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450 Seventh Ave, Suite 809  
New York, NY 10123

toll-free phone: 1-866-NEW-PLAY  
email: [info@playscripts.com](mailto:info@playscripts.com)  
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## **Cast of Characters**

BRANDON (M)

WARREN (M)

ZOE (F)

NIKKI (F)

ASHLEY (F)

HIKER 1 (M or F)

HIKER 2 (M or F)

HIKER 3 (M or F)

HIKER 4 (M or F)

HIKER 5 (M or F)

## **Character Notes**

Brandon, Warren, Zoe, Nikki, and Ashley are all in their late teens and have graduated from high school. Nikki and Warren are siblings.

## **Staging**

The play takes place in several different parts of a forest. There may be plants, leaves, logs, small trees, etc. scattered around the stage. These will be rearranged several times as the characters move through the forest. There is also a fairly large tree (approximately 10-12 feet tall), described in the stage directions as “bare, gnarled, dark and twisted...resembles a Halloween tabletop diorama piece brought to life.” This may be stay in one place or be moved around during scene changes, depending on the director’s wishes.

## **Lighting**

The play begins in early evening and it grows later with each scene change. Night comes at the third and final scene change.

## **Properties**

- Backpacks, flashlights, and camping gear (Ashley, Zoe, Nikki, Brandon, Warren)
- Large pink hair band (Zoe)
- Pocket knife (Warren)
- Watches (Nikki, Ashley, Brandon)

## **Costumes**

Ashley, Zoe, Nikki, Brandon, and Warren are all dressed for warm weather camping and hiking.

Hikers 1-5 are dressed entirely in blacks and grays.

## **Note**

If the dialogue about Warren's photocopying is considered too crude, alternative dialogue is provided at the end of the script.

# THE TREE

by Bradley Walton

*(At Rise: WARREN, BRANDON, ASHLEY, NIKKI, and ZOE enter. ASHLEY is leading. They are all in their late teens, dressed for warm weather hiking, and carrying camping gear. Scattered across the stage are various bits of plants and shrubbery.)*

*(In one corner of the stage is a bare, gnarled, dark and twisted tree, approximately 10-12 feet tall, which resembles a Halloween tabletop diorama piece brought to life.)*

**WARREN.** How come there's never a photocopy machine around when you need one?

**BRANDON.** We're in the middle of the woods, Warren. What, at his precise moment, could you possibly have the burning need to photocopy?

**WARREN.** My butt.

**ASHLEY.** Someone please kill me now.

**NIKKI.** You had to go and ask him, didn't you, Brandon?

**ZOE.** He's just trying to get a rise out of you, Brandon. Don't bother.

**BRANDON.** *(Ignoring the others:)* Your butt.

**WARREN.** Yeah.

**BRANDON.** When you say, "butt," do you mean, "the thing that fills out the back of your pants" butt?

**ASHLEY.** What other kind of butt is there?

**BRANDON.** Cigarette butts.

**WARREN.** I don't smoke.

**BRANDON.** It's entirely too much to hope that you've suddenly decided to start, isn't it?

**WARREN.** You want to see me wither and die from cancer?

**BRANDON.** The mental image is admittedly less unsettling than you exposing yourself at Kinko's. (*The director may substitute the name of another copy store.*)

**WARREN.** You want to share in the secondhand smoke?

**BRANDON.** Wait a minute.

**WARREN.** You want to take up smoking, but you're too cheap to buy your own cigarettes?

**BRANDON.** *That's* why you were banned from Kinko's! You lying weasel.

**WARREN.** Emphysema is best when you share it with a friend? That what you're thinking?

**BRANDON.** You said you spilled a soft drink on one of their machines.

**WARREN.** I did. I knocked it over while I was copying my butt.

**ZOE.** Look, I realize that the photocopying of body parts is a glorious tradition that's probably only about ten minutes younger than the first copy machine, but it's like dressing up in your grandmother's underwear and watching a bootleg copy of *The Star Wars Holiday Special*—it's just not something you do in a public place.

**WARREN.** How many people do you know who have a photocopy machine sitting in their living room?

**NIKKI.** Mr. Bradford at the high school said he had one.

**ASHLEY.** The teacher with the tattoo of Yoda?

**NIKKI.** Yeah.

**ZOE.** I heard he owned a bootleg of *The Star Wars Holiday Special*.

**WARREN.** I suppose you're going to try to tell us he owns some of his grandmother's underwear?

**ZOE.** Well, if he's got enough sense to have a photocopy machine in his living room, why shouldn't he?

**ASHLEY.** Zoe, that makes no sense whatsoever.

**BRANDON.** Neither does photocopying your butt at Kinko's!

**WARREN.** But I don't own a copy of *The Star Wars Holiday Special* or any of my grandmother's underwear! How can you expect me to have my own photocopy machine?

**ZOE.** I don't! I expect you to not photocopy your butt in a public copy store!

**WARREN.** It was late at night. The clerk was in the back. And if they didn't want people to photocopy their butts, they wouldn't be open 24 hours!

