet, now, out here in the UNF, all alone—

A second cry pierced her thoughts.

Closer now.

Brenda went still, letting the camera do its own work.

She listened.

And the cry came again.

It didn't sound like a bird. Wasn't wind.

She lifted the phone. She started walking. Pictures of living things scrolled through her mind; some ridiculous, some not. Robins, deer (no deer sounded like that), monkeys (no monkeys in the UNF, of course), a child, a girl, Amanda.

She thought of the legend, too.

Opso lamenting its faceless visage.

Brenda had walked farther than she'd planned. Looking back, she saw she'd left the wheelbarrow thirty yards behind.

Someone was kneeling beside the barrow.

"Hey!" Brenda called, and a cold shot of terror coursed through her body. It was the most alive she'd felt in months. "Who—"

Her hands were trembling, and she needed to have steady hands for the footage—

"Who is that?"

And her voice was pure fear.

Then . . .

"Wait," she said to no one.

Because she'd realized it wasn't a face. There was nobody kneeling. It was Larry, the mannequin head, stashed in the barrow.

"Oh my God," she said. "Come on, Brenda!"

She wanted to laugh. Almost did. But the fear remained. Larry hadn't made those haunting sounds.

She walked back to the gear, shaking her head. Replaying the footage on her phone, she felt the tightness of fear again. The featureless white head wedged just under the tent bag. The faint remnants of pencil where she'd drawn just enough of the eyes and nose to give the features some believability the last time she'd filmed.

The last film she made with Amanda.

"Well, that was dumb," she said. "Scared myself apart."

She breathed deep. Looked back the way she came.

She could leave. Right now. Nobody would even know she'd been out here. Wheel this gear out, pack the car, head back to her apartment.

"The apartment you got so you could get away from your mother and

father. Your mother and father who haven't smiled in three years. A house you used to run through, laughing, with your sister. Your sister who is still missing."

She hadn't realized the camera was still rolling. She'd never revealed herself the way she just had. Not on film. Back when she made her movies, they were scripted, they were rewritten. And the questions she had for her friends the night Amanda went to the woods alone, those had been intentional, too.

She eyed the phone. It wouldn't be hard to erase what she'd just said. It was easy to clip the end of videos. But when she brought her finger to end the recording, she paused.

Unexpectedly, she found she *liked* that she'd been caught on tape. She felt a profound satisfaction. She had captured something real, after all.

"All right," she said. "The new me."

And for a while it felt good. As she pushed deeper into the forest, as she found a rhythm upon the forest floor, she felt a fulfillment she wasn't sure she'd ever known.

But as the sun lowered, and the canopies of leaves went from green to gray, as she started thinking of where she should pitch her tent, the idea of "the new me" started to grow cold.

Whoever she was now, for better or for worse, she was alone out here.

Despite these revelations: alone.

4

Two days and two nights, Brenda pushed the barrow deeper into the forest. She had no doubt she'd reached areas she had not searched with the police those three years ago. She slept soundly in her tent, her mother's gun within reach. She charged the phone in the mornings, the generator humming loud in the otherwise quiet woods. She cooked beans on her small camp stove and drank bottles of water sparingly. She didn't review any footage on her phone other than to make sure the videos were there, the takes had been saved.

The nights were cold, but she'd come prepared. The mornings were mercifully warm. This far into the forest, things seemed to grow wilder, the trees closer together, their tops connecting to blot out more sun. Yet, rather than losing heat, there was a humidity in that space that didn't reach the town she lived in, like a greenhouse effect. She sweat as she pushed the barrow slowly forward.

And she filmed. A lot. She filmed everything.

And she thought about filming and what it meant to her. How the footage was like a mirror to her, how it reflected who she was by way of what she filmed. She thought, too, of the three years in which no video—no slice of life—made its way onto her phone. There had been nothing inside her to reflect.

She took short breaks to eat. To adjust the gear. But also to film. Sometimes she pointed the camera up and walked until she found cool angles among the leaves. Other times she got close to the ground and followed a worm, a ladybug, as they traversed a world she was beginning to understand. In those two days, Brenda Jennings felt more one with nature than she ever had. The humidity, the fresh smell of the trees, the *life*. The moon shined on her tent at night, and the birds woke her in the morning. She wrote her thoughts in her journal as the generator hummed, the phone charging beside

her. She asked herself to notice it all. Allowed herself to feel.

