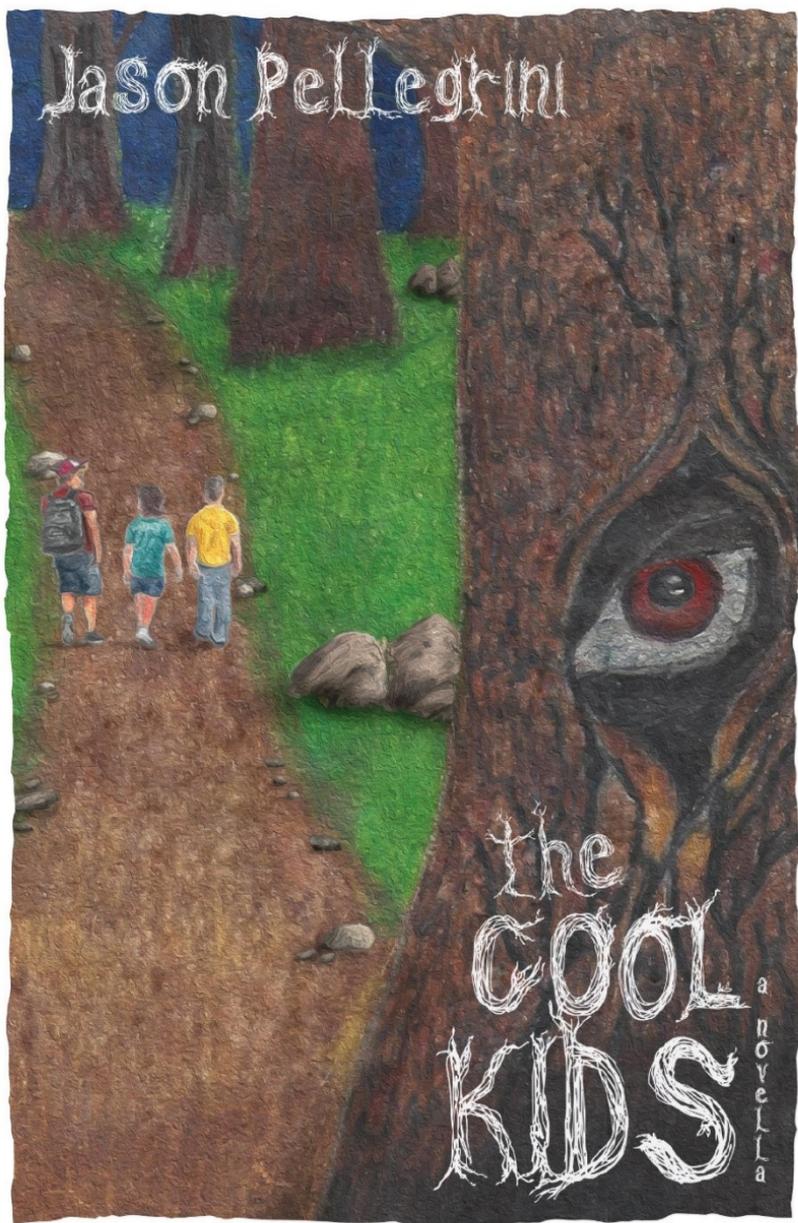


Jason Pellegrini



the
COOL
KIDS

a NOVELLA

I

I made the decision to tell my story days ago. Four to be exact. It had been with me for weeks, lingering like a sickness. I tried to distract myself by creating busywork, but the more I tried, the tighter it held on. I realized it wasn't going to leave me alone until I finally told it. The only way to rid my mind of it completely, would be to let the story pour out onto paper for others to see.

So why has it taken me four full days to finally sit down and start typing, you ask?

It's not laziness or procrastination, if that's what you're thinking!

The reason it's taken me so long is I can't figure out how to start. I've spent every waking hour of the last four days obsessing over what to say here and I've come up with squat.

Nothing... nada... niente.

The big fat zero!

The main reason is because there is no way to tell you without sounding like a crazy person. No matter what sequence of words my brain conjures up, you are just going to think I'm some nut job, who has finally lost that last bolt holding his sanity in place. At the very least, if I'm lucky, you're just going to think I'm a liar, which I suppose is better than you thinking I'm a mental case.

So after four days of obsessing, and nothing to show for it, I've decided to just write. I'm going to say what it is I need to say, and if you don't believe me, then so be it. There's nothing I can do about that.

I am hoping, though, that you'll stick around to hear my story.