**ZOE.** I am never going to a 7-11 with you.

**BRANDON.** Please tell me you at least cleaned off the glass.

**WARREN.** Oh, yeah. I mean, there's no telling who was there before me.

**ASHLEY.** (*Aside:*) When we get home, I'm going to file a patent for sanitary photocopy machine covers.

**BRANDON.** No. After.

**WARREN.** Why should I? I figure if somebody's going to copy their body parts after me—if they have any reasonable sense of postmodern cultural practices—they'll know to wipe the glass off themselves.

**NIKKI.** Why do we hang out with you?

**WARREN.** Because I'm your brother.

**NIKKI.** You don't have to remind me.

**WARREN.** And maybe you feel bad for me because I don't have a social life.

**NIKKI.** If you don't have any friends, it's your own fault.

**WARREN.** Is it my fault for being me, or is it everybody else's fault that they can't stand me?

**ZOE.** I can't stand you.

**WARREN.** And yet, here we both are. Are you trying to reform me?

**ZOE.** I'm not that optimistic.

**WARREN.** Why waste your time?

**ASHLEY.** Nikki's one of our best friends. You're her brother. If that means dragging you out of the house once in a while and trying to teach you to act like a human being, we'll cope.

**WARREN.** Am I your community service project or something?

**ASHLEY.** Just trying to make the world a little more pleasant.

**WARREN.** So my long-term welfare really isn't a consideration? You're just doing it for yourself—so you can wallow in the warm fuzzies you get thinking about what a good person you are?

**ASHLEY.** You need to work on your social skills.

**WARREN.** You're not answering the questions.

**ASHLEY.** I'd like to think I do things for the right reasons.

**WARREN.** Wow, that's really evasive, Ashley. Did I make you that uncomfortable?

**ASHLEY.** We're trying to be your friends.

**WARREN.** Right. Am I supposed to be grateful?

**BRANDON.** I'd settle for less grating.

**WARREN.** All right, look, if it makes you feel any better, I only used the really old copier back in the corner next to the display of sticky notes.

**BRANDON.** This is your idea of less grating?

**NIKKI.** You—*I use that copier!*

**WARREN.** But it doesn't work half the time!

**NIKKI.** That's why it never has a line!

**BRANDON.** Warren, why—

**ASHLEY.** Brandon, please drop it.

**BRANDON.** In a minute.

**ASHLEY.** If he opens up his mouth again, you know we're all going to regret it.

**NIKKI.** It's like watching an overweight teacher wade past their retirement age write on the chalk board, oblivious to the giant rip in the seat of their pants. It's disgusting, but it's impossible not to look.

**BRANDON.** I want to understand, that's all. I'm trying to get it to make sense. No matter how awful it actually is, it's less threatening when it makes sense.

**ZOE.** We're talking about Warren. Photocopying his butt. It's a stupid, immature, impulsive thing. It doesn't make sense. You can analyze it until your brain liquefies, evaporates, and re-condenses into a completely new organ, and it's still not going to make sense.

**BRANDON.** Warren, why do you want to make photocopies of your butt while you're hiking in the woods?

**WARREN.** We could staple them to the trees and have a clear path back to the car.

**BRANDON.** They'd be hard to miss.

**WARREN.** Plus, you know, it would make things feel more like home.

**BRANDON.** Right. Um.

**ASHLEY.** Told you so.

(BRANDON *looks at* NIKKI.)

**NIKKI.** Don't look at me. I haven't seen the inside of his room for years.

**WARREN.** One of those days, I'm just going to have to break down and buy myself a personal copier.

**NIKKI.** And I will never, ever attempt to use it.

**WARREN.** Hopefully one with a rechargeable battery pack.

**BRANDON.** So you can bring it camping?

**WARREN.** Sure.

**ZOE.** Do they even make those?

**ASHLEY.** Why don't you just use a digital camera?

**WARREN.** Photocopiers have this old school classiness about them.

**ZOE.** "Old school classiness" has no place here. It ran screaming from the forest thirty seconds into this conversation.

*(WARREN approaches the tree and gestures to it.)*

**WARREN.** Look at this tree. Does this tree look welcoming to you?

**BRANDON.** Not especially.

**WARREN.** What, I ask you, could make this tree more welcoming?

**NIKKI.** You hanging from it. By a noose. *(The director may substitute "Christmas ornaments" for this line.)*

**WARREN.** *(Ignoring her:)* You know how they say that if you're nervous speaking in front of an audience, that you should picture them in their underwear, so they don't seem as threatening? It's the same here. Stick a photocopy of a butt on this tree, and it wouldn't seem so foreboding.

**ASHLEY.** I'm sure the tree appreciates the sentiment.

**NIKKI.** Especially coming from somebody who kills trees to photocopy his butt.

**WARREN.** It's not like I went out and chopped them down myself.

**NIKKI.** It's still waste. You should respect the environment.

**WARREN.** When the environment can shine a pretty blue light on my bottom and spit out a glorious, high resolution image of my

upper thighs smooshed comedically against a glass surface, I'll grant it the same respect I show a photocopier machine.