She was deep in thought, writing about the birds, describing the uptick of a particular song one sang, when she heard that distant cry for the third time.

It was unmistakably the same sound she'd heard her first day in the UNF.

Only this time it wasn't just closer, it was *close*.

Her eyes on the woods, she reached slowly for the generator and turned it off. She disconnected the phone from the charger. She rose and turned on the camera.

She needed to take down the tent and repack the wheelbarrow.

But Brenda Jennings only grabbed the RØDE audio gear and walked blindly toward that cry. She did not speak. She did not narrate.

She filmed.

One with nature, one with the scene.

She filmed.

5

Amanda had been out there. Drinking beer. Maybe her first. Or close to it. Like all kids, she was just off experimenting with life. Trying things out. Pushing the boundaries that felt so rigid when you were young. Brenda was still underage, and yet she understood a beer was just a beer. Who cared about it? That was the thing about pushing an envelope: they'd all been pushed before, by someone else. It wasn't the envelope a good filmmaker should worry about, but the letter inside.

Ahead she could see a slant of sky through the trees. Up and off to the right. It looked too low to the ground. Had she climbed a hill? A cliff? Had her route been so gradual?

The sound she heard replayed without her intention; it seemed to exist there as if it always had, the cry in the UNF, over and over, growing closer with each iteration.

Twenty feet farther along and that spot of light she saw looked less like a swath of sky and more like the side of a shack. White wood, perhaps. A toolshed for forest caretakers, if anyone took care of this wilderness at all.

Brenda lifted the phone and zoomed in.

It was hard to tell what she was seeing. White? Blue? Shack? Sky? She thought it could be the side of a van. A white van. The exact type of van she'd imagined a thousand times in the days following her sister's disappearance.

The sort of van a man who took teens might own.

Brenda stopped walking. She held the camera still. She couldn't zoom in any farther, but she didn't want to get closer either. She thought of her sister in the back of a van, out here in the woods. So close to where the Jenningses and the police had searched. Amanda knocked out or tied up or worse. In a white van. In a green wood. So close to home . . .

Brenda continued walking. Because there was no other option. She

needed to know what that was, and there would be no more waiting.

Here was something she hadn't seen with the search party. Something she hadn't heard mentioned at all. It was wood. She was sure now. Not a van after all. A shack, then. A pile of white wood. Some yellow in there. It looked more like a small storage shed. The thick trees ahead shielded her from an adequate view. She moved, less quiet now. She stepped quick, phone up and filming, the barrow far behind. To her right, the first vestiges of a ravine.

Brenda stopped.

She knew her breathing would be loud on the recording. It was all she could hear.

Her heart and the throbbing of her pulse might be audible, too.

"*Oh my God,*" she whispered.

It was a bridge. Made of wood, painted white. Ornate handrails once yellow, now chipped like the paint of a child's toy from decades past.

Brenda took a step back. Under a thicker canopy of dark-green leaves.

And she filmed. Even as she saw the bridge with her own eyes, yes, the shallow ravine it traversed, yes, but also the entrance on the other side, nearly flush to the bridge, vines and roots twisting to form a leaning arch, sloppily framing a pitch-black entrance to what might've been called a cave if its walls were made of stone and not moss.

She did not say, *It's the bridge.*

She didn't have to.

She could hardly believe it. And she wasn't sure she wanted to.

Brenda had found what she'd set out to find.

6

First thing Brenda did was locate a spot as hidden as the bridge nearby. It wasn't easy, and she moved by instinct, propelled by both fear and a deep need for discovery. She was right to come here. She knew that now. But was she right to stay? She could leave the woods, tell the police what she found, bring them back to investigate. But the story of the bridge, seen in so many different spots, arranged in different ways. The officers had said it was never actually used as a bridge. But here Brenda had found it traversing a grassy ravine. Was it always here? Just like so? Or did it really move? And if it did, could she be sure of finding it again, the police in tow?

It was impossible not to think of some vestige of Amanda in that dark place beyond the arch of vines. Brenda guessed her sister knew what the inside of the mossy cave was like. But three years was a long time. Whoever took her, whatever it was, *if* it did, it wouldn't toy with her for three years. Would it? She wouldn't let herself believe Amanda was still alive.

Fear and discovery. Discovery and fear.

She wheeled the barrow quietly to the edge of the ravine. She didn't go ten seconds without looking back to that patch of white between low branches. Her goal was to stay hidden, quiet. It wasn't easy. Just pushing the barrow made too much noise. The phone was set up on top of the gear, and she eyed the screen when she wasn't looking ahead. She'd found the bridge, yes. But did something live in there? And if so, had it also found her?

