

ASHWOOD

Written by

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Logline: When their teenage son vanishes into the forest on the anniversary of a local disaster, an estranged couple must reconcile their past in order to save their son from a lurking evil born from their town's collective grief.

Theme: Unresolved grief, generational trauma, guilt

Ray: 40s. A grizzled, alcoholic father trying to outrun the guilt of his past. Emotionally broken and withdrawn.

Claire: Late 30s. Tightly wound, emotionally repressed, and intense ex-wife of Ray.

Danny: 40s. A soft-spoken grief counselor and the sole survivor of a local mining disaster, with a sinister motive.

Ethan: Late teens. Withdrawn and traumatized by his parents, searching for meaning in the aftermath of personal loss.

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EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

1

A full moon illuminates the dark forest. A dark purple mushroom glows in the moonlight, before a raggedy sneaker tramples it. ETHAN, late teens, lanky and terrified, but quietly self-assured, runs through the woods, breaking through bushes and shrubs.

Footsteps follow close behind. They're heavy - something from a large creature. It sounds as if entire trees are being crushed under its massive weight. Ethan trips and hits the forest floor hard. His chilly breath catches the moonlight in short, shaky bursts.

He sits up and looks around him. Silence. He lifts his flashlight and scans his surroundings. His eyes turn upward. His primal screams are suddenly cut short. The forest is silent now.

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2

INT. RAY'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

2

Trash, dirty dishes, sofa stains, the hallmarks of a depressed living surround RAY, 40s, grizzled and desperate, his beard sopping with last night's Natty Light. He lays slumped back on his recliner, a radio playing faintly in the background.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
...marking one year since the
tragic collapse at Ashwood Creek
Mine, which claimed the lives of 32
townspeople. A public memorial is
being held at 6 PM today at Hartley
Park...

The sound of a car pulling up in the gravel driveway.

3

EXT. RAY'S HOUSE - DAY

3

CLAIRE, late 30s, put-together but frighteningly intense, steps out of her car and approaches the house. Peeling paint, overgrown weeds, the mailbox bent and laying on the ground. She walks up the porch. Trash, boxes, and mail piled high in front of the door.

Multiple pamphlets stuffed into the door jamb. She BANGS on the door, then yanks one of the pamphlets free. It reads:

"ETERNAL SOLACE GRIEF COUNSELING GROUP"

"You don't have to carry it alone."

A small picture of the counseling group's leader in the corner. Claire scoffs, tossing it on the ground with all the other mail. She BANGS on the door again.

CLAIRE

Get up! It's past noon!

4

INT. RAY'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

4

RAY

It's Sunday, fuck off!

CLAIRE (O.S.)

Ray, it's me.

RAY

I already paid you! I'm all out of handouts.

Ray staggers up and starts cleaning in his hungover stupor.

CLAIRE (O.S.)

Open the fucking door!

Ray ignores it.

CLAIRE (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Ethan's missing!

The door swings open.

RAY

What do you mean missing?

Claire barges in.

CLAIRE

He went into the woods and hasn't come back yet.

RAY

Alone?

CLAIRE

Yeah.

RAY

When?

CLAIRE

Yesterday.

RAY
You tried the SAT phone?

CLAIRE
Yeah. Nothing.

RAY
Shit.

Ray plops down on the couch.

CLAIRE
I'm worried Ray.

RAY
What was he doing out there? You
let him go out alone?

CLAIRE
Don't fucking start.

RAY
What is it?

CLAIRE
We got in an argument. He said he
just needed to cool off. Was gonna
walk the start of the trail. But
that was last night. I'm freaking
out.

RAY
Ok ok. Did you tell the police?

CLAIRE
You know how that goes.

RAY
Right.

Ray takes a sip of last night's beer and lights a cigarette.

CLAIRE
Gimme one.

Claire reaches her hand out, but Ray lights it himself and
hands it to her. She takes a long inhale and sighs. Ray
springs up, grabs a handgun from under the kitchen sink and a
backpack, already packed.

RAY
Okay then.

CLAIRE

Okay then what?

RAY

I'm gonna look for him I guess.