So, with all that said, there's nothing left to do, but say what it is I need to say. So here it goes...

Monsters are real.

I know what you're thinking: it's a ridiculous statement, sure, but it wasn't so bad. Well I'm not done just yet.

Magic is real, too!

Yes, I am telling you that both monsters and magic exist. Two things we are raised to believe aren't real are just that. Now I'm not claiming there are also wizards out there waving their wands, or that vampires stalk the shadows praying on the innocent. I'd like to clear that up now. There are things that exist, however, that the majority of us are utterly unaware of.

How do I know these things are real, you may be wondering?

It's because I've witnessed both with my own two eyes. It all happened one afternoon, in the summer of 1994, and I still remember every detail of it as if it happened to me just yesterday.

So here I am now, twenty-three years later, to share with you my story, assuming you're still here to listen to it.

Before I get into the meat and potatoes of my tale, I'd like to take a moment to tell you a little about myself. I think in order for this story to really strike the chords and resonate the way I am hoping it will, you should have a better understanding of me.

So let's start with my name.

It's Kevin Ford.

I was born, raised, and have spent my entire life on Long Island. I'm the third born of four children: three boys (which

I am the youngest of) and a girl. I'll tell you now, so you don't waste your time: if you are looking for a story about a broken man with a tragic past, this is *not* the story for you. Sorry to disappoint. My entire life (especially my childhood and early adulthood) has been fairly mundane.

Now just because I didn't have parents who neglected me, or a drug addiction, or a sibling who was in and out of the prison system, does not mean I didn't have any hurdles to overcome growing up. They just might not seem so big in the grand scheme of things. Still, they are my own, and they are part of my story.

Being the youngest boy in the house was not easy, as I'm sure those with older brothers can attest to. I have wonderful relationships with both my brothers now, but that was certainly not the case while growing up under the same roof. When they wanted to, my brothers, Andre and Matt, could be real jerks, and as a result, a long-running two-on-one sibling rivalry developed.

The usual focus of my brothers' torture was my size and athleticism, or lack thereof.

Both Andre and Matt took after our father. Anthony Ford, known to everyone else as Tony, was the star athlete of the high school football team. Dad possessed all the qualities one could hope for in a star quarterback: size, strength, mobility, intelligence. He could pick apart a defense with ease, and when he was in sync with his receivers, everyone knew there was no hope for the opposing team. Dad's talent led him to college. He was destined for the pros. It was as if it was written by destiny.

That was until the start of the season of his junior year. The great Anthony Ford took a sack from a two-hundred and fifty pound lineman with a bad attitude. He suffered a career ending knee injury. All future hopes of getting drafted by the NFL were gone in a single play.

Dad didn't let it destroy him, though. He decided he would move forward with his life, and not reflect on what

had happened to him, or what might have been taken away. He was given the opportunity to get into coaching, which could have potentially led him to the NFL. He declined, though. The pay wouldn't be great for years, if ever, and with football behind him, all he wanted to do was marry his college girlfriend, and settle down. He dropped out of college, and found a career in the electricians union.

Even though the prospect of a career in football was behind him, dad's love for the game never wavered. Despite turning down the opportunity to coach, he embraced the coaching side of the game. He studied it, learning the proper tools needed to help mold a star player, and once his firstborn son, Andre, was old enough, he began training him for greatness. He repeated the process with his second son, Matt.

Not so much the case with his third, though.

Matt and Andre were their father's sons. No doubt about it. Even from a young age, you could tell athleticism was in their DNA. With every season came a new sport for my brothers to enroll in. Like dad, though, they each had a passion for football. They would spend hours on end running drills with dad, and they loved every single moment of it.

I was the odd one out. Like my brothers before me, dad took me into the yard when I was old enough, and tried to get me acclimated to the pig skin. Unlike Andre and Matt, I lacked the finesse it took to be a football player.

At first, dad thought maybe I was a slow learner. After all, everyone learns at their own pace. That was not the case. It quickly became apparent I would not be a star athlete at any point in my life.

Dad never showed an ounce of favoritism towards Andre and Matt, nor did he ever neglect me because of my lack of ability. Whenever I'd want to join in on family practice, he was happy to have me, despite my ineptitude towards properly running routes, or throwing and catching a ball. He was also my protector against my brothers, who loved to call

me their little sister, or make fun of how terrible I was at the game.

“At least he has some brains in his head,” he’d often jest whenever he saw the heckling was getting to me. “Which is more than I can say about you two Neanderthals!”

