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Tall Oaks

Written by Chris Whitaker

Published by Twenty7

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TALL OAKS

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twenty7

First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Twenty7 Books

This paperback edition published in 2016 by

Twenty7 Books
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE
www.twenty7books.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-7857-7030-2

Also available as an ebook

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc

Twenty7 Books is an imprint of Bonnier Publishing Fiction,
a Bonnier Publishing company
www.bonnierpublishingfiction.co.uk
www.bonnierpublishing.co.uk

For Victoria, who after ten years still hasn't realised that she's too good for me.

1

Send in the Clown

Jim closed the blinds, unplugged the telephone, and put the tape in. He leaned back in his chair, took a breath, and pressed play.

The tape crackled, the sound familiar though no less unsettling, for he knew what was to come.

He skipped past the preliminaries, stopping when he heard Jess's voice.

"The baby monitor is one of the new models. There's a small camera downstairs in Harry's room, and a base unit next to my bed. I was nervous about Harry sleeping in his own room, especially with him being two floors below: the lower ground floor. It's a long way down. The house wasn't really designed for family living. Michael loved it though."

He turned up the volume and closed his eyes. He heard her take a sip of water. He flinched as the glass touched her teeth.

"I liked lower ground floor over basement, like the realtor said. Basement sounds creepy, dark, and cold. Harry's room is nice though—there're animal stickers on the walls. We had the ceiling painted blue, like the sky."

She coughed lightly, shuffled in her seat.

"It'd taken a few weeks before I managed to sleep more than an hour without checking the monitor; seeing what position he was sleeping in; making sure he hadn't kicked his sheet off. The night-vision mode gives his room an eerie, green glow; makes his skin look so pale I felt sure he was freezing cold down there."

She laughed then, a fleeting, anxious laugh.

"I wasn't sure why I was sitting up in bed that night, why I was sweating, why my heart was pounding so hard. I remember reaching for the clock, seeing it was three-nineteen. Funny . . . the things you remember."

Another pause, another cough.

"I glanced at the monitor and fought the urge to check him. I drove myself mad, always checking. He's three after all, not a baby. I reached for my glass of water. My throat was dry and scratchy . . . I'm not sure . . . maybe I was getting sick . . . a cold or something."

She cleared her throat. *"Is this too much detail?"*

He heard his own voice, calm, reassuring, practiced. *"You're doing well."*

"I lay back and stared at the blank screen. He was fine. Harry was fine. It had been like this every night since Michael left. I was a wreck . . . I am a wreck: fucked. The person I used to be . . . gone . . . I'm not even sure I remember her. I wonder if I'll ever see her again . . . that person I mean. Do I sound crazy?"

He'd smiled gently, shaken his head.

"My mother said it will just take time, that I'll find my way again. But how much time? How much longer will I have to go on like this before it gets easier? She doesn't know, she can't tell me. I'm waiting for the day when I can stop thinking about him, flip a switch or something; dark to light. But at the same time I'm terrified of moving on, because I love him so much. Do you get that, Jim?"

He'd met her eye, offered a slight nod.

"I wonder when I'll be able to eat a meal and not think about who he's eating with, or worse, sleeping with. It's like an illness, it consumes you. I breathe him in, but never out. Is that fucked-up, Jim? It's unfair, you know. He just walked out. It's easier for him to find someone else. I'm the single mother now, the one with the baggage, the one that needs a small miracle to find someone decent . . . someone that wants to be a father to another man's child. And who does? I mean, really? I try to force these thoughts to the back of my mind. But lying there at night . . . that night . . ."

She trailed to a heavy silence.

They broke, this time for her to visit the ladies' room.

He thought about stopping the tape—he always did at this point. He traced his finger over the button, drawing it away when he heard her voice again.

"A long hour passed before I started to relax. My eyes grew tired and I started to drift. And then I heard it.

A whisper.

'Jessica.'

I opened my eyes wide, my breath caught in my throat. I stared at the monitor, the screen still dark, the green light still burning.

I must have been imagining it. That's what I thought, Jim: Get a grip, Jess. *It was my mind playing tricks again, the way it did when Michael first left. It had been easier then because Harry had slept in my bed, as much for my sake as his. He didn't want to though. Imagine that. A three year old wanting to sleep on his own. So grown-up."*

She cleared her throat.

"I sat up. My hand shook as I reached for my water."

He remembered her cheeks burning, her eyes darting up, around.

"I heard it again.

'Jessica.'

Still a whisper, but louder this time."