**ASHLEY.** You consider sitting on a photocopier machine an act of respect?

**WARREN.** I'm incredibly selective about the electronic devices I touch with my posterior.

**NIKKI.** So you don't care about wasting paper, and by extension, killing trees, which make oxygen to keep you alive?

**ZOE.** In essence, she's asking if copying your butt is more important than breathing.

**WARREN.** If you're gonna live, then your life needs to be worth living.

**NIKKI.** If you were the only person on the planet, that line of reasoning wouldn't bother me so much. But you'd kill us all...just to photocopy your butt?

**WARREN.** I'll make copies for you, too.

**NIKKI.** Turn around and start walking before I hang you from that tree myself. (*Or "...before I turn you into a Christmas ornament."*)

**ZOE.** Jerk.

*(Everyone exits. The lights dim and the set pieces are rearranged to indicate a different location. The lights, when they come up, suggest that it is later in the evening. ASHLEY, ZOE, NIKKI, BRANDON, and WARREN enter.)*

**BRANDON.** It's gonna be dark soon. Are you guys ready to quit for the night?

**ZOE.** Sure.

*(Everyone sees the tree.)*

**WARREN.** What the...

**BRANDON.** That's not...

**ASHLEY.** Wow.

**NIKKI.** That looks like...

**ZOE.** Did we go in a circle?

**ASHLEY.** No.

**ZOE.** You sure?

**ASHLEY.** Pretty sure.

**ZOE.** How sure is pretty sure?

**ASHLEY.** Kind of sure.

**ZOE.** So not sure?

**WARREN.** That's the same tree we saw earlier. It's got to be.

**ZOE.** So we went in a circle.

**NIKKI.** We must have.

**ASHLEY.** Crap. (*Or "crud."*)

**BRANDON.** So, do we camp here?

**ZOE.** No. Let's go a little ways yet.

**WARREN.** Okay.

**NIKKI.** Sure.

**ASHLEY.** Coulda sworn...oh, well.

*(Everyone exits. Again, the lights dim and the set pieces are rearranged to suggest a different location. When the lights come up, they again indicate that it is later in the evening. ASHLEY, ZOE, NIKKI, BRANDON, and WARREN enter.)*

**ZOE.** ...and he says, "but squirrels can't do that!" And the whole class just looked at him.

**ASHLEY.** What'd the teacher say?

**ZOE.** The teacher said we were getting off topic. And that she was glad she wasn't being observed by one of the principals.

**BRANDON.** That's crazy.

**NIKKI.** Oh, I wish I could've seen that.

**ZOE.** It was great.

(WARREN *sees the tree.*)

**WARREN.** Ashley, your sense of direction sucks.

**ASHLEY.** What?

**BRANDON.** Look.

**ASHLEY.** No...

**ZOE.** This is getting weird.

**NIKKI.** Freaky.

**ASHLEY.** We're not going in a circle. We can't be.

**WARREN.** Then there's a tree with at least two identical twins in this forest.

**ASHLEY.** It's not the same tree. It isn't.

**WARREN.** It's got to be.

**ASHLEY.** We are *not* going in circles.

**ZOE.** Are you sure?

**ASHLEY.** I'm positive.

**BRANDON.** How positive?

**ASHLEY.** Cut it out! I'm absolutely, 100% completely certain that we did not go in a circle this time.

**ZOE.** Okay, we believe you.

**ASHLEY.** This is not the same tree!

**ZOE.** Right. I hope not.

**NIKKI.** What do you mean, you hope not?

**ZOE.** You ever see the movie *Goldfinger*?

**NIKKI.** That was one of the Bond movies, right?

**ZOE.** Sean Connery's third one. There's this line, goes something like, "Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action."

**ASHLEY.** You're saying, what...that finding three trees that look like this, that it's enemy action? From what?

**ZOE.** I don't know. Just thinking out loud, I guess.

**WARREN.** You know, the same line's in the novel. At least, I'm pretty sure it is.

**ZOE.** Warren...

**WARREN.** What?

**ZOE.** Just keep your mouth shut, okay?

**WARREN.** What'd I do?

**ZOE.** Shut it, all right?

**WARREN.** Whatever.

**BRANDON.** All right. Look around. We need to try to remember what this place looks like.

**WARREN.** How hard can it be? Look at the tree! It's right there!

**ZOE.** Warren.

**BRANDON.** We need to mark this place, so if we do come back this way, we'll know for sure. No offense, Ashley.

**ASHLEY.** (*Coldly:*) None taken.

**BRANDON.** Does one of you have a hair rubber band or something?

*(ZOE produces a large, bright pink hair band and hands it to BRANDON. If ZOE doesn't have long hair, it can come from*

*someone else. If no one has long hair, the director may improvise another prop.)*

**ZOE.** Yeah. Here.

*(BRANDON hangs the hair band on the limb of a small tree or shrub.)*

**BRANDON.** Thanks. Okay. Let's go.

*(WARREN crosses to the twisted tree, pulls out a knife, and starts carving something into the tree's bark, just out of the audience's view.)*