At the ravine's edge, far from the bridge, she found what she was looking for. A cluster of thick trunks, nearly a semicircle. It made a perfect den; she wondered if wolves or deer had ever called the spot home. She moved quickly but quietly, removing the gear from the barrow, setting up the green one-person tent. She put the generator, the clothes, and the blankets inside. She unpacked some jeans, a sweater stuffed with T-shirts, a hat she hadn't planned to wear, and arranged it so Larry wore the hat, his white

stump of a neck resting upon the stuffed sweater just as he had the last two nights. Her dummy companion to ward off an animal, maybe a man, maybe even something else.

Brenda paused, took stock of all her things. She tucked her mother's gun into her waistband, put the audio gear in a fanny pack, and picked up the phone to start filming.

She remained quiet. Unmoving. From between the thick trunks, she could make out a part of the white-and-yellow bridge, then a sliver of the dark entrance to the hollow. The two views were split by trees closer to the bridge. This was good, though. A decent look from a decent spot. She put her headphones on, connected the RØDE receiver to her phone, took the mic from the pouch.

“Testing . . .”

It worked. Brenda had charged the audio at the nearly empty apartment. And while she wasn't sure how far the mic could be from the receiver, she started making her way back to the bridge.

Had she ever shot a scene this far away? From tent to bridge? Would the sound come through? The farthest shot she'd done had been with Amanda outside a storefront in Chaps. Brenda filming across the street. The audio had come through crystal clear, Amanda's voice, the fourteen-year-old delivering Brenda's precocious philosophical monologue. Was this farther than that?

She held the camera chest high but looked straight ahead toward the bridge for a wider field of view. Closer to the bridge, she told herself to breathe deep, to hold the air in her lungs, to release. Alone out there, approaching the wood, she thought of her fourteen-year-old sister carrying cans of beer that night, innocently looking for a little fun. She thought of what she, Brenda, was doing as Amanda stepped over those same roots. If she had stepped over them. If the bridge had been there, that same spot, all along.

Brenda was as close to the bridge as she'd gotten when she'd spotted it. She slowed to a stop and raised the camera. She wanted to narrate, to make notes, to set the stage.

The arch of vines appeared more menacing on the iPhone screen, the entrance to the hollow darker.

With unsteady hands, she approached the head of the bridge. There she ducked and crawled up to the handrail.

The paint was chipped. Up close, it looked even older than it had from

afar. She removed string from her pack and tied it around the microphone's clip, then paused and considered tying the mic to the far end of the bridge—at the entrance to the cove.

The sound would be better there. And who knew how deep that mossy hollow went? If she left the mic so far away, she might not catch any noises within. But at the other end . . .

Brenda was uncharacteristically indecisive. To get there, she'd have to cross the bridge. If she did that, she'd be trapped, exposed to whatever might live inside that cave.

A bear?

A man?

She crawled closer to the ravine's edge and looked down. It was deeper than she'd thought. Using anything but the bridge would be noisy. Still, she could navigate the roots down there, climb up the rocks on the other side, tie the RØDE to the bottom of the bridge.

She wished she wasn't alone. She wished she had a producer, a director, a studio, anybody but Larry to tell her what to do. She wished she could ask Amanda's advice. It was how they'd made movies. It was how Brenda worked best. The great directors, Brenda believed, were the ones who listened to everyone on set. And nobody could do it alone.

But Brenda had never felt as alone as she did out in the woods, crouched by the head of the bridge.

She doubled the knot to the far post and crawled back. She wasn't sure how long the charge would last in the RØDE, but she knew, from shooting, she had at least a few hours. She remained still; then she gently raised the volume of her headphones.

She heard breathing. Some rasp to it. Was it her own? She held her breath and still heard it.

Through the branches, the hollow's entrance looked infinite.

She backed up slowly. The sound she'd heard, she thought with some relief and disappointment, was the wind through the leaves. The mic's sensitivity was strong. She lowered the volume, stepping back, back, careful not to fall but too alert to take her eyes from the bridge.

A third of the way to the tent, she moved quicker. The sound grew quieter in the headphones the farther she got. For the first time, the name *Opso* didn't sound silly in her brain. It sounded old. Foreign. The sort of name one might find in a book of terrors.