My dad and I still bonded over football, despite how bad I was at it. Let’s be clear about something; I love football. I absolutely suck at it, but I freaking love the game. Every fall, for as long as I can remember, my dad, my brothers, and I would be glued to the television all day on Sundays. We’d yell, we’d curse—then we’d get yelled at by mom for cursing—we’d cheer, and, on a few occasions, yes, we’d cry.

Dad’s team was always the New York Giants, and his love of and loyalty to G-men was passed down to all three of his sons. I was too young to remember the Giant’s 1987 Super Bowl XXI win, but there is a picture of my father holding me right after with a young Andre and Matt by his side. You could make out the tears in his eyes.

I remember their Super Bowl XXV win in 1991 more clearly. But my fondest memory with my father, as far as football is concerned, was in 2008. Mom decided she would kill four birds with one epic stone and scored us all tickets to Super Bowl XLII in Arizona. It was a combined birthday and Christmas gift for each of us that year. There, we got to see the underdog Giants, not only win the Lombardi Trophy, but break the New England Patriots’ season-long undefeated streak. That time, all of us were in tears when the game ended.

Football brought my family together, and gave us all amazing memories together. I don’t think I’d have the strong relationship that I do with my father or my brothers (after my brothers grew out of being jerks, of course) if it wasn’t for football.

While football was definitely one of my passions, it was not the only one. I fell in love with reading at an early age. Whenever dad was out in the yard with Andre and Matt, and

I didn't feel like making an ass of myself, I'd be up in my room, reading.

A few times dad attempted to pick up a book, looking for another chance to bond with me. It didn't pan out. Mom found him a few books on football, and he was able to read through them in a night or two. But anytime we put a work of fiction in his hands, he'd give up on it after a week and only twenty pages in. It just wasn't his thing, and that was fine. We had football. Reading was how I bonded with my mother.

Throughout the years my brothers loved to torment me for my small size and lack of athleticism. Their favorite thing to do was call me their sister.

Mom was always good at noticing whenever their torture was getting to me. She always sat me down and told me that being good at football wasn't the most important thing in the world. One of the most important point she always tried to drive home was that football wasn't what made you a good man.

"I didn't fall in love with your father because he was good at football," she'd tell me. "I fell in love with him because of the kind of man he is."

(She'd later on in life joke that she fell in love with dad in spite of football; even though she's had her crazed lunatic moments when it comes to the game)

One afternoon, as mom was attempting to lift my spirits, I noticed a book she had been reading laying on the coffee table. My curiosity took over, and I asked her what it was about. She told me—of course, negating some adult-oriented details—and I became so entranced that I forgot all about my brothers upsetting me. This soon became my mother's way of distracting me from my insecurities.

Whenever she'd see me becoming upset, she'd take me inside and tell me about whatever book she was reading at the time. My fascination for these stories became such a good coping mechanism that I would seek her out on my

own whenever my brothers or lack of athletic skills were getting to me. Eventually mom came up with the idea of getting me my own books. I would read them, which served as its own distraction, and then tell her about them whenever I finished. Soon reading became more than just a means of a distraction for me.

Upon noticing the quality time spent with mom, my brothers began to tell me that mom took a liking to me because she always wanted a daughter, and I was as close to a girl as someone can get without actually being one (clever... right?). Eventually our sister, Bethany, was born, and I will admit I was jealous for a while of the late addition to our family. No big shock, it was Andre and Matt who fueled that fire. They liked to tell me with a true daughter now in the mix, mom no longer had use for me. I held my bitterness in for a while, but eventually I broke, and told my mom what Andre and Matt had said. This resulted in mom scolding them badly. Then dad took them down to the football field, and put them through torturous drills, over and over... and over... and over again.

Not going to lie. Even now, the thought of dad putting them through the ringer for being such little shits makes me smile.

The truth was, despite now having a daughter to do mother-daughter things with (things she never tried to do with me for the record) my relationship with my mother never weakened, and I believe it was because of our love of reading. In fact, as I got older, and she allowed me to start exploring more adult oriented content, our bond got stronger. We'd always find time to hang out, and discuss whatever book it was we were reading at the time. Even to this day, once a month we pick a book to read and discuss. I have no doubt she will be one of the first people who will read this when it is finished. Although I'll be mentioning some things in here that she has never known. Had she, she'd

have had dad take me down to the football field and run drills until I thought my legs were going to fall off.