Her words tumbled out.

"I dropped the glass. I picked up the monitor and pressed the button. I calmed when I saw Harry, fast asleep on his back, with his hands above his head. He'd slept that way since he was a baby. I must have imagined it. Just a voice in my head. That's what I kept telling myself, because that's what you do . . . you rationalize. I watched him until the screen faded. I placed it back onto the nightstand and forced myself to lie down. I thought I was going mad, Jim. I thought I'd call my mother in the morning and tell her. Then maybe the men in the white coats would come and cart me off someplace.

I couldn't get back to sleep. I kept thinking, what if I hadn't imagined it? What if there was someone in Harry's room? The

scan button. I had forgotten about the scan button. I reached for the monitor again. There're four arrows on the side of it, so you can move the camera around. I pressed the right arrow. The camera swept along his bed and past his toy chest, his rocking horse, and his ride-on car. I hoped that it didn't make a noise when it moved. He's only just started to sleep through the night, a big deal for a boy who used to wake every few hours."

He could hear her fingers clawing at the table as the panic began to take hold.

"The camera reached the far wall. I scanned back again. And then, just before it reached his bed, I saw something. The camera swept back to Harry's face. He looked so calm, Jim, so peaceful."

She spoke quietly, almost in a whisper.

"I pressed the arrow intermittently. It jerked slowly right.

Again, I pressed it. Again, it jerked.

Again and again . . ."

She paused, struggling for breath.

He'd wanted to break then, had moved to, then stopped himself.

"And then it settled on the rocking chair in the far corner of the room.

I saw a shape in the chair, but it was too far away to make out.

I knew that it shouldn't be there.

Every night I sit Harry on my lap and read him a story in that chair. I strained my eyes trying to see what it was.

I pressed the zoom button and watched as the shape slowly became something that I recognized.

A man.

A man in my son's room."

Her voice shook savagely.

"The man was wearing a clown mask."

He swallowed then, felt his own throat dry.

"I screamed, dropped the monitor, and grabbed the phone.

I put it to my ear. The line was dead . . . the storm outside. I walked across the bedroom and stopped when I felt something wet beneath my feet. I was about to scream again when I saw the glass on the floor. Water. I had spilled my water."

The clawing was louder now, faster.

"I crept down the first flight of stairs, wiping the sweat from my eyes.

I walked along the hallway and into the kitchen. I had left the blinds up, could see the rain falling outside. I saw the knife block. I reached for the largest, the carving knife. As I walked down the final flight of stairs I stopped and listened.

My heart was pounding so fast, Jim, it was all I could hear.

Thump.

Thump.

Over and over.

I took a breath and ran for the door, pulled the handle down, and burst into the room.

I hit the light switch and screamed, gripping the knife so tightly that my fingers turned white. I looked at the rocking chair.

No clown.

And then I looked at my son's bed.

I dropped the knife and fell to my knees.

My son wasn't there.

He was gone.
Harry was gone."

Jim rubbed his eyes, his shoulders tight as he exhaled heavily.

He sat in the dark for a long time, listening to her cry, willing himself to stop the tape.

2

Pinstripes and Termites

It was hot out. Far too hot for the heavy woolen suit—a three-piece too. But seeing as it had been the only one with a pinstripe, Manny had insisted that his mother purchase it. The fact that it was half off had worked in his favor, so she had relented.

As he stepped out of the Ford Escape, he felt the sweat plastering his father's starched white cotton shirt to his back. He glanced down at his shoes—black wingtips, a shine so deep he could see the fedora wrapped tightly around his head reflecting back at him. The fucking hat was a medium though, and really starting to hurt. Mr. Phillips, in the gentleman's clothing store on Main Street, had told him that he needed an extra-large, told him this as he'd wrapped a tape measure around his head and let out a long whistle. They might be able to order one in, but it could take weeks, a custom job for a head of this size.

Manny turned back to the car, scowling as his mother pressed the horn and waved.

He'd begged her to buy an old Cadillac, or a Lincoln. But then the muscled Ford dealer, with his three-day stubble, and squint

blue eyes, had started to flirt with her and she'd gone to pieces. He probably could've sold her the gum from his shoe by the time he'd finished his patter. She'd been like this since his father walked out: a dog on heat, and an old dog at that. As they'd walked the forecourt Manny had become resigned to the fact that his first car, which he would share with his mother, would be a Ford Escape. He'd reasoned that at the very least it would have to be black, with the privacy glass, naturally. But then the muscled squinter had led them to a duck-egg blue model. As his mother circled it the squinter had told her he could do her a good deal on it, winking as he said it.