**WARREN.** Wait a minute.

**BRANDON.** What?

**WARREN.** I'm marking the tree, too.

**BRANDON.** We don't have to mark that tree. We just marked this.

**WARREN.** What if the wind blows the hair band off?

**BRANDON.** There's no wind.

**WARREN.** I'm just saying.

**ZOE.** Warren, leave the tree alone.

**WARREN.** What, are you scared of it or something?

**ZOE.** Yeah, I kinda am. So leave it be.

**WARREN.** It's the only way to be sure. Just a little X with my knife.

**NIKKI.** You know what I think? I think you're taking out your pent-up aggressions on the tree.

**WARREN.** I think you think too much. Okay. There.

**ASHLEY.** You're an idiot, Warren.

**WARREN.** You're a lousy navigator, Ashley.

**BRANDON.** Come on. Let's just go.

*(Everyone exits. For the final time, the lights dim. The set pieces are rearranged and the hair band is removed to suggest a different location. The lights come up at level to suggest that it is night. ASHLEY, ZOE, NIKKI, BRANDON, and WARREN enter, all focused on the tree.)*

**ASHLEY.** No. Absolutely not. There is no freaking way.

**BRANDON.** Where's the hair band?

**NIKKI.** I don't see it.

**BRANDON.** Well, find it.

**ZOE.** It's not here.

**ASHLEY.** This isn't the same place. That log wasn't there before. And that bush. *(Change dialogue to match actual set pieces as necessary.)*

**NIKKI.** *(Looking offstage:)* There's a dirt mound over here that I don't recognize.

**WARREN.** It's the same tree.

**ASHLEY.** That's not the same tree. This isn't the same place.

**BRANDON.** She's right. It's not the same place. I don't know what it is with the tree, but...it's just some weird coincidence.

**WARREN.** *(Looking at the mark he carved into the tree:)* This is the same tree.

**ASHLEY.** It's not the same tree!

**WARREN.** The X is right there.

**BRANDON.** What?

**WARREN.** Look. X. Right there.

**ASHLEY.** It's not the same X. Someone else must've carved an X on this tree. It's an X. They're common. Lots of people carve X's on trees.

**WARREN.** Look under the X.

**BRANDON.** It's a little jagged line.

**WARREN.** It's a W, you moron.

**BRANDON.** How do you know?

**WARREN.** It's my first freaking initial. I carved it there when I did the X.

**ASHLEY.** Why did you carve your initial?

**WARREN.** Because X's are a pretty common thing to carve on a tree.

**ASHLEY.** Lots of people have W's in their names.

**WARREN.** I don't know who elected you governor of the state of denial, but you need to get your head out of sand and start dealing with this.

**NIKKI.** Dealing with what? What exactly is it that we're dealing with?

**WARREN.** It's following us.

**ZOE.** That's the stupidest thing I ever heard!

**WARREN.** Do you have a better explanation?

**ZOE.** It's a tree! Trees don't move! And don't you dare bring up the Ents in *Lord of the Rings!* Trees don't move. Period.

**NIKKI.** Trees are alive.

**ZOE.** Yeah, but they don't get up and walk.

**NIKKI.** But they're alive. You have to respect that.

**WARREN.** Did hippies beam down from outer space and plant flowers in your brain?

**ASHLEY.** That tree doesn't look alive to me.

**NIKKI.** Do you think it's angry with us?

**BRANDON.** Are you serious?

**NIKKI.** Brandon. That thing shouldn't be there. But it is and it's really freaking me out. Obviously, there's some kind of really big problem here. So let's see if we can figure out what it is and maybe we can solve it.

**BRANDON.** You think we ticked off the tree?

**NIKKI.** I think Warren ticked off the tree.

**WARREN.** Yeah. Blame it on me.

**NIKKI.** That stuff he said about killing trees so he'd have paper to photocopy his butt.

**WARREN.** Wait a minute. I didn't say that! You said that.

**NIKKI.** I said it about you. And you more than willingly agreed.

**ZOE.** That's ridiculous.

**NIKKI.** Almost as ridiculous as being followed around by a tree.

**BRANDON.** Maybe we're asleep and this is some kind of dream.

**WARREN.** You're stretching.

**BRANDON.** It's a more rational explanation than being stalked by a tree with anger management issues!

**NIKKI.** What do you think we should do? What do you think Warren should do?

**WARREN.** This is not my fault, so if you expect me to hug the tree and give it a little kiss and tell it I'm sorry—it ain't happening.

**BRANDON.** I've about had it with you.

**ZOE.** Stop.

**NIKKI.** Maybe we're looking at it all wrong.

**ZOE.** How can there be a right way to even look at a situation as screwed up as this?

**NIKKI.** Is the tree following us, or are we following the tree?

**ZOE.** What kind of metaphysical gobbledygook is that?

**NIKKI.** It's not metaphysics, it's simple, linear space, you idiot. We're not constantly seeing it just behind us. We keep catching up to it. It's like it's leading us somewhere.