Back at the tent, she set the camera on her small tripod, positioned so she could easily pan from the head of the bridge to that sliver of darkness, the trees obscuring her view between the two. She didn't want to go near the bridge again and could only hope the charge in the mic would last long enough to get some answers. That vined entrance: she knew something had to be beyond it.

She eyed the generator. At home it didn't seem to make much noise. Not compared to the neighbor's lawn mower, or even the neighbor's generator when the block lost power. But out there, in the mornings when she charged her phone . . .

She didn't want to make any more noise than she had to.

As if cued, a sudden BOOM caused her to cry out, to raise her hands to the headphones and her ears within them.

A second BOOM followed quickly, and she worried her hearing might be permanently damaged. Shaking, she lowered the volume and looked to the zoomed screen of her iPhone.

It was there. Something like a hoof upon the white wood.

A deer on the bridge?

It was near the head of the bridge, so that Brenda could see only its leg, its hoof. And its steps had nearly deafened her.

Whatever it was, it was breathing. The same steady rasp she'd heard before.

It hadn't been the wind after all.

Brenda held her own breath, instinctively. She remained stone still.

Hooves, yes, upon creaking wood. She could hear it all so clearly once she'd lowered the volume. And there was the unmistakable sound of an animal sniffing the air for threats. For opportunities.

A voice came through the headphones. Sibilant:

"Do you have my face?"

Brenda flushed red with paralytic fear. What was it? And was it talking to her?

"My face . . ."

An eruption of hooves rattled in her ears. She saw the creature pass the visible sliver of the hollow entrance, saw a flash of something tan, *something* enter the darkness of the maw of twisting vines.

Her mind was refusing what it was experiencing, but she'd gotten it on camera. Thank God she'd gotten it on camera. The bridge, the hollow, the

voice—all of it.

Yet when she went to view the footage, the video wasn't there. She hadn't been recording. And Brenda, on her knees behind the enormous tree trunks, more afraid than she'd ever been, knew she'd made an amateur's mistake at one of the most important moments of her life; she'd forgotten to press record.

In her headphones, a quiet, steady sound persisted.

The sound of something breathing, hissing, perhaps whispering its question, the same question—*Do you have my face?*—back now in the dark of its cave.

7

Brenda wrote it all down. The coordinates (insomuch as her GPS told her), descriptions of the trees she hid behind (as best she could), the bridge, the ravine, and, of course, what she'd heard. Keeping the record was all she could do to calm her nerves. Maybe if she approached it like a scientist, with strategy, these facts would appear less unfathomable.

Maybe.

She made sure to set the camera to record, though the sound of the breathing had ceased. Twice she thought she heard a distant clop, which could have been anything in the forest—or something deeper in the hollow. *How far back did it go?*

She shook at the idea of passing beneath that arch.

Yet she'd set out to find the bridge. She'd deliberately sought it out, and she couldn't leave it, couldn't let it out of her sight. What was there to do but investigate? She was there because Amanda had gone missing in those woods. And because Brenda hadn't been paying attention when she had. Yes, the time had come. And whether Brenda was ready for what was next didn't change the fact that in that moment, in that place, she could dent the past, or possibly even rid herself of the feeling that had taken root in her stomach three years ago when her parents had blamed her on television.

What choice did she have but to enter the darkness on the other side?

Brenda stood up, knelt, sat, stood up, paced. All within the circle of trees that suddenly didn't feel quite big enough. The most haunting question, the one she simply could not ignore, echoed in her head like a singular monstrous howl:

Is Amanda Jennings in that hollow?

Right now?

Brenda didn't let herself consider the fact she'd long grieved her sister's death. She didn't let herself question her motivation for coming to the UNF.

She'd come to investigate the legend. That was all. She did *not* come here to rescue her sister. Amanda was long past rescue. The sun was still up, but soon it would dip beneath the tree line. Brenda didn't want to think about going into the tent. Going in anywhere felt like stepping into a trap. There was only one way in. And one way out. What if the thing found her there?

She had to eat. She opted for fruit leather; the chips and crackers she'd packed were too loud. She drank water from a bottle and forced down two pieces of bread. She needed food to think with a clear head, but it was going to take more than nourishment to counteract the terror she'd felt since hearing that voice in her headphones. While she ate, she heard another distant clop. It could have been the sound of water dripping slowly in a cave or an acorn falling near the head of the bridge.