Well sorry, mom, but I'm all grown up now, and the statute of limitation on punishment has long expired!

Growing up in my Levittown suburban home was an amazing experience. Despite the two jackasses I had to put up with!

However, my family isn't the only reason I had a memorable childhood. It was also because of the friends I made, and the relationships I developed through those friendships that helped to enrich my childhood with fond memories. Two friends in particular stand out high above the rest, and they just so happen to play a crucial role in the story I am about to tell.

In September of 1989, I entered the first grade. On one of the first days of class our teacher, Mrs. Manus (who I can still remember as the first person I ever noticed had really terrible body odor) split the entire class up into groups of four. Except for one group. There was an odd number of students in the class, so one group only had three children. I was one of the three kids and the other two were David Fein and Gregory Moore.

The three of us hit it off immediately. We all lived a few blocks from each other, so getting permission to hang out was never an issue. We'd have sleepovers at Dave's house. We'd stay up late, playing *Super Mario World* or *Zelda: A Link to the Past* on Super Nintendo until Dave's mom, half asleep, would trudge into the living room, which was lit only by the glow of the television, and scream at us to get to bed. We'd spend wintery afternoons following school at the park down the block from Greg's, sledding down the snow covered hill. We'd then settle down to a delicious home cooked meal at Greg's dinner table. Dave and I would constantly be fishing for an invite to a Moore family dinner,

because Greg's mom was absolutely the best cook in the world.

In 1993, the three of us opted out of a Sunday of trick or treating to attend our first football game together. My father took the three of us and my brothers to see the Giants play the Jets. The Giants lost, but it didn't matter. Being at that game, and seeing both New York's premier teams play each other was the coolest thing in the world.

The three of us were inseparable. Very early on, my mom dubbed us the Three Musketeers—although dad argued we were more like the Three Stooges. So many memories from my childhood involved those two.

Including the day that inspired me to write this story.

That day started off like any other. Summer was coming to a close, and we were all dreading the inevitable return to school. Dad was at work, and Andre and Matt were refusing to let me play football with them.

When Dave and Greg knocked on the front door, I was up in my room, trying to stay out of my mother's sight. I had recently begun a campaign to be allowed to read more mature books. Mom shut my idea down fairly quickly, saying I was not old enough for the books she read. In an attempt to ease my desire, she picked me up a few *Goosebumps* novels by R.L. Stine. She thought they'd be enough of a change to satisfy me. She was wrong.

After I had breezed through those, I found myself wanting more. Instead of returning to her to plead, I turned to plan B, which was to take it upon myself to get my hands on one of mom's books without her knowledge. One evening when she and dad were distracted by their conversation in the kitchen, I snuck over to the bookshelf and grabbed her copy of Stephen King's *Misery*. I shoved it under my shirt, and ran up the stairs to my room. Just as I would a few years later

with the occasional *Playboy*, I threw the book under the mattress.

Every night, after my mom thought I had gone to sleep, I'd pull the novel out from beneath my mattress, and dive into the story about an author held against his will by a psychotic fan. At first, I didn't think it was that bad. I had no idea why mom thought I couldn't handle it. I'd soon learn that mom was one-hundred percent right. I was in no way ready for a novel like that. I found myself awake at night, scared Annie Wilkes would be there in the darkness to take my foot.

This did not stop my determination to finish the book, though. I needed to convince myself I was mature enough to make it to the end. I decided it was best not to read at night, so I was forced to sneak a few pages in whenever mom was distracted. That's what I was doing when Dave and Greg showed up at my house on that August day.

"Kevin!" mom yelled up the stairs. "Greg and Dave are here!"

"I'm in my room, mom," I announced, which was followed by the sounds of Dave and Greg coming up the stairs.

I took the copy of *Misery*, and returned it to its hiding spot. I didn't want one of them to see it, and blow my cover while mom was potentially in earshot.

"Hey. What's up, guys?" I said as my two best friends entered the room.

We greeted each other, and Dave eased my bedroom door shut. It was obvious he didn't want mom to hear it being closed.

"Get your bathing suit, and a towel," Dave told me, once he felt certain there were no unwanted listeners nearby. "Tell your mom we are going to the pool. Then we're going to eat dinner at Greg's."

"Sweet!" I said. "I'm finally going to do a backflip off the diving board!"

“First of all, no you’re not,” Dave said. It wasn’t the first time I had made the claim throughout the summer. “Besides, we aren’t actually going to the pool.”

“Well then why am I telling my mom I am?”

