

Honorable Mention, Grades 7-8

“The Growth of Madness”

Nick Hall

St. Joseph Grade School

Blackwater Creek was a small farming community of fewer than five hundred people, its citizens living a simple, peaceful life. The years went on, through harvests when the trees dropped their leaves, creating a golden bed of oranges and reds beneath themselves, giving way to the cold winters, bringing their crisp blanket of white to the town. The residents always had plenty and so they gave thanks with each passing year.

Two proud parents planted a single seed in the center of their property to commemorate the nativity of their new offspring, Jareb. The story varies, but whether oak or maple it does not matter, for I am sure you will agree that this was no ordinary arbor, just as Jareb himself was no ordinary child. As an infant he did not shed a single tear. As a young child he was one who kept to himself, and yet as he matured he became even more introverted, regarded as an outcast by the other boys.

As Jareb grew, he developed a great attraction to the tree. It was as if a magnetic force drew him towards its branches. Even as a small sapling of no more than five feet the tree's scant shade provided a place for Jareb to spend hours on end. In the absence of human companionship, the boy developed a sort of friendship with the tree.

Taking sanctuary under its leaves the boy would speak, pouring out his mind to its greenery, for he felt it listened. In a sense, Jareb and the tree began to grow together. Knots and bumps formed on its trunk, seeming representations of times of great trouble and sadness. The happier times had their mementos too, as new buds, leaves, and beautiful flowers would sprout, symbolizing the joyful times on the road of Jareb's life.

Jareb was not completely socially inept. Surprisingly, that special someone did come along. It's difficult to know what this woman saw in him, but somehow they fell in love. The day they tied the knot, people say a new arm branched off of the tree, perhaps representing the new union they had created. Jareb's parents became joyful with new hope that he might make it in society and live a normal life.

Before long Jareb and his wife were expecting a baby, with Jareb himself becoming excited, eagerly anticipating fatherhood. But things took a turn for the worse. As her delivery neared, Jareb's wife became sick with a great fever. Miraculously, she lived to give birth to a healthy son, but she did not live to meet the child.

Overwhelmed with the horrible loss, Jareb went mad, looking for someone or something to blame for his beloved's death. In his utter rage he turned to the tree. Taking an axe to its trunk, he struck a heavy blow. Immediately regretting his actions, he was given a new thought. *It was the child. He has killed my wife.* Bearing the axe, he charged back into the house. Only Jareb's own father was capable of restraining him from hurting the infaWith

accusing cries, the villagers of Blackwater Creek leapt at the opportunity to incarcerate Jareb, a man they had long thought mad. They had always despised him, viewing him as a disturbance and threat to their peaceful lifestyles. The hearing was a quick one with Jareb sitting silently, his eyes glazed over—seemingly lost in a world of his own.

Thereafter, Jareb remained in solitary confinement, day after day, at the St. Dymphna Asylum for the Mentally Ill. Sitting in a concrete cell with no fresh air or sunlight for most of the days' course only worsened his condition. He had endless time to think and one can only imagine the horrible thoughts that raced through his head, building up hour by hour for more than two decades.

Yet during these twenty-three years, Jareb was not completely alone, for he was accompanied by the spirit of the tree. Like Jareb's mind, the strange tree grew gnarled and twisted. The tree itself looked confused, like it no longer knew which direction to grow; as if it had forgotten the way to the light.

I infer this spirit must have had great influence over people. About this time Jareb himself must have stopped ostensibly looking mad, at least from a physical standpoint. Or in any case, from the doctors' point of view, because for some reason whatsoever they decided he had grown well enough to be released. I agree, this decision was very questionable and would indeed have dire consequences.

Back in Blackwater Creek, fifty miles away, his son had grown up to the ripe age of twenty-three. Upon his release, Jareb returned to his home, completing the trek in only a couple days' time. He paused as he finally approached the familiar wrought-iron fence of his former home. The property was no longer his, but trespassing was the least of his worries. Looking upward Jareb's eyes rested upon the tree, its glowing silhouette pressed against the velvety black night sky. It was like being reunited with an old friend. As his eyes moved downward along the knotted trunk his eyes caught a glimmer of moonlight. It was some sort of polished rock. Straining his eyes to see, Jareb moved forward along the cobblestone path. Soon he was able to make out letters on the stone. "...*Passed Away in Childbirth.*" It was a tombstone, marking his wife's resting place.

Rage once again boiled up inside his veins. Jareb knew what he must do. How it would solve the problem his twisted mind did not know. Creeping towards the house, Jareb suddenly stopped. At that moment, as if on cue, the front door creaked open. A man stepped out, looking around unsurely. Jareb instantly recognized him, seeing himself in the grown boy. The man he once was, the man he could have become. But more importantly, he also saw everything he hated about himself. Once again, anger pulsed throughout his body.

Crouching down behind the bushes, Jareb pounced, wrapping his arms around his son's back, cupping his hands over the boy's mouth. Reaching into his pocket Jareb brought out a cloth. Gagging his victim before he could even make a sound, Jareb placed him against the tree. In a moment's time, the tree grew a vine, providing Jareb with the needed rope. Pulling it down, Jareb bound his victim to the tree.

As a cool gust blew through, Jareb turned, moving swiftly across the yard to the back of the home. Finding the shed unlocked, he quickly selected the instrument needed for his task. Returning to the tree, he struck the spade into the soft ground beneath the tree. In less than an hour's time the grave was ready. Placing him in the trench, Jareb looked into his son's fearful, teary eyes. "Goodbye, my child. Here you go, right next to your mother," he snarled. The boy whimpered, muffled by the gag, as he took his last few breaths. Not the least bit deterred, Jareb began shoveling the soil back into the ditch.

But it seems the tree had another idea. If Jareb had turned around at that moment, he would have seen it coming. A new vine crept down from the tree, resembling a perfectly formed noose. As a strong wind wrestled its way through the tree's leaves, the vine was blown down, catching its target. The great force swept Jareb up as the vine returned to the tree's branches. There his still body hung, his soul finally at rest.

The young man was found the next morning still breathing by a neighboring farmer who stumbled across the peculiar scene. The tale spread rapidly, raising many doubts and speculations. The villagers themselves could not come up with any answers, and over time the true story was forgotten. Yet all this while, the iniquitous tree has lived on. And I believe it will subsist as long as its legend lives on.