**WARREN.** It's a seeing eye tree? Right. That explains everything.

**ASHLEY.** If it is leading us, then do we keep going?

**NIKKI.** I'm not real crazy about the idea of staying right here.

**ZOE.** I'm not real crazy about walking two hundred yards and seeing this tree again.

**ASHLEY.** I wonder what would happen if a couple of us stayed here with the tree and the rest went on ahead?

**BRANDON.** That's a really interesting question, but we're not splitting up.

**ASHLEY.** Why not?

**BRANDON.** Because it's a bad idea. One of the groups would never see the other again. End of story. I've seen enough horror movies where I've been thinking, "No, you idiots! Don't split up!" and then somebody dies. I refuse to be one of those idiots.

**WARREN.** I can't believe you're trying to impose the rules of a horror movie here.

**BRANDON.** What other rules do you suggest we follow?

**WARREN.** There are no rules. This isn't a movie. There's no formula.

**BRANDON.** Horror movies are the closest thing we've got to any sort of experience dealing with something like this.

**WARREN.** What if the tree hasn't seen any horror movies?

**BRANDON.** Then we're probably screwed.

**ASHLEY.** If the tree hasn't seen any horror movies, then maybe it doesn't know how it's supposed to act.

**WARREN.** I'm sorry, but I don't remember ever seeing any horror movies about evil trees. I mean, what would you even call the sequel to something with the title *Tree*? (In a mocking announcer voice.) *Tree 2: Pine Tree?*

**NIKKI.** How do you know it's evil?

**WARREN.** I'm making an educated guess.

**ZOE.** *Man-Thing*.

**WARREN.** What?

**ZOE.** *Man-Thing*. It was a horror movie about a monster in a swamp. Not quite a tree monster, but close. It was on the Sci-Fi Channel. Based on a Marvel comic book. Co-starred the guy who played Anakin Skywalker's stepfather in *Star Wars Episode II*.

**WARREN.** The fact that you know that scares me almost as much as this mess we're in. We get out of this alive, you and me need to talk.

**ASHLEY.** *Man-Thing*? They called it *Man-Thing*?

**ZOE.** I never said it was a good name. About on par with *The Incredible Hulk* and *Fin Fang Foom*.

**NIKKI.** *Fin Fang Foom*?

**ZOE.** Giant dragon in purple shorts.

**NIKKI.** You're kidding.

**ZOE.** You wish.

**ASHLEY.** *Man-Thing* sounds like a—

**NIKKI.** Don't say it. Just don't. We've already got enough bad karma on our heads for one night. I don't want to say anything that could add to the pile.

**ASHLEY.** What did the *Man-Thing* do?

**ZOE.** It killed people.

**BRANDON.** Great. That's just great.

**ASHLEY.** How?

**ZOE.** I never read any of the comics, but in the movie, it impaled people and ripped them apart and stuff.

**WARREN.** That's dumb. It should have burned them.

**ASHLEY.** Burned?

**WARREN.** Yeah. You know, you want a fire, you burn wood. That's generally the way it works. If I was going to have a tree monster killing people, it just seems like there'd be some kind of poetic symmetry to having it set them on fire.

**ASHLEY.** You are so messed up.

**BRANDON.** Guys! We're in a seriously bad situation here and you're debating the merits of a low-budget horror movie most of us haven't seen!

**WARREN.** You're just jealous you haven't seen it.

**BRANDON.** We need a plan.

**ZOE.** Right. Picking up where we left off—stay together, or split up?

**ASHLEY.** Stay together.

**NIKKI.** Yeah.

**BRANDON.** Definitely.

**WARREN.** Listen to yourselves.

**ZOE.** You want go off by yourself, be our guest.

**WARREN.** You're a bunch of idiots for thinking like Brandon. But I'd be a bigger idiot to go off into the woods by myself in the dark.

**BRANDON.** All right, then. We stay here.

**NIKKI.** Do we set up the tents?

**ZOE.** If we're going to wait out the night, we may as well.

**ASHLEY.** You're going to *sleep*?

**ZOE.** No. But if I was in a tent, I wouldn't have to look at that. (*Gestures to the tree.*)

**ASHLEY.** Okay. Do we build a fire?

**ZOE.** Well, that's a million dollar question. Will we offend the tree if we do?

**BRANDON.** "Will we offend the tree?" This conversation can't be happening.

**WARREN.** We've built campfires before. It would be hypocritical not to build one now.

**NIKKI.** But the tree is watching us.

**BRANDON.** "The tree is watching us." I'm standing next to someone who actually just said the words, "The tree is watching us." If I wasn't scared to the point of peeing in my pants, I'd be laughing my head off.

**ZOE.** You want to go take a minute to relieve yourself behind some bushes, go ahead. We'll be right here.

**NIKKI.** Just don't go on any of the trees.

**BRANDON.** No. No. I'm okay.

**ZOE.** Nothing like mortal terror to give your contradictory bladder impulses a good workout.

**WARREN.** Look, if we *don't* build a fire, it'd be like saying grace only when you have company over for dinner, or a vegetarian pigging out on corn dogs and Jell-o when no one else is around. We camp. We build fires. Using wood that is already dead. This is normal behavior. We're suddenly going to not do something we always do because some tree is stalking us?