“Because if you tell her what we’re really doing, she won’t let you come.”

“So what are we doing?” I asked; my interest now piqued.

All I got back were two giddy smiles.

“I’ll tell you when we get outside.”

“It’s going to be so awesome,” Greg added in.

My first thought was maybe Dave stole a few of his dad’s beers. We had toyed with the idea before. That wasn’t it, though. Although it would happen five years later, and, yes, we did get caught, and, yes, all three of us got into a heap of trouble.

I couldn’t come up with any other ideas about what we were doing. But the bait was dangling in front of me. So I bit and agreed to lie to my mom.

I wasn’t thrilled about the idea of lying to mom. But, like every kid, I had done it, and whenever I got caught, it was terrible. Not because she yelled at me (which she rarely did) but because I would see the look of disappointment in her eyes. Every time she caught me in a lie, that look would make me feel worse than any scolding possibly could.

I grabbed my backpack from my bedroom door, which in just a few weeks would be used to lug textbooks and binders to and from school. I pulled my bathing suit from my dresser and grabbed a towel from the upstairs bathroom. I shoved both items into the backpack. Dave told me we would be stopping at the deli, so I grabbed some of my allowance. I zipped up my backpack, and the three of us headed downstairs.

“Try and get some snacks.” Greg said as we made our way to the kitchen. “We’re definitely going to need those.”

“Hey, mom,” I said upon entering the kitchen. “I’m going to go to the pool with Dave and Greg.”

“Oh, are you now?” mom asked. “I wasn’t aware you were the one who called the shots around here.”

“Would it be okay if I went to the pool with Dave and Greg?” I corrected myself.

“Sure. What time are you coming home?”

“Well Greg said we can eat dinner over his house.”

“Okay, that’s fine. Please call me when you get back to Greg’s to check in.”

“Okay. Can I take snacks?”

“Sure.”

I thanked her and grabbed some snack baggies out of the cabinet.

“Do you three also plan on eating an actual lunch today?” mom asked as I rummaged through the cabinets.

“We’re going to the deli,” I let her know. “I took from my allowance.”

As Dave and Greg waited, the anticipation building in the room was obvious. They were nearly bursting at the seams. Then there was me, as eager to hear what they had to tell me as they were to say it.

Once I had snacks in hand and was ready to go, Greg and Dave each said goodbye to mom and went out the front door. Before I could follow, I was stopped.

“Hey! Where’s my hug?” mom asked.

I turned around, walked over to her and gave her a hug.

“See you later, mom!” I exclaimed.

“Have fun,” she said.

She didn’t have to tell me twice. I ran out the front door to join Dave and Greg, who were outside on their bikes already, waiting for me.

What waited for us was an adventure.

I came out the front door of my house, and ran across the lawn to the garage. I threw open the huge door, went in, and pulled out my bike. I jumped on, and let it roll down the driveway, where Dave and Greg were waiting.

“Oh my God, Matt! Look who it is,” Andre yelled as my brothers emerged from the backyard, where they had been tossing around the football, and running drills.

“I can’t believe it,” Matt said, his tone as mocking as Andre’s had just been. “It’s the Cool Kids!”

The Cool Kids was a nickname Andre and Matt had conjured up for Dave, Greg and me. Both my brothers were stars on the football team, they dated cheerleaders, and they were constantly surrounded by other students who wanted to be cool by association. Unfortunately, my friends and I were part of a crowd a little less popular.

Okay... a lot less popular.

In 1994, we weren’t in high school yet, but my brothers saw the writing on the wall. So they dubbed us *The Cool Kids*.

“Where are you three dweebs going?” Matt asked.

“None of your damn business,” I snapped back, defiantly.

“Whoa, Kevin!” Andre exclaimed. “No need to get yourself all mad. We were just asking because we want to know where the cool kids hang out these days.”

“Yeah!” Matt added. “I want to hang out where the cool kids hang out, so I can try to be just as cool as the three of you.”

“Impossible,” I fired back. “You need at least half a brain to hang with us, and even if you combined the two of you, you still wouldn’t have enough.”

It wasn’t the cleverest of insults, but, keep in mind, I was only eleven years old. I hadn’t had as much experience dishing it out as I had taking it. Still, my little jab was enough to get under Matt’s skin. He was always the hothead of the three Ford boys, and I knew he would react.

“What did you say, you little shit?” Matt snapped. “If you think I want to be anything like the three of you, you’re crazy! You’re a bunch of losers.”