"No shit. What other poor bastard would want the duck-egg?" Manny had offered, though his pleas had ultimately fallen on smitten ears.

As she signed the paperwork, Manny had tried mightily not to cry. But then the squinter had looked him up and down and asked his mother why her son looked like a 1950s gangster, and he had felt much better. People were starting to take notice. And it wasn't just the clothes; seventeen weeks of not shaving his upper lip had started to bear fruit. The mustache had finally arrived, though it was still the wrong shape. Genetics had dictated that Manny's mustache take the shape of an arrow. An arrow whose head, save for a small gap, met exactly at the center of his nose. He had tried, with great desperation, to encourage it to change direction, but met with little success. One time the overzealous use of a beard trimmer had led to the arrowhead being shortened too much, which had resulted in his classmates referring to him as "Adolf."

Manny sighed as the Escape disappeared from sight, the sun bouncing off of its duck-egg body as it went. He turned and walked toward the school gates.

"Looking sharp, Manny."

Manny turned to see his best friend, and future *consigliere,* Abel Goldenblatt. Not that he needed to turn to see who it was. Abe's voice was deep, ludicrously so. And when that ludicrously deep voice was paired with his ludicrously tall, and ludicrously thin frame, the result was . . . well . . . ludicrous.

"Shit, Abe. I told you to use my other name from now on."

"Sorry, I forgot it again."

Manny frowned, slowing his pace when he felt the sweat running down his forehead and onto the collar of his shirt, a shirt that was a full inch too tight around the neck.

"I told you a thousand times, just call me 'M.' Like Tony Soprano is 'T' to the guys closest to him."

"Right, sorry, M. Do I have to call you it in class too?"

"Of course. How else will it take? Have you thought about what you want to be called?"

Abe shrugged, his lack of commitment evident.

Manny glanced up at him and, not for the first time, lamented his friend's given name. "What kind of sick, twisted parents call their only son Abel? Sure, you're Jewish, but there are plenty of Jew names better than Abel."

"I think Abe is quite cool actually. Biblical names are enjoying a renaissance. My cousin just called his son Binyamin."

"You mean Benjamin."

Abe shook his head.

"You can't just take a perfectly good name and change a couple of letters."

"It's a real name. Binyamin . . . like Netanyahu."

"You know, half the time I don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

Abe laughed. "You sound just like my aunt Devorah."

Manny grinned. "You got me. Well played. *Touché.*"

Abe frowned.

Manny pulled at his shirt collar.

"I can't believe it, man, not long until graduation. Then we're free," Abe said, pushing his glasses up his nose with his index finger.

"Did you ask your mom if we could paint the Volvo?"

"Not yet."

"And don't forget to ask about the windows too. I can get us twenty percent off the blackout sheets. You have to apply it carefully though, otherwise it'll bubble."

Abe looked at him, nervously. "My mom's not going to let us black out the glass. She won't be able to see out. You know how her eyes are."

Manny's mind ran to Mrs. Goldenblatt, who wore lenses thicker than her son's, with a frame so heavy it had left a permanent indentation in her nose.

"Fucking hell, Abe. How are we supposed to make collections if we don't look the part? And that reminds me, you're going to have to buy a new suit."

"What's wrong with this one? It's Brooks Brothers. I only got it last year for my nephew's bar mitzvah, remember?

I shouldn't really even be wearing it in this weather. It's going to be ninety degrees today. My mother said there's a real danger of me overheating."

"It's tan. Gangsters don't wear tan."

"It's not tan. The guy in the store said it's *Evening Barley.* He said it flatters my figure far better than a darker number would . . . gives me width."

Manny looked him up and down and sighed.

"Besides, who are we going to collect from? And when will we make these collections? My mother's fixed me up with a job with Mr. Berlinsky this summer, so we'll have to fit it in around that."

"Mr. Berlinsky? The Jewish butcher? He's on my list of people that need to pay up. You can't work there, Abe. No fucking way. People will laugh if they see me making collections with a butcher's boy. You'll probably reek of raw meat too. I feel nauseous just thinking about it."

"I still don't get it. I know that we're going to be gangsters, even though I'm Jewish. But why will these people pay us money?"

Manny fought the urge to scream.

"Firstly, it doesn't matter that you're a Jew. The Italians and Jews have worked together for generations. Just look at Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky. They fucking ruled shit."