A teacher who'd encouraged her filmmaking once told her to watch an entire movie without *actually* watching it. She told her to make the screen dark and just *listen* to it. Then do the opposite: turn the volume down and only watch. This, the teacher said, was like attending all of film school in four hours. A full education. The thing that blew Brenda's mind was how hard it was to determine the source of a sound when you had no image to confirm it. *Clop*. A squirrel leaping from a branch? A footstep deep in a hidden hollow?

“... *help* ...”

Brenda froze midchew.

“... *help me* ...”

She stood up, her body suddenly hot. That was a voice, yes. But was it the same voice she'd heard on the bridge? Someone was asking for help. In the hollow? Had to be. But it was far away from the mic. Was she hearing only what she wanted to hear?

The possibility of Amanda beyond that arch?

She needed to get the police. She had footage now of the bridge, of the hollow. Video and audio. Even if they didn't buy into the myth, they'd have to do something about the word. *Help*. They'd have to come.

“... *help meeeee* ...”

Listening closely, Brenda detected some sibilance in that voice, yes. But was it the same as that thing who'd hissed into her ears? She didn't know.

“You need to find your spine,” she told herself.

She'd said that phrase a hundred times, writing movies, filming movies, walking the halls of high school and her family home, too, after the

disappearance of her sister.

There was a truth she was trying to deny, listening again for that pleading: no matter how much a family has grieved, if their missing loved one had not been found, alive or dead, there was always hope.

Help me . . .

Someone needed help in the hollow at the far end of the bridge.

Brenda got up. She removed her mother's gun from her waistband and held it in one shaking hand. She picked up the small tripod with the other, the camera still attached. The record button blinked red.

She walked back toward the bridge.

If that voice was going to speak again, she needed to hear it. She kept her headphones on. Her shoes crunched the fallen leaves, and her steps grew in volume like a storm on its way. Her own breathing was just as loud.

When the head of the bridge was in sight again, she slowed. But she did not stop. Not until she arrived at the first post, where the microphone was still tied waist high. Her heavy, steady breathing eclipsed any wind, and any voice that might come from deep in that hollow.

And how deep did it go?

The creak of her boot on the first white board chilled her. She crouched, set the tripod on the bridge, keeping her eyes ahead, gun aimed toward the arch, and tried to untie the microphone. The knot was tight, and she had to set the gun down so she could use both hands, had to look at the twisted knot. Her fingers trembled, clammy with sweat, but she got it loose. She rose, clipped the microphone to her waistband, picked up the tripod.

Ahead she saw the outline of something just inside the darkness beyond the arch.

The hiccup in her gasp came through as a sharp crack in her headphones. She almost fired the gun. What was she looking at? Was it Opso? Was it whoever had taken Amanda?

Brenda held the camera high, zoomed in on the form.

It wasn't lost on her she was recording now. Whatever this was, she got it. The shot.

But the longer she looked, the clearer it became this was not a living thing. The sun still shone over her left shoulder, into that darkness. This whiteness, this form . . . Brenda thought it looked more like reflected light, the sun off a car bumper, an old compact disc . . .

A mirror.

She crossed the bridge. The creaking in her headphones was extraordinary, but she didn't turn the volume down. She wanted to hear into that hollow, all the way to whoever had asked for help.

She thought of *finding her spine* and wondered, among the incredible fear, the grief, the urge to *do* something for her missing sister, if she'd found too much of it.

She thought of her parents' grief-stricken faces on television, too. What would they say now?

At the arch, she made a split-second decision to turn on her phone's flashlight. Part of her was a documentarian, perhaps a part that protected the rest from running back to the tent or falling completely apart. And if she was going to enter this cave, she wasn't going to leave it with a black screen.

“. . . *is someone there?*”

A voice came again. The plea for help.

“Yes!” she called out.

“*Help! Please!*”

Brenda stepped under the arch, into the darkness, her phone's light illuminating only a foot before her. Were these walls? She couldn't tell. Moss, leaves, branches woven together. And there was the smell: the gamy stench of an animal's den.

She aimed the light to her right, and a figure, movement, startled her. Again, she almost fired the gun. But it was only her image, reflected in a mirror. When she'd first heard the Opso story, she'd imagined it gazed at an ornate piece of glass from a fairy tale. Framed in golden ridges, carved by hand. But here, just an ordinary rectangle, herself reflected, and she'd seen the same thing on the back of a dozen bedroom doors. Yet there was something extraordinary there. The young woman she saw looked stronger than the one she believed herself to be. And this kernel of confidence felt big enough to use.