Letting his temper get the best of him, Matt took the football in his hand, and threw it at me. Now, I knew what his plan was. He had pulled this stunt on me before. He knew I would go to catch, or at least block, the football coming at me. And being the graceless spaz that I was, I would’ve missed the ball entirely, gotten hit with it, all the while getting caught up in my bike, and falling to the ground.

Lady Luck was on my side, though!

Every now and again, throughout my years, I would show a tiny inkling of athleticism, and I would make a great catch during dad’s drills, or even throw like what might resemble a mini-sized quarterback. Dad would attempt to use these opportunities to try and fire me up, but we both knew full well that it was nothing more than luck. That morning, as Matt flung the football at me in an attempt to make me look foolish in front of my friends, luck intervened, and when I stuck my hands out in response to his action, I caught the football.

The look of shock on everyone’s face is still ingrained in my memory. None of them could have been as shocked as I was, though, as I stood there holding the football.

I had only a few short seconds before Matt’s shock wore off and he made a move to reclaim the football. Before Matt could even take a step towards me, I was on the move. I kicked off the ground to get my bike started, and once I had enough momentum, I pushed down on the pedal to increase my speed. Dave and Greg followed.

Both my brothers chased after us, but the three of us had created enough distance that it was a lost cause. I yelled victoriously as I pedaled down the block, the football held high above my head. As I reached the end of our block, and was about to turn the corner, I threw the football behind me, where it landed in the street and waited for Matt or Andre to

retrieve it. I had won the battle, but I wasn't stupid. Had I taken the football with me, it would've been war, and there was no way I would see victory there.

As we rode our bikes through the streets of Levittown, Dave and Greg went on about how awesome the whole exchange with my brothers had just been, and how sick of a catch I had made. I happily welcomed their compliments.

So with the taste of victory in my mouth, I rode alongside my two best friends. Soon the talk of the exchange on my front lawn died down, and we moved on to more pressing matters. Like the big secretive plans Dave and Greg had in store for us that afternoon.

“So what are we doing?” I asked as the three of us rode down the Levittown side streets, towards Gardiners Avenue

“Not yet,” Dave said. “Let’s go to the Wooden Park.”

The Wooden Park was a gigantic park behind Abbey Lane Elementary School that was built entirely from, well... wood. It was unlike any other park around. It was just so vast, especially for young children. No matter how many times you went, it always seemed as if you'd discover a new location. It was the perfect place for an epic game of hide and seek, or on that August day, a place for three friends to sit down, privately, and discuss their plans for the day.

When we got to the park, we locked our bikes up against the fence, and headed in. We made our way to one of the higher, more secluded areas of the monstrous wooden structure. We sat, and Dave opened up his backpack. He reached inside, and pulled out a book. I knew Greg had already seen it, because, at the sight of it, he beamed with

excitement. As for me, I could already feel myself itch with intrigue. Dave carefully placed the book in the center of the three of us, and I got my first look at the cover.

Written across it, in huge letters was the book's title:

THE LEGEND OF THE GORGALAGORTH.

An illustration of a single tree appeared beneath the title. Etched upon on the tree was a face. It wasn't a happy face. It didn't invite the reader to open the book and read the pages. It was angry and it was evil. It warned the reader to beware of what laid ahead. I felt a sudden chill travel throughout my body as I stared at the face. I can still remember the feeling all these years later.

"What is this?" I asked, my curiosity outweighing my sudden fear.

"This is what we're doing today," Dave answered, and pointed to the picture on the book's cover.

"What is a Gorgalagorth?"

Dave opened the book, and read to us the legend of the Gorgalagorth.

"The Gorgalagorth is an ancient guardian of the forest," he explained. "The Native Americans in these parts prayed to their gods to send them something to keep them safe. Everything they needed could be found in the forest. From food to water to supplies for clothing and shelter. If they lost the forest, they'd lose everything. So they asked the gods for a protector and the gods sent them the Gorgalagorth."

Any time a neighboring tribe would attempt to move in on their territory, Dave read, the Gorgalagorth would fight off the invaders. That was until the settlers from Europe showed up, and claimed everything in the New World as their own.

"Groups of settlers would head out into the forest to collect supplies for their settlements," Dave went on. "And when they came back, there would be less of them. Those who made it back told the others that they were attacked by a giant creature. Some kind of bear, maybe."

