

Jesse looked back at his little brother, and he insisted, "Hurry up!" Jesse was eager to get up the hill, to the only home that both had ever known and had never been away from for so long. He was anxious to get back to their family; he wanted to see their mother's smile, to hear their father's deep voice, to play in the yard with their other siblings, and to know that this was just a bad dream. So, his pace quickened, as he marched up that winding and wooded gravel road.

For his own part, Jeremiah tried to keep up. His leg was still very sore, and that made even this simple walk a lot harder for him. But, as he lagged behind Jesse, Jeremiah took the opportunity to be observant. Raindrops still covered the leaves of trees, and the puddles were undisturbed. There was the same aroma of freshness that followed every storm, but there was something different now. Everything seemed so still. There were no birds chirping or flying about. There were no squirrels wrestling through the trees. There were no signs of life around them. Something was wrong, Jeremiah thought to himself, as he limped along, and that worried the twelve-year-old boy.

The young brothers soon rounded a curve in the gravel road, exposing a clearing at the top of the hill, and there, they were confronted by the unimaginable.

"No," Jesse uttered with a gasp.

For more than a decade, the six-room, wooden farmhouse where the boys had been born and raised had stood atop this hill, closest to the road among four smaller cottages, overlooking a field of crops behind them. Now, apart from a sturdy brick chimney, there were only the charred ruins of what was. In fact, all the houses – and even the barn that their father was building – had been burned to the ground.

As Jesse and Jeremiah slowly approached the family homestead, they never spoke a word, and their eyes never left their house. The rush of anguish they both felt was inexplicable, particularly to two children unaccustomed to such a great loss, and it was evident in the tears that streamed down their faces.

Jeremiah used his shirt to wipe away the tears, and he broke the silence. "Why'd they do this, Jesse?"

Jesse only shook his head. He did not know what to say to his brother. Instead, he maneuvered to look away from the ruins and Jeremiah, but where his eyes landed was an even worse sight – one that caused him to puke, almost instantly.

In the distance, the bodies of Uncle Pep and Aunt Rose were hanging from large branches of a big oak tree. Jesse could not stop vomiting and heaving, and Jeremiah, overcome by emotion and adrenaline, rushed over to their relatives. Aunt Rose was still in her nightdress – ripped, soiled, and bloodied – and her body, like that of her husband, was beginning to badly decompose as it dangled just feet above the ground. Upon reaching her, Jeremiah dropped to his knees, and he buried his face in the gown near her lifeless and swollen feet.

"WHY!"

Jeremiah's cry was as loud as it was harrowing, but it went unanswered. There was nothing alive here now. Their family was dead. The birds and the livestock were gone. And even God had abandoned this place. Jeremiah lowered his face to the muddy ground, sobbing, as he wrestled with the frightening notion that he and Jesse were now alone in an evil world.

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