**BRANDON.** "Some tree is stalking us."

**ZOE.** Sounds like a darned good reason to me.

**WARREN.** It's not like it's doing anything threatening.

**ZOE.** We've been trying to walk away from the thing for close to an hour and it won't let us. I think that qualifies as threatening.

**ASHLEY.** Maybe it likes us.

**ZOE.** Maybe it likes us in an unhealthy kind of way.

**WARREN.** Okay. Fine. No fire.

**ZOE.** Thank you.

**WARREN.** You're not welcome.

**ZOE.** You're not acting rational, Warren.

**WARREN.** This isn't a rational situation.

**NIKKI.** And Warren's never rational.

**ZOE.** Forget it. I'm not going to talk about it any more. Let's set up the tents.

**NIKKI.** You hear something?

**BRANDON.** What?

**NIKKI.** Sounds like voices.

**WARREN.** I don't hear any—

**ZOE.** Shut up and listen!

**HIKER 1.** (*Offstage, barely audible:*) ...it was awful the way things worked out.

**HIKER 2.** (*Offstage, barely audible:*) Unbelievable.

**ASHLEY.** It's people!

**NIKKI.** Oh, man. I don't think I've ever been so glad to hear somebody's voice in my life.

**WARREN.** What are you expecting them to do, rescue us?

**NIKKI.** I don't know. Maybe. Yeah.

**WARREN.** Rescue us from what, exactly?

**NIKKI.** From this tree!

**WARREN.** Right. “Oh, hey, excuse me! This tree is stalking us. Can you save us, please?”

**ZOE.** We don’t have to mention the tree. We just walk with them. Maybe the tree will leave us alone.

**BRANDON.** And maybe we’d be pulling them into this mess along with us.

**ASHLEY.** Hey, guys? Does it seem kind of odd to you that whoever this is—that they’re walking through the woods after dark? Without any flashlights?

*(Five HIKERS enter. They are dressed entirely in blacks and grays. There is no color about them. They are not carrying flashlights or any other light source.)*

**HIKER 3.** Even so, those were the good old days.

**HIKER 4.** Sure were.

**NIKKI.** Hi.

*(The HIKERS ignore NIKKI and the others.)*

**HIKER 5.** Boy, I miss college.

**HIKER 1.** Me, too.

**HIKER 2.** Sometimes I’d give anything to go back.

**NIKKI.** Uh, excuse me.

**HIKER 3.** All of the freedom and none of the responsibility.

**HIKER 4.** Except on the tests and papers.

**NIKKI.** Sorry to interrupt you all, but, uh...

**HIKER 5.** Sometimes, not even then.

**HIKER 4.** Some days I almost feel guilty about all the trees that died to print the textbooks I never read, but it sure was a blast.

**NIKKI.** Hey, watch it! Don't go saying stuff like that!

**HIKER 1.** Anybody ever tell you about Bob Daniels?

**HIKER 2.** Didn't he drop off the face of the Earth or something—back before our freshman year?

**HIKER 1.** Yeah. That's him.

**HIKER 3.** I heard he was a real jerk.

**ASHLEY.** Will you look at us?

**HIKER 1.** Did you know he worked in the campus bookstore?

**HIKER 5.** Yeah. I heard. I can't believe someone was dumb enough to give him the job.

**ZOE.** Hey! Look at me!

**HIKER 3.** What'd he do?

**ZOE.** What's the matter with you people?

**HIKER 1.** He ripped pages out of every single book in the store.

**HIKER 4.** Every book?

**HIKER 1.** Every book.

**HIKER 2.** When'd he do it?

**HIKER 1.** Over a couple of nights. He had a key.

**HIKER 2.** Oh my gosh.

**ZOE.** I'm talking to you!

**HIKER 1.** And he was real specific about it.

**ZOE.** Can you hear me?

**HIKER 1.** Pages 215-220. Gone from every book.

**ZOE.** Hey!

**HIKER 1.** So a bunch of people got 200 pages into their books before anyone realized there was a problem. Nobody could look at each other's textbooks and to get the missing information, and there were no undamaged copies readily available in the book store.

**HIKER 5.** And it was the two-week interterm between semesters. There wasn't enough time for the bookstore to get replacement copies for the classes going on.

**ZOE.** Hey!

**HIKER 4.** Wow.

**ZOE.** Do you hear me?!

**HIKER 2.** I'm assuming he got caught?

**ASHLEY.** What's going on?

**HIKER 1.** Somebody figured it out, yeah.

**ZOE.** I'm right here!

**HIKER 3.** Did they make him pay for everything?

**ZOE.** Do you see me?

**HIKER 5.** They tried. I don't know if they got any money out of him or not.

**NIKKI.** Why aren't they talking to us?

**HIKER 1.** The worst part was, though...you remember Prof. Wharton?

**ZOE.** Come on!

**HIKER 4.** I wish I didn't.

**NIKKI.** Please!

**HIKER 2.** He found out about it. And on the exam for his interterm course, every question came from pages 215-220 of his textbooks. There were over a hundred people in the class.