"But you're not Italian, you're Mexican."

Manny bit his fist.

"My father's great-uncle married an Italian. Rosa. That means my cousins are Italian, which makes part of my family Italian, which makes *me* part Italian. And secondly, they'll have

to pay up because if they don't then shit will get crazy around here. You think Mrs. Parker wants to see her Tearoom run out of milk? Or Mr. Ahmed wants his dry cleaners to get the power shut off? No, they fucking don't. So they'll pay up. They've had it easy for too long. It's time for someone to muscle them."

Abe put his skepticism to one side and pushed the classroom door open.

When the other kids saw them they burst out laughing. As did the teacher.

Roger felt his pulse quicken as he switched the computer on. The screen was large, the stand clear, and with no wires on show, seemed to float in the air.

He didn't have much use for an office, though the interior designer had insisted. His chair was leather, Herman Miller, and his desk a weighty oak. Bookshelves lined each wall, the books in neat rows, no gaps, an assortment ranging from classics to reference. All untouched.

As the screen flickered to life he glanced at the framed photograph beside it. They looked young in it. Their wedding day. Henrietta glowed. She'd fallen pregnant a month before, unbeknownst to him, to anybody else. They'd called their son Thomas. He'd lived for six hours.

He swallowed a lump of shame as he picked up the photograph and set it facedown on the desk.

The screen lit the room. With the blinds closed he squinted as his eyes adjusted. He opened the browser and navigated to the site.

Though certain he was home alone, he glanced at the office door repeatedly, his cursor hovering over the X.

He dabbed the sweat from his forehead with a monogrammed handkerchief, licked his dry lips, and tried to stop his hands from shaking. It was always like this for the first few minutes, until he calmed, until he escaped.

He smiled as he stared at the image, feeling shards of excitement begin to take hold and the guilt that would later suffocate him begin to lighten. He felt the muscles in his neck unwind, his shoulders drop, and his heartbeat slow.

He unbuckled his belt.

And then he heard the doorbell chime.

He stood quickly, his trousers falling to the floor. He pulled them up, then sat again and tried to close the browser. It froze on a picture; a picture that only a moment ago he had thought quite beautiful, though now a picture that terrified him. He clicked the X repeatedly.

He looked for a power button on the screen but could see nothing.

The door chimed again.

He'd leave it. It was probably just a delivery—something for Hen, probably shoes. More shoes.

And then he heard the key in the door.

"Darling?" he heard her call.

He swallowed.

He leaned down to the computer and pressed the power button once. Nothing happened. He pressed it again, several times.

She was unlikely to venture into his office, but he couldn't take the risk.

He picked up the screen, cradling it in his arms, and tried to pull it from the desk. It was heavy. He tried to wrench the wires out, but found they were screwed in. He tried to unscrew them, but his hands were slick with sweat.

"Darling?"

He set the monitor down and banged the side of the computer with his hand.

"Darling, what was that noise?"

"Nothing." His voice shook.

"Darling, where are you? I'm carrying a heavy box and can't bend to put it down."

Of all the excuses available to him, his panicked mind sought out the most absurd.

"I'm up a ladder."

"Why on earth are you up a ladder? You shouldn't climb ladders alone. What if you slip and fall?" she called.

He breathed again as the screen finally faded to black, then sprinted through to the kitchen and retrieved the stepladder.

He clambered quickly to the top.

He heard her sigh, make a production of placing the box onto the kitchen counter, and then there she was, standing beneath him, peering up.

In his haste he had picked up his glass of wine. He stood up there, his apparent nonchalance betrayed by his shaking hands, and took a sip.

He stared at the wall and, to his utter relief, noticed a small crack in the plaster just above him. He ran his finger over it and shook his head.

"What is it? Is it bad?" she asked.

He rubbed his chin. Had he had the faintest clue about anything remotely connected to plasterwork, or building work, or anything resembling manual labor, he might have come up with a better reply.

"Could be termites."

Luckily, Henrietta was even more ignorant of the work of the termite than him.

"Termites? I'll call Richard."

He swallowed, deflating at the mention of Richard's name. Richard was a builder to whom they had paid more money than he could remember to remodel the house. Richard was tall, and handsome, and muscular. A real man. The kind of real man that Roger regarded with quiet deference.

"No, don't call Richard. Leave it to me. I'll deal with the little buggers myself," he said, mustering the kind of conviction he hoped might see her drop the subject altogether.

"What do you know about termites, Roger?"