She stepped close and saw the glass was wet. Half-covered in a viscous and clear substance, like an animal's slobber.

“Help!”

The voice was no longer far off, and Brenda recoiled at the volume in her headphones. Was that Amanda? She couldn't know for sure. It'd been three years. Her body, her mind, her voice, all would be different now.

Brenda didn't call out, didn't break into a run even though she wanted to. There was so much she wanted to do. Instead, she took measured steps,

deeper into the cave, past the mirror, turning right as the hollow made a sharp bend.

She held the camera level.

She advanced.

She stepped on something round, something hard.

Bones were everywhere on the ground.

And still Brenda did not gasp, she did not turn and run, she did not scream. She didn't even wince as she stepped on and over the bones, and a crunching of a different kind filled her ears. She was advancing toward what was clearly the ridge of a hole in the ground.

"Oh my God, help me!" the voice called.

Brenda removed the headphones. She was close enough to hear clearly on her own. She stepped to the ridge and shined the light below.

"Oh God," she said.

There were others. It was hard to decipher it all at once. An old woman, her white curly hair tight against her scalp, seated against the wall of the hole in the ground. Amanda was not there. She was sure of that.

She looked closer and saw the skin on the woman's face had been removed. She was long dead.

Two bodies, maybe more, were on their backs. They'd have been looking back up at Brenda, but they were all without faces.

And amid that carnage was a young woman. Alive. A tearful, terrified intact face. Looking up.

"He's not here," she said. "Help."

It wasn't till then that Brenda started to register how deep the hole went. Twice her own height.

She shined the light ahead. Behind.

Where was he if not in the hollow?

"Please," the woman said. "Please hurry."

Brenda recalled the posters around town. The missing Kimberly Jackson. The face she'd repeatedly told herself to avoid, the one she couldn't *bring* herself to look at. But the truth was, she'd seen her picture, the square school portrait of an innocent smile, an expression rendered ominous once a person vanishes.

This was her. Brenda knew it.

"How?" she asked, seeing no way to help Kimberly Jackson out.

"Send something down!" Kimberly yelled. "Hurry. He's gonna come

back.”

The horror in her voice was palpable. Brenda, still filming, felt confused, hurried, scared, all while trying to figure out any action and, thus far, doing nothing. There was no rope, no way Brenda could see to reach her. Nothing but bones and the mirror in the hollow.

And Brenda’s mind was fixated on the other bodies. Could any of *those* be Amanda’s?

“*Hurry!*” Kimberly yelled.

“Okay, Okay, I . . .” But what did she have? “I have clothes. At my tent. I can make something out of vines. I can—”

“Don’t go. *Please* don’t go.”

“Where’s Amanda?”

“*Please* don’t go.”

“Do you know Amanda? My sister—”

“She . . . she’s gone,” Kimberly said.

The young woman’s voice deflated. As if she knew, by giving Brenda this information, she was resigning herself to the hole forever.

“Gone?” Brenda asked.

There were too many thoughts to process. Did *gone* mean alive? Kimberly Jackson had been missing only a couple of weeks—how could she know?

How recently had Amanda been *gone*?

Questions crowded Brenda’s brain: *How? Was she hurt? Did that thing drag her out? Was she dead? WHERE IS SHE?*

But before she decided to, Brenda was stepping back from the hole. As Kimberly’s wailing reverberated against the walls of the cave, Brenda took the winding hall back past the mirror. She turned to the bridge and moved fast but deliberately, the old woman’s faceless body in the hole imprinted on her mind, Kimberly’s cries fading a little with every step.

Were any of the bones in the hollow Amanda’s?

Brenda had one thought that cut through the questions: She couldn’t end up in that hole. She had to get out.

She ran. Thoughts of a rope made of her clothes and vines flashed bright, then faded, and she ran out under the arch, across the bridge.

The forest floor felt soft again beneath her, and she kept running, toward the tent now.

But just as she saw the tent’s peak, something moved to her left and

touched her arm. It felt like a branch, but there was no tree beside her.

It was slender fingers. A hand.

Brenda turned and pulled the gun's trigger blindly, but she heard only a click. In that moment she was sure she would die because she hadn't taken an hour to teach herself how to operate a firearm. But she saw the form that ducked when she pulled the trigger, its hair stringy and wet like the mirror in the hollow, and immediately Brenda's knees gave out under her.