**NIKKI.** Please answer us!

**HIKER 3.** You're kidding.

**HIKER 1.** Nope.

**BRANDON.** Look at us!

**HIKER 4.** Why?

**HIKER 1.** Heaven only knows what Wharton was thinking, but a hundred people blamed Bob because they bombed the class.

**ZOE.** Look at us!

**HIKER 1.** Bob didn't last long at school after that.

*(The HIKERS exit.)*

**NIKKI.** What was that?

**ZOE.** I don't know.

**NIKKI.** Why didn't they know we were here?

**ZOE.** I don't know!

**ASHLEY.** Were they ghosts?

**ZOE.** I don't know.

**NIKKI.** Why would they be ghosts?

**ASHLEY.** They didn't notice us. It's like they were on a completely different plane of reality.

**NIKKI.** But...it's living people who aren't supposed to be able to see the dead! Not the other way around! That's the way it usually works, right?

**ZOE.** If they were ghosts, they didn't act like they knew they were dead.

**WARREN.** Have you ever seen a ghost?

**ZOE.** No.

**WARREN.** Have you ever been dead?

**ZOE.** No.

**WARREN.** Then how do you know what a ghost acts like?

**BRANDON.** If we've never been dead, then how do we know we're not dead?

**WARREN.** Oh, for crying out loud, Brandon. That wasn't an invitation.

**ZOE.** *(To BRANDON:)* Because right now, except for this intense sensation of unbridled panic, I feel pretty much exactly the same as I have for the whole eighteen years I've been alive.

**BRANDON.** But if you've never been dead, then you have nothing to compare it to.

**ZOE.** Brandon, stop talking crazy.

**BRANDON.** Sanity skipped out on this conversation a long time ago.

**ZOE.** We're not dead.

**BRANDON.** I know you've seen movies where people are dead and they don't know it.

**ZOE.** Enough with the movies! This isn't a movie! We're not dead!

**BRANDON.** Prove it.

**ZOE.** What do you mean, prove it?

**BRANDON.** Prove it. How do you know you're not dead?

**ZOE.** I'm breathing. I can feel my clothes, and the ground under my feet.

**BRANDON.** So? Who's to say ghosts can't feel?

**NIKKI.** I got one better: I can think.

**BRANDON.** You can think, therefore you are?

**NIKKI.** Yeah.

**BRANDON.** I didn't say that you didn't exist. Just that maybe you weren't alive.

**ZOE.** This is a load of crap. (*Or "bunch of garbage."*) We can't prove or disprove that we're alive or dead.

**WARREN.** We could bash your head against the tree a few times... break your neck and see if there's any change.

**ZOE.** Are you threatening me?

**WARREN.** No. Just making an observation.

**ASHLEY.** Maybe the tree is controlling our minds. Making us act crazy. Trying to get us to kill each other.

**NIKKI.** No. Warren's acting like that because he's scared and he's a jerk. Botanical telepathy's got nothing to do with it.

**ZOE.** Nikki?

**NIKKI.** Yeah?

**ZOE.** You said something about a dirt mound earlier, didn't you?

**NIKKI.** Yeah.

**ZOE.** Where?

**NIKKI.** Over there.

*(ZOE crosses to where NIKKI saw the dirt mound and looks off-stage.)*

**ZOE.** Here?

**NIKKI.** Yeah.

**ZOE.** Oh. Crap. (*Or "crud."*)

**NIKKI.** What?

**ZOE.** It looks like a grave.

**ASHLEY.** What?

**ZOE.** The length. The width. It looks like a grave.

**ASHLEY.** Don't mess with us. This isn't funny.

**ZOE.** I'm not messing. And there's another one.

**NIKKI.** Another grave?

**ZOE.** There's...there are five of them.

**BRANDON.** Five.

**ZOE.** Yeah.

**ASHLEY.** I wanna go home.

**ZOE.** That's how many there were of those people that walked by us. Maybe they really are dead. Maybe these are their graves. You said you thought maybe the tree was leading us somewhere, Nikki. Maybe this is it.

**BRANDON.** There are five of us. Maybe these are our graves.

**WARREN.** Will you cut it out with the stupid horror movie stuff?

**BRANDON.** Just because I saw it in a movie doesn't mean that it isn't what's happening now!

**WARREN.** Listen to yourself! You're desperate to make any kind of sense out of this mess! You're experiencing something completely unfamiliar and you're trying to put it into the only context you can think of, looking for some kind of familiar ground, no matter how awful it may be—because it beats dealing with a complete unknown. I get that. But I don't believe any of that stuff applies here, because I've seen it all on TV, and if there's one thing I've learned in life, it's that you don't trust the TV. If you want to tell me something that I'll believe, then tell me something that I haven't heard before! Tell me something original!

**BRANDON.** I can't.

**WARREN.** Then do us all a favor and just shut up. We don't know what's happening and there's nothing we can do about it.

**ZOE.** How about you? Why couldn't you have just kept your mouth shut about the photocopies?

**WARREN.** Wanna know something funny? When I made those copies...I had my pants on.

**NIKKI.** But you said...

**WARREN.** I was just trying to get a rise out of you.

**ASHLEY.** You made photocopies of the seat of your pants?

**WARREN.** Yeah.

**ZOE.** You're going to get us all killed because you wanted to act like an immature brat, and you couldn't even do *that* right?

