

## Stringy Meat

Ross Hyde didn't know a lot of things. At only ten years of age, knowledge of a lot of things eluded his grasp. But one thing he knew for sure was that *someone* in his neighborhood was hanging dead squirrels from tree branches. Standing at the entrance to his street, he looked up at the large oak tree that marked the Riscoe's front yard. Dangling from the largest leafless branch was your everyday neighborhood squirrel, red string wrapped around its torso, but unmoving and lifeless. The whole scene looked like some kind of twisted tire swing, like the one Ross had in his backyard.

"Is it alive...?", he thought out loud while getting off his bike, laying it down on the sidewalk in case a car drove by, like he'd always been told to do by his mom and dad. He knew it was a pointless question to ask, but he didn't want to assume. Lord knows how many word problems he'd screwed up in math class from not taking in all the information in front of him. His friend Louis glanced up at the branch, equally uncertain, but more eager for an answer.

"Dunno...lemme huck something at it", he said before heading back to the side of the road to grab something to throw at this unfortunate rodent. A few tries and he eventually succeeded at hitting it with a stick he found in the yard. However, the body remained fastened to the branch, maintaining only an ever-so-slight rotation. Regardless, it was enough for Louis.

“Yeah it’s dead”, he said.

“So this is like...the fourth one now, right?”, Ross asked. It had been about two weeks since they found the first of these hanging squirrels. It wasn’t anything to write home about then. It had been found the day after Halloween, so they just assumed it was some kind of creepy decoration. Then when it turned out to be a real dead animal, it was just written off by the neighborhood as a prank by some teenagers. Nothing worth getting up in arms over, just a bizarre warning to all to watch over their lawns more vigilantly. Then another one popped up, and then a third. Now, it was an actual neighborhood-wide concern. Tales began to spread of the horrifying “Squirrel Stringer” as Ross dubbed them, and with that came safety measures. He had to start going inside earlier, and he couldn’t spend the night at his friends' houses anymore. It all annoyed Ross. Whoever the Squirrel Stringer truly was, they were sending him to bed earlier, depriving him of valuable hours of the day, a grave offense to any ten year-old. After only a few days of all these new rules, he soon vowed that *he’d* be the one to catch them in the act and expose them to the rest of the neighborhood. He hadn’t had any luck so far, but now that a fourth squirrel had popped up, the rules would most likely get even stricter. Ross wouldn’t stand for that. He had to bust them soon, *tonight* even. But how would he get out of the house without alerting his parents? As he thought about all this in his head, Louis continued to throw things at the latest victim, probably in some vain

attempt to knock the poor thing down. Soon enough, Mr. Riscoe had to come outside and see what these two kids were doing standing in his yard throwing rocks.

“The hell are you kids doing?” he snapped with his typical sharp voice. Louis suddenly dropped the assortment of rocks and sticks he was still holding and was put at a loss for words. Mr. Riscoe had an occasional meanstreak about him.

“Uh...I...we...” Louis stammered, still looking up at the branch.

Mr. Riscoe followed his eyes, and then he connected the dots.

“...oh Jesus, another one?!”

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As Ross expected, the curfew was now set an hour earlier. It made getting out of the house a bit more difficult than he'd planned, but he figured he could circumvent the issue by “forgetting” to put their dog back in his cage for the night. He'd seen similar plans carried out in the cartoons he watched, so it was practically foolproof. Glancing at the clock in the kitchen just before he left out through the living room, it read 9:37 P.M. Ross knew his parents never fell asleep until around 11:30 P.M, so he'd need to stay out for around two hours at the very least if he wanted to get back inside unnoticed. Carrying a backpack with a flashlight and a can of soda, he grabbed his bike from out of the garage and started making his way down the street. At the moment, his plan was to patrol the neighborhood and keep

an eye out for anyone who might be the Squirrel Stringer. If he saw someone, he'd shine them with his flashlight and...well...he wasn't sure he could tackle them or anything. Maybe he could make a bunch of noise or something? He decides to table that thought for now, he'll see who they are with his flashlight. Then he can just tell his parents who it was. With this course of action in mind, he continued to make his way through the neighborhood, looking for any signs of squirrel stringing.

After around a half hour of scouring the neighborhood for anything of note, Ross was starting to get bored. Tracking down a criminal wasn't as fun as the movies he watched made it seem. Plus it was getting a little too cold for his liking. As he began to contemplate just throwing in the towel and taking the risk of sneaking back into his room, he heard yelling somewhere in the distance. His childlike curiosity piqued, he began to head in its direction; he didn't just want to have done all this for nothing. Eventually he found that the commotion was coming from the Wilker's house. Ross knew the Wilker's daughter, Elizabeth (although everyone at his school just called her Lizzie), as they were in the same fourth grade class. She never really hung out with anyone else, Ross always remembered her being by herself everyday at recess. Ross suddenly stopped his bike upon seeing who was yelling. It was Mrs. Wilker. She was hauling suitcases like the ones he and his sister would always use when packing for vacations.. He was confused,

what was she doing? Suddenly he saw Mr. Wilker in the doorway, coming after her.

“Mary, what the hell?!” he yelled, his voice filled with more concern than anger.

“I told you, I’m not doing this anymore! I *can’t* do this anymore!” she shouted back, as she tossed one of her bags into their faded-red SUV.

“Christ Mary...is this about Elizabeth?”

“What else do you think, Scott?! Look in the basement, she’s a fucking freak!” she yelled at a volume that Ross thought everyone in the neighborhood could hear.

Mr. Wilker was completely stunned, “What...what are you—”.

Mrs. Wilker quickly cut him off, “Jesus Scott, it was *her!* All that shit since Halloween, it was all her! I just...I can’t do it anymore...”, she yelled before getting in the SUV and starting up the engine. Mr. Wilker desperately started banging on the window, as if to somehow stop the whole thing in its tracks.

Nothing stopped it, and it drove off around the street, disappearing behind the trees and other houses. Mr. Wilker yelled some obscenities and ran back inside the house. Ross just stood frozen, he didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t move. As he turned to look back at the house, he saw Elizabeth staring outside through the window in front of their house. She of course didn’t look happy, but she didn’t look sad either. She just looked...blank. Ross quickly picked up his bike and desperately tried to get on it. He suddenly realized he was crying.

Ross Hyde didn't know a lot of things, but that night, he learned that sometimes you should let sleeping dogs lie.