

Lost

Part Two: Open Your Eyes

Julie walked as quickly as her legs could muster, leaving the forest further behind her with every step. However with every step she took a growing feeling of pain and guilt brewed deep in her chest. Her feet followed a seemingly never-ending path. With fields either side, the path too should have been covered with grass but presumably where wagons or other vehicles have been, the green was long dead for most of the path save for a small strip of green in the middle.

It was mid-summer and the sun was beaming in the sky, and didn't the landscape know it? Julie felt warmth on the soles of her feet and looked down to see her feet were bare. How long had she been missing shoes? The ground was searing as if Julie was in fact standing on a huge frying pan but she felt no pain. In fact she did not feel the heat at all; there was a giant invisible bubble surrounding her, protecting her from the cruelty and obscenities of the festering world.

Julie's legs carried her absently along the path, beside endless fields. Julie felt something pull at her from the distance and turned. It was like the feeling you have when you know someone is watching you and you don't know why. She looked around at the forest from which she had come. A deep darkness surrounded the forest and Julie gulped, the discomfort hitting her just looking at it.

She felt down to her pocket where the goat eyes were wrapped up in a red handkerchief and just before welcoming the thought that she had dreamt of the caravan and the old woman, her hand found the shape of the eyes and she shivered. Julie hurried up the road, trying to shake off the uneasy feeling that somewhere unknown to her, a diabolical pair of eyes was following her.

In the distance, just on the corner of one of the fields on the left, a large tree house caught Julie's eye. It stood tall against the flat landscape of endless green. Julie felt a sinking feeling in her stomach and then a sharp heat as if she had been doused in hot oil and then soaked in ice. It pulled at

her hairs and she turned quickly. Something in the distance had moved but by the time she had noticed, she could not pinpoint where the movement had come from. A shadow of a man in a hat was suddenly strong in her mind but distant, like an optical illusion where one looks at a negative picture for a set time and then can see the image clear as day when you close your eyes. She knew at that moment that the man in the hat was watching her.

Julie picked up pace, walking steadily and looking over her shoulder every few strides. There was a rumble that shook Julie's entire body but it was so soft that when it stopped, Julie felt she could have imagined it. The forest was calling to her. Again Julie saw a flash of the man in the hat. He had his back to her, then he was turning slowly but his face was hidden in shadow. Or maybe it was that he was the shadow. He reached out a long skinny finger and gestured for her to come with him, back into the dark forest. The forest closed around her, swallowing her up.

Julie lay face down in the dirt, her arms outstretched in front of her and the taste of blood in her mouth. She was exhausted to the core and would have just closed her eyes and let sleep consume her had it not been for the gentle sound of children's laughter coming from not too far in front.

Julie pulled her aching body to a sitting position and squinted at the bright sunlight. The laughter was coming from the tree house in the field just in front of Julie. She listened carefully, focusing on it and using the sound as her drive as she got to her feet and wandered toward it. Just as Julie reached the field, she felt that same feeling. It was a disconnected feeling that her body picked up before she even knew she had felt it. Her hairs stood out coldly and she turned instinctively.

Julie blinked and suddenly everything she had seen between turning round and blinking became a blur. Although there was one thing she was sure of; she had seen the man in the hat again. He had been close.

The sound of laughter pulled her attention away from the sickening thought and she quickly closed the space between her and the tree house. As she began to climb the ladder to the tree house, voices were clear as well, joyous, light-hearted children's voices. There was a dry stickiness to the wooden rungs of the ladder like sap from a tree but Julie ignored it completely, intent on reaching the top as quickly as she could.

Julie reached the top and pushed into the small room through a wooden trap door to find the room completely empty of life. Julie collapsed on the floor with exhaustion. Inside the tree house, dead silence prevailed. Only the sound of her soft panting as her chest rose and fell.

The tree house was made of wooden planks nailed together but underneath her, Julie felt something soft pushing into her back. She slowly sat to see a dark blue blanket crumpled underneath her. The blanket struck her subconscious and a flush of *déjà vu* passed over her but before she had a chance to think about it, her eyes were drawn to a photograph lying amongst the blanket, a little bent from where she had lay.

Julie took the photograph in her hand and held it up to the light. A younger Julie smiled back at her, a small boy held above her by the length of her arms. Sunlight partly blinded the camera but the shot was perfect. A tear dripped down her face and onto the blanket.