**ASHLEY.** (*Shouting at the tree:*) Do you hear him? He didn't mean it! He didn't mean any of it! You can stop this now! It's all a misunderstanding. Please. Just let us go.

**ZOE.** I don't think that's gonna help.

**NIKKI.** What do we do?

**ZOE.** We wait.

**NIKKI.** For what?

**ZOE.** For starters, we wait for the sun to come up. What time is it anyway?

**ASHLEY.** (*Looking at her watch:*) It's—

**ZOE.** What?

**ASHLEY.** It's ten.

**ZOE.** So we sit tight for eight or nine hours and try not to get rattled.

**ASHLEY.** It's ten o'clock in the morning.

**ZOE.** What? No it isn't.

**ASHLEY.** 10 AM. My watch says 10 AM.

**ZOE.** Then your watch is wrong.

**NIKKI.** I've got the same thing. My watch says AM.

**ZOE.** That can't be right.

**BRANDON.** I've got it, too.

**ZOE.** It isn't ten o'clock in the freaking morning! It's just gotten dark within the past hour!

**BRANDON.** Maybe if you're dead, time passes differently.

**NIKKI.** But if we were dead, wouldn't our watches be showing—I dunno—dead people time, or something?

**ZOE.** If we were dead, that doesn't mean our watches would be dead, too.

**ASHLEY.** You're saying time is passing differently for us than it is for our watches?

**ZOE.** I don't know. Maybe.

**WARREN.** That doesn't make any sense.

**ZOE.** I'm sorry! It's not like I'm an expert at this crap! (*Or "at whatever's going on!"*)

**BRANDON.** This is bad.

**ZOE.** Could you possibly make an even more obvious statement?

**BRANDON.** What else do you want me to say? What else do you *expect* me to say?

**ZOE.** Something useful.

**BRANDON.** I've been trying, but every idea or suggestion I toss out gets derided.

**WARREN.** Because you're tossing out stuff you've seen in movies!

**BRANDON.** Well, here's one more for you to laugh at.

**WARREN.** Oh boy. What movie is it now?

**BRANDON.** *Saw*.

**WARREN.** *Saw*. Right. If there's any movie that an angry, sentient, magic and downright ugly tree is going to have seen, it's one called *Saw*. Tell me something—is the tree supposed to have watched this in the theater? I hope it sat in the back, because I'd have been pretty upset if it plopped down in front of me and blocked the screen. Or did it stroll into the video store and rent it? Maybe we could call Blockbuster and ask them to look up the tree's account for us...then we'd know what movies it had seen and we could plan our strategy accordingly. That's brilliant, Brandon. Brilliant.

**NIKKI.** I doubt Blockbuster would give out a customer's rental history.

**WARREN.** I was being sarcastic!

**NIKKI.** There was a flaw in your sarcasm. I just thought you should know.

**ASHLEY.** Brandon, the *Saw* movies are about people having to mutilate themselves in order to escape from death traps. We're not chained to anything here. Cutting off somebody's leg isn't going to do any good.

**BRANDON.** You're being too literal. You, me, Zoe, and Nikki—we're all chained to the tree. And Warren is the chain.

**WARREN.** What? We covered this part already. It's not my fault.

**BRANDON.** I think it is. And I think we need to get rid of you if the rest of us want to get out of this.

**NIKKI.** You want to kill him?

**BRANDON.** I don't *want* to. I mean, yeah, the urge is there. Frequently. But when it comes down to it...no. But we're going to have to. That or leave him here.

**WARREN.** You're not leaving me anywhere.

**ASHLEY.** What are you going to do, punch him out, tie him to the tree, and walk away?

**BRANDON.** Pretty much, yeah.

**NIKKI.** We can't.

**BRANDON.** Why not?

**ASHLEY.** He's Nikki's brother. He's our—friend.

**BRANDON.** That's pushing it.

**ZOE.** Okay—he's somebody we hang out with.

**BRANDON.** He's obnoxious.

**ZOE.** That's not a capital offense.

**BRANDON.** And up until this moment, I've always been content to let him live.

**ZOE.** If we sacrifice someone's life to save ourselves, what does that say about us?

**BRANDON.** That our sense of self-preservation has its priorities straight.

**ZOE.** Life is about more than self-preservation.

**BRANDON.** Right. It's also about photocopying your butt and ticking off trees with bad attitudes.

**ASHLEY.** Warren? Would you stay here willingly?

**WARREN.** Would I *what*?

**BRANDON.** How can you ask him that?

**ASHLEY.** How can you talk about leaving him? What's the matter? Would it sully your memory of Warren if he did something noble? And anyway, I'm not asking him to actually do it. I'm asking him if he would. I'd just like to know. Especially if I'm going to die.

**WARREN.** No, I wouldn't do it.

**ASHLEY.** That's what I thought.

**BRANDON.** So we leave him?

**ASHLEY.** No. We stay.

**THIS PLAY IS  
NOT OVER!**

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