Eventually, the natives revealed the truth to the settlers. The settlers convinced the Native Americans they could coexist peacefully without the presence of the Gorgalagorth. They promised the two groups would share the forest. After some negotiations and the promise of goods from across the ocean, the Native Americans agreed to the terms, and banished the Gorgalagorth from the forest.

Only the Gorgalagorth did not go without a fight.

“All attempts to drive the Gorgalagorth out of the forest failed,” Dave told us. I knew Greg had heard the story already, but he was just as enthralled by the second telling. “So the next step was to try to destroy it.”

Their attempts to kill the Gorgalagorth proved just as feeble. There had been casualties on both the native’s and settler’s side. Each time they were forced to retreat only a lucky few would return from battle. When they realized that the Gorgalagorth would kill every one of them, they abandoned their plan.

With all other options exhausted, the Native Americans once again turned to the gods.

“The tribe’s elders begged the gods to help them,” Dave said. “And once again the gods answered. The elders were given the knowledge of a ritual that would help successfully defeat the Gorgalagorth.”

So, one last time, the natives and settlers entered the forest to battle the Gorgalagorth. Not to kill it, but to distract it while the elders worked their witchcraft.

The Gorgalagorth would not go without a fight. Many were killed. Their trick worked, though, and the elders were able to perform the ritual. The Gorgalagorth’s flesh turned to bark, his hair transformed into leaves, and his blood turned to sap. Before the Gorgalagorth could realize what was happening, it was too late. Within minutes, the guardian of the forest had turned into the very thing it was sent to protect: a tree.

I took the book from Dave and I skimmed through the pages. I studied the illustrations that accompanied the text. I got to the part where Dave had left off, and when I turned the page, I saw there was more to the story. The illustration showed the Gorgalagorth tree. Only now it had cracks in it that hadn't been in the picture on the page before. A menacing eye peered through one of the cracks.

"Although natives had been able to trap the Gorgalagorth," Dave said, as he continued the story and I studied the photo, "they were not able to vanquish it completely. Its physical body may have been transformed, but its spirit remained. Trapped inside the tree."

I skimmed the book's pages as Dave continued to tell the story. Towards the end, I came to a section called *Rituals*.

"What are these for?" I asked.

"Well don't skip ahead, and you'll see!"

"Forgive me, masterful storyteller," I said; handing the book back over to Dave. "Please, forgive me, and continue."

For centuries the bitter taste of betrayal remained with the Gorgalagorth. The very people that the beast swore to protect had turned against him. They transformed him into a tree where birds nested and deer pissed. The Gorgalagorth vowed revenge.

"The beast swore to one day break free of its prison," Dave said. "And when it did, it would destroy those who turned against it, and the very earth it was created to protect. That's what these are for..." Dave pointed at the page. "These rituals will help us in our quest to make sure the Gorgalagorth stays trapped in its prison."

"Our quest to do what?" I asked. Had I misheard what Dave just said?

"The Gorgalagorth has a chance to escape." Dave informed me, and then repeated, "We're going to make sure that doesn't happen."

The Gorgalagorth's taste for vengeance proved stronger than any Native American ritual or magic. As its hatred grew

stronger, the mystical binds that held it weakened. It would only be a matter of time before the magic failed all together, and the Gorgalagorth was freed.

“Every one-hundred years,” Dave explained. “A binding ritual must be done to re-strengthen the binds that keep the Gorgalagorth imprisoned.”

“And you want us to do it?” I asked.

“Yes! We have the rituals and we know how to find the Gorgalagorth.” Dave turned back a few pages to a map. Beneath it was a list of directions. “Why wouldn’t we do it?”

Because it’s dangerous, and insane! I thought to say, but before I could transition my thoughts into words, Dave was already making his case.

“Aren’t you sick of playing it safe, Kevin? We always do exactly what everyone thinks we’ll do. And we never do anything exciting. Anyone who ever did anything great did more than everyone thought they could. Here’s our chance to be like those people.”

As crazy as Dave sounded, he still had a point. I knew this plan was likely a bite of something more than we could chew. But to everyone who knew me, I was just the nice boy who loved to read. All my adventures were found within the pages of a book. You didn’t have to worry about me. It was my two older brothers who were the adventurous ones. They were the ones you had to keep an eye on. Not Kevin!

Well this was my chance to prove them all wrong. I already had the itch for adventure. All I needed was to find one. This was it. This was my opportunity.

I just needed to take it.

“Come on, Kevin!” Greg said trying to convince me. “It will be amazing!”

“What about it, Kevin,” Dave asked. He already knew my answer, but sensed I needed a little nudge. “Are you in?”