Julie went to press the photograph to her chest and noticed something on the back. She flipped it over to see the words 'open your eyes' written in black marker pen. The sound of laughter floated into Julie's mind and a white light took her sight quickly.

She stood at the sink, her hands in scorching hot water up to the wrists. From her place at the sink, she could see out of the window directly in front of her; there was a tree house about halfway down the garden and two boys could be seen in the tree house's window. Julie looked down at the dishes in the soapy water, every chip and crack hidden under the depths of the water.

The garden she could see was amazing. It's natural beauty was stunning from the lilies floating on the cool green water to the tight garden path that ran up the garden between overgrown hedges, leading up to a huge dome water feature. The tree house in which the children were playing resided in the tallest and most beautiful tree in the whole garden; a magnificent oak surrounded by an array of purple flowers. But the oak was an old one; the years were branded on its body like scars forever bleeding into the very soil from which it took its nutrients.

There was a shout and Julie looked up to see, as if in slow motion a child falling from the tree house. His terrified eyes locked with hers for a

fraction of a second but it sent a shiver down Julie's spine. Before she knew it, the child hit the ground hard. There was an eerie second of silence before a shrill scream.

Julie let the plate she was holding fall from her fingers; it bounced off the surface and shattered on the ground beside her legs as she sprinted out of the house. The boy was lying flat on his back; staring up at the clear sky with wide, open eyes. His mouth too just hung open limply, an ear-splitting scream reverberating around the garden. The second boy was climbing down the rope ladder with a look of sheer terror on his face.

'Oh no,' he muttered to himself. 'No no no' and he ran off behind the water fountain and out of sight.

'It's okay baby shhh.' Julie muttered fumbling to find her phone in her pocket but her fingers found nothing.

'Shit,' she spat and got to her feet in a jump. She sprinted back to the kitchen and looked around frantically, spotting the phone on the side by the fish bowl. She snatched it up and headed out but her arm knocked the bowl and it tipped, water pouring out onto the surface and floor along with the goldfish.

Julie paused for a second, contemplating it but then hurried out, leaving the stranded fish. She reached the child's side, who was rasping for air in between coughs. She put her hands on his face and found his panic-stricken gaze.

'Look at me, it's okay. You're going to be fine.' She took the phone out and dialed. Tears streamed down the child's face and just as Julie wiped them away with a soft hand a huge tremble shook the world. Julie looked up at the skies and was momentarily blinded by how powerful the white clouds were. They stung her eyes and she looked quickly at the ground. It took a good two seconds for her eyes to re-adjust and then her eyes were pulled quickly to a terrified child in front of her.

'It's okay, I prom-' another huge tremble shook everything and a huge ripping sound cracked the world accompanied by a rumbling growl.

Julie sat cross-legged, a tear slipping down her cheek. The tree house shook and the photograph fell from her hands and onto to the floor. Julie turned to look out of the window and saw a huge bull facing the tree from

about twenty-five feet in front. It charged again and Julie had just enough time to brace for the impact. Its huge head smashed into tree, shaking the whole tree house and throwing Julie from her feet to hit the floor hard.

She looked around frantically and her eyes fell upon the blanket that she instinctively took up and tucked under her arm before clumsily climbing down through the trapdoor and onto the wooden ladder. The bull was bouncing around underneath the tree ferociously, its deadly horns pointing up at Julie.

She descended a few steps cautiously but not being able to take her eyes off the bull, stumbled on a rung and she lost her footing. She fell for a second then hit the bull's side and crashed into the ground. Her head burst open with pain and she felt blood dripping from her nose and into her open mouth but she had no time to ponder on the pain. The bull stopped, looking right at her, its terrible eyes wide with not anger but fear. The source of its violence was fear.

Without knowing why, Julie slowly reached out a hand and touched the bull's cheek. She let the soft black fur run through her fingers as the bull watched her carefully. Then it suddenly snapped and bolted towards her. It knocked her sideways and charged on to the same spot about twenty-five feet away. Julie let the blanket in her arm fall open and she gripped it tight with two hands.

Her fingers shook violently with fear as she again locked eyes with the bull. It pushed off and charged at her but she was ready. She stood still, letting the Bull run directly at her then at the last second stepped sideways and let the bull smash into the blanket. It caught the blanket in its horns, covering its face but Julie had no time to look back. Her legs were already pumping hard and by the time the bull had thrown the blanket off, Julie was already halfway up the field heading for the path. She did not look back.