Amanda was crouched beside her. Her shirt and pants were covered in mud and looked barely kept together by the thread that had once held them tight. Her skin was covered in dirt, and her silent tears revealed streaks of pale deathly skin. There was something feral about her, something raw, but perhaps not yet broken.

"Oh my *God*," Brenda whispered, her words catching in her throat.

The sisters stared at each other. The few seconds of silence felt like three years. Brenda saw embarrassment on Amanda's face and couldn't help but imagine the horrors her sister had endured in that hole. And how, despite them, Amanda had retained her expressiveness, her honesty.

Brenda imagined calling *action*, wanting so badly for all this to be a film, the newest one she and Amanda were making.

Then she grabbed her sister by the wrist and ran.

"Brenda," Amanda said. Her voice was hoarse, but the sound of her name from Amanda's mouth made Brenda weak. "I got out," she said. "He gets stuck if he looks in the mirror. Days, weeks. He can't look away. He cries. I got out."

"Okay," Brenda said, her mind close to caving in. "Okay. *Run*."

Amanda was trying. Only her legs were spindly, like an animal learning to walk.

"He's gonna trick us," Amanda said. And her voice was nearing hysteria; her voice was horror. "When I saw the bridge, it wasn't where it is now. There wasn't any cave. He's gonna trick us."

"Come on," Brenda said. Her own voice close to the same, but the shakiness in her sister's scared her deeply. "Now. We run."

"I saw you come in," Amanda said.

"Come on . . ."

"He's gonna trick us, Brenda."

"*Amanda*," Brenda said. "You're alive."

It struck Brenda that she'd forgotten about filming. Despite the

unfathomable emotions swirling within her, this realization brought with it pride.

She turned and held her sister's face in her hands, and she cried, speaking without words, and then they were running again toward the tent and barrow.

"He wanted my face," Amanda said. "*My face.*"

Brenda tried to compartmentalize what was happening. She had to stay focused. She had to direct.

Amanda's voice was only the audio track; the only plot point that mattered was that her sister was alive. There were bodies in that hole, people without faces. A living person, too. Brenda feared she might lose her mind.

She focused on the visuals in front of her, exactly what she could see.

The forest. Thick tree trunks obscuring their path. Pine needles cushioning the ground. The tent and her gear ahead. The space between trees and how that gave her hope of a clean exit. But the canopy of leaves above, too, and how that made her feel trapped.

But mostly she just saw them getting out. Running back the way Brenda had come in. Yes, she saw a way out, a way home where she'd make right all the wrong that had shrouded her life since Amanda had disappeared.

Amanda is alive!

She pulled Amanda toward the tent. Her sister kept saying, *We have to go, he's going to trick us*, and Brenda began to imagine the care it would take to get her sister right again before she said, "The car keys. We need the keys. We can leave the rest."

She fell to her knees behind the semicircle of tree trunks. She didn't care about the journal, the tripod, anything. She unzipped the tent and found the keys fast on the polyester floor. The world was one buzzing color; dozens of piqued emotions at once. She was dizzy with it. Scared beyond containment. They had to go. They had to run. She sprang from the tent and looked to her sister, who was staring wide eyed at the trees that blocked their view of the bridge.

Brenda turned to where Amanda was looking and saw Larry, the mannequin head, strewn on the forest floor. But a featureless face still rested upon the stuffed powder-blue sweater, her dummy still with a head.

Amanda screamed as the dummy stood, leaves falling from its shoulders and knees. Hooves protruded from the hem of the jeans.

There was no face, no, but there was the suggestion of a mouth. Thin

lips parted as the creature turned its head from Amanda to Brenda and said,
“*You have my face . . .*”

Brenda put herself between her sister and Opso.

“*Back,*” Brenda said, holding the gun with hands that shook.

But the monster did not back away. He took a step toward her, a single hoof thudding flat in the dirt.

“*You have my face,*” he repeated.

Brenda couldn’t synthesize what she was seeing. It was well beyond reason. But she knew stories. She knew what would come next. This thing, this horrible thing, was about to lunge for her.

A thought came, as crystalline as a good decision on a movie set: Brenda dropped the gun and lifted the tripod. She fumbled with shaking hands, staring briefly at her own terrified image on the screen, then found the button to flip the screen away from her.

Opso began to lunge.

But he saw his own image, the blank face despairing in its nothingness, on Brenda’s phone and stopped.