Having never been a proficient liar, he began to lose his grasp of the English language. "I know much . . . in actual terms. We had a place in the Cotswolds growing up; damn house was riddled with them. We had to fire them out in the end."

He arched an eyebrow, his own lie taking him by surprise.

"And what does *firing-out* entail?"

He coughed. "A blowtorch . . . and a little chemical substance called Termex. I'll call into the hardware store tomorrow and see if they have any."

She started to walk away, then turned back. "Be careful, darling. I don't like you drinking up ladders."

He closed his eyes and exhaled heavily, then took a liberal sip of wine.

He had slayed the dragon.

He heard the doorbell chime as he was descending, and then Henrietta leading someone along the hallway and into the kitchen.

"Darling, it's Richard. He's left one of his drill things in the garage. Might as well get him to look at the termite problem while he's here."

Richard, real man Richard, entered the room and raised a quizzical eyebrow.

Roger sighed. It had been a valiant effort, but it was over now.

Thalia frowned at her toy washing machine, banged the top with her small fist, then smiled as it began to spin again.

"Manny, I need you to wash the car. It's starting to lose its shine. Jared said to keep the bodywork clean. It'll hold its value better," Elena yelled, trying to make herself heard above the noise.

She looked up as her son walked into the kitchen.

"Jesus Christ, Manny. What happened to your head?"

Manny gingerly rubbed the thick, red groove that striped its way across his forehead.

"The hat, Ma. The hat is too tight. Who the fuck is Jared?"

His mother shot him a look. With Thalia at an age where she repeated all that she heard, Elena was trying hard to censor her son.

"Watch your mouth. I'm already mad at you, so don't make it worse."

Manny raised his hands in surrender. "What have I done this time?"

"You dropped Thalia off at preschool this morning."

"Yeah. We weren't late or nothing, so what's up?"

"And you remember that I said she has to take a piece of fruit in. All the kids do, and then they cut them up and share them out at snack time?"

He nodded, carefully, already eyeing the exit.

"So what did you give her?"

"An apple or something."

"Wrong, Manny. Try again."

He cast a furtive glance at the fruit bowl. "An orange?"

"You gave her a potato."

He looked over at Thalia, trying not to meet his mother's eye.

"Kids need carbs too," he offered.

Elena glared at him.

"I'm serious. All that fruit will give them the shits. I did it for the kids, and I was in a rush to get to class. Technically, it's your fault for leaving the potatoes out. Anyway, who's Jared? And why does he care about the duck-egg?"

He watched his mother open the refrigerator and pull out a thick cut of steak, wrapped in a Berlinsky's bag.

"Are you making the ziti? You know how I like it, with the Mortadella sausage . . . little pinch of pepper flakes . . . just enough to tease the palate."

His mother looked at him, wearily. "I don't even know what ziti is. I'm making *huaraches*. They're your sister's favorite. We're Mexican, not Italian, Manny. Accept that."

"I had ziti at Azzurro, remember? Last year, for my birthday. Who's Jared?"

"Jared is the nice man that sold us the car. He's taking me to dinner on Friday, so I'm going to need you to look after your sister."

Manny stared at her, horrified. "Fucking squint-eyed muscle man? You can't date him, Ma. He's young enough to be your son."

"Manny," Elena hissed. "Curse one more time and your allowance is gone."

She stared at him until he looked at the floor.

"Jared isn't that much younger than me, and I will date whoever I like, and *you* will wash the car and stay home on Friday. Do you understand me?"

He looked up at her and nodded, reluctantly.

"Good."

He watched her turn back to the refrigerator. She looked tired, she always did. The separation had been hard for her, for all of them. She worried, Manny knew that. She worried, but she tried to hide it from them.

"I'm sorry, Ma. I'm just looking out for you."

"I know."

"Jared looked like a dipshit player asshole type. Can't you just wait for Dad to come back?"

She sighed. "We've talked about this, Manny. It's been two years now. If your grandmother hadn't written to me I wouldn't even know where your father was living. And Jared is perfectly nice. It's not like I'm going to marry him anyway. I just want someone to go out for dinner with, maybe catch a movie. And for the last time stop cursing. Thalia is right there, and for some reason she looks up to you, so no more language."

Manny grabbed a bucket from under the basin and filled it with water.

As he was walking out of the door he heard his sister's washing machine stop spinning, mid-cycle, and then her sweet voice as she turned to their mother.

"Fucking batteries have shit the bed."

Manny dropped the bucket and ran out the door before his mother could catch him.