A smile stretched across my face, and that was all my two best friends needed. They let out a victory cheer, and we high-fived. After our small celebration, we safely packed up

Dave's book, and left the Wooden Park. We mounted our bikes, and rode off towards our adventure.

Growing up in a highly populated suburban area of Long Island, there were endless amounts of delis to choose from. There was only one I would call the best, though, and that was Cherrywood Deli. Even today, although it has probably changed ownership a few times over the years, it has the best freaking sandwiches. I might even be so bold as to say that Cherrywood Deli's sandwiches can hold their own against any New York City deli. When we were younger, we would constantly try to convince our parents to drive us there to get lunch. Whenever they agreed (dad was always the easiest to convince because he loved his breakfast sandwiches at lunchtime) Dave, Greg and I were in all our glory.

On that summer day, Dave, Greg and I rode our bikes to Cherrywood Deli by ourselves. Normally, we wouldn't do this. Keep in mind we were only eleven. We were allowed to ride our bikes to delis near our houses (there were a few to choose from) but Cherrywood Deli was too far for us to go without an adult. On that day, it didn't really matter that we were riding to Cherrywood Deli without parents. After the deli, we'd be riding much further, so if we were going to break the rules, we might as well stop for some damn good sandwiches!

"Where are we going after the deli?" I had asked Dave, as we rode our bikes through the winding streets of America's first suburb.

I knew the plan. I just had no idea where we were going to do this. Dave was purposely withholding that tidbit of information from me for as long as possible. He knew if he told me too early on, I might back out.

We had a pretty solid alibi in place. Our parents all thought the three of us were at the pool. Keep in mind, this

was 1994, and we lived in an age before cell phones. If one of our parents needed us home, they would have to come to the pool to get us. When they saw we weren't there, best case scenario, they'd just assume we got bored and went to someone's house.

Worst case scenario, they might assume the three of us were abducted. That was a sure recipe for disaster. Fathers and, even worse, police would be called. If that happened, and it was discovered that the three of us were in no real danger, we were as good as dead.

Pretty much, no matter what scenario played out, if we got caught, it wouldn't end well for the three of us.

"Tackapausha," Dave eventually yelled back. He was riding just ahead of Greg and I.

For those not familiar with Tackapausha Preserve (and I'm assuming most of you aren't) here is a brief history lesson.

Tackapausha Preserve is a nature sanctuary that consumes eighty-four acres of the south shore of Long Island. Trails run through the preserve for hikers to follow and admire the various natural beauties of Long Island. The land was acquired by Nassau County in 1938 as a precaution to preserve some of Long Island's natural hábitat as the era of post-World War II suburban America was being ushered in.

That was at least the story that the local officials wanted the public to believe.

As settlements on Long Island turned into villages, which would eventually become towns, Tackapausha was never touched. So why did it remain intact while the surrounding areas were leveled? The explanation is simple.

The Gorgalagorth.

As those who were involved in trapping the Gorgalagorth died, and generations passed, the guardian of the forest and the tale of his imprisonment became myth. After centuries of separation, the Gorgalagorth was forgotten completely by the vast majority. Still, the knowledge of what dwelled in the

forest and the threat of what would await humanity if it ever broke free, remained with some. They were guardians in their own right. They were the ones left in charge with ensuring that the beast was never freed. In addition to performing the ritual, they made sure the Gorgalagorth was never chopped down and destroyed.

Dave explained if the tree was destroyed, then the Gorgalagorth's spirit would be freed. Soon its spirit would once again take its physical form, and vengeance would be dished out. Not wanting this to happen, local officials took advantage of laws put into effect to protect natural habitats. Tackapausha became untouchable under New York State law, and the threat of the Gorgalagorth tree being destroyed was no more.

We got to Cherrywood Deli, and ordered our sandwiches. After eating some of the snacks I had packed earlier, we tucked the sandwiches away in our backpacks, jumped on our bikes and rode off.

Next stop: Tackapausha Preserve.

We rode down Jerusalem Avenue, leaving Levittown behind, and entering Seaford. We stopped at Maria Regina—a church across the street from Tackapausha—to lock our bikes up in one of the bike racks. We crossed the street, and stood at the entrance of a rusting chain linked fence. Beyond that fence was a trail surrounded by woods. Somewhere in those woods was a monster with a thirst for vengeance. It was trying to break free and we were just three eleven year old kids, ready to enter those woods and stop it.

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