Brenda steadied her hand.

Opso fell to his knees. The jeans splatted in fresh mud. His thin, vague mouth curved down at either end.

“*My face,*” he lamented. “*Oh, my face.*”

“Be ready to run, Amanda,” Brenda said.

“*Gone,*” Opso said.

He reached for the camera, and Brenda pulled it back, slowly, backing up from the thin fingers that reached to her.

“Be ready,” she said to Amanda. “And . . .”

She set the tripod down. She took a step back.

“*Gone!*” Opso said. “*GONE!*”

And Brenda said, “Action.”

Then there was a blur of running. Her sister beside her. Amanda falling. Brenda’s hand upon her sister’s wrist. Roots and fallen sticks tripping them up as they scrambled. Amanda ahead. Brenda nearly carrying her sister, pushing her forward through the thick brush. Trees, leaves, moss, fallen logs, canopies of dark green.

Forever, it seemed, they ran, covering the days of slow advance that Brenda had made with her gear and the barrow.

And wailing, behind them, the demon imp trapped, staring at itself by

Brenda's abandoned tent.

More trees, roots, sharp branches.

"There!" Brenda finally gasped.

Yes, it was the place she'd entered the woods. The sandy lot beyond it. And her car. She could see her car.

She turned as she exited the forest and saw her sister still standing at the edge of the woods.

"Amanda . . ."

"He'll trick us," she said. "He'll find us." Amanda's slight frame seemed stuck to where the canopy of trees ended. Terrified of reentering the world outside the woods.

But Brenda was already stepping back to her, already taking her sister forcibly by both wrists.

She pulled Amanda out of the woods as Amanda broke her grasp to shield her eyes from the sunlight. Sunlight Amanda hadn't seen, not like this, in three years.

Then, because she couldn't wait another second, she hugged Amanda's frail body.

"I found you," Brenda said. "You're out. Oh my God. I found you."

And her words were nearly drowned out by the unbelievable wailing from within the Ucatanani National Forest.

Far off now, the sound was no less chilling. The unmistakable tone and timbre of misery.

Brenda imagined that voice on tape. The visage, or lack thereof, on camera.

All that now left behind. Lost.

She pulled Amanda to the car. The two sisters standing on either side, their doors not yet open, Amanda said, "He . . . he started starving them slowly until their faces get loose. I thought I'd never see you again."

"Okay, Amanda, okay, I love you. I love you so much."

"He keeps them for years, I think."

"Yes, come on, we have to get out of here."

"I told him he was beautiful. I insisted."

"Amanda, I'm so sorry I wasn't paying attention to you. I'll never let you go again. Please get in the car."

"I insisted he was beautiful until he said he'd prove he wasn't. He pulled me out, Brenda. To show me. To show me the mirror. He pulled me

out.”

The wailing continued. Misery upon the air like pollen.

“And he got stuck . . . looking at himself . . . stuck! I just . . .”

“What?”

“I just walked out.”

“Amanda. Let’s get you home. We need to send someone to help that girl.”

But would the bridge still be there? Would her gear? Would anything be the same for the next person who entered the forest?

Brenda opened her door. Amanda looked back to the woods once before doing the same. Still standing, she said, “I didn’t know how to get out of there. I saw you . . . I thought I was . . .”

“Get in, sis. I love you, Amanda.”

“I thought you were a wish, a dream . . .”

The sisters sat beside each other at last.

Behind the wheel, Brenda saw a bright light, miles away, it seemed, through the wilderness of the woods.

Sunlight, perhaps, glinting off a mirror in a hollow across a bridge.

She started the car, pulled out of the lot, and drove fast and determined, knowing they’d never be the same, knowing they’d always hear that wailing from within the woods, no matter where they moved, no matter how much they healed, how old they grew.

In the cracks of their new realities, they’d always hear the lamentation of the vain imp, its howlsong rising like misery, like horror, from the forest deep.

Brenda put her hand on her sister’s knee. Perhaps to prove this was all fact, not fiction.

“You came for me,” Amanda said.

But even this far from the forest, Amanda’s words were interrupted, it seemed, by the shrieking, the crying, the longing of the thing in the woods.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Josh Malerman is the *New York Times* bestselling and Bram Stoker Award–winning author of *Daphne*, *Pearl*, and *Spin a Black Yarn*, as well as *Bird Box*, which was adapted into a feature film for Netflix. He is also one of two singer-songwriters for the rock band the High Strung.