CLAIRE

Ok let's go.

RAY

Not you.

CLAIRE

Shut the fuck up. I'm not in the mood to argue. I'm going.

Ray sighs.

5

INT. COMMUNITY CENTER BASEMENT - DAY

5

A modest, nearly empty room. Folding chairs form a circle in the middle. A single, harsh fluorescent light on the ceiling, moths fluttering around it. A standing sign reads: "ETERNAL SOLACE GRIEF COUNSELING," and underneath it: "One year since the Willow Creek Incident."

DANNY PRUITT, 40s, clean-shaven, calm, cardigan and khakis, like your local church youth pastor, sits at the front.

DANNY

...and just remember what we talked about. Just notice the thought, and let it pass through you, like wind through a screen door. Let's try it now. Absolve yourself from all thoughts. Become a clean slate. Close your eyes.

The group, a mix of seniors, middle-aged, and teenagers from all walks of life. They all close their eyes.

DANNY (CONT'D)

Breathe in.

A collective deep breath.

DANNY (CONT'D)

And out.

Exhale. One of the participants, MEGAN, a teenager with dark blue streaks in her hair, arms crossed, hoodie up, eyes OPEN, scoffs. The silence interrupted.

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DANNY (CONT'D)

Would you like to share, dear?
Sorry, what was your name? It's
lovely to see a new face here, and
on such a special day too.

MEGAN

This is bullshit.

DANNY

And why's that?

MEGAN

All this meditation crap. I mean if
you're still here after a whole
fucking year, I don't think a few
breathing exercises and even more
wallowing is gonna help.

DANNY

But you're here?

MEGAN

(pause)

Yeah...I think I just wanted to see
who was responsible for killing my
brother. Not to beg for sympathy.

Hushed gasps from the group. Danny smirks.

MEGAN (CONT'D)

And now what, you're a grief
counselor, really? None of us would
even be here if it wasn't for you.
You ever think about that? All of
this, these people, this stupid
memorial today, it's all your
fault.

DANNY

I understand you're upset. We all
are. And you're right. It was my
mistake. One year ago today, I made
the biggest mistake of my life. 32
people gone, and we're still
feeling the fallout from that.

Silence. An older woman, SUE, begins sobbing.

DANNY (CONT'D)

And I've spent every day of my life
after that moment trying to make up
for it. I don't know if it'll ever
be good enough. But I'm gonna try.

(MORE)

DANNY (CONT'D)

I learned a lot that day. Even I
had my own kind of transformation.
All I can do now is try to help the
rest of you.

MEGAN

(scoffs)

Good luck with that.

Megan gets up and storms out of the room.

DANNY

I think we'll wrap it up there,
everyone. I'll see you all tonight
at the memorial.

The crowd begins getting up. Danny approaches Sue and pulls
her aside.

DANNY (CONT'D)

Hey, are you okay? I know that
can't have been easy for you.

SUE

It's days like this I just miss him
so much. I still can't believe he's
gone.

DANNY

I know...

SUE

Thank you, Danny. I know this isn't
easy for you either.

DANNY

Hey, it takes a village, right?
Maybe you would benefit from a more
one-on-one approach. I offer
private counseling sessions, it's
actually something I just started
doing, where I take a more holistic
approach. Just you and me, I
actually have this really nice,
serene spot I set up in the woods.
We go out there, get away from it
all, indulge in nature, I
incorporate some more advanced
meditative techniques. Let me tell
you, it's completely transformed me
as a person. I can see you're
hurting Sue, but you don't have to
live like that. You can let it go.
And I'd love to help you do that.

6

EXT. WOODS - CAMPSITE - DAY

6

A modest tent set up in a clearing in the forest, surrounded by suffocating trees reaching to the sky on all sides. Ray and Claire approach.

RAY

It's his tent.

CLAIRE

You sure it's his?

RAY

Positive. Gave it to him on his last birthday.

CLAIRE

Oh right. You mean the last birthday you actually showed up at.

RAY

Claire...

Ray unzips the tent and looks inside. Clothes, supplies, a sleeping bag, and a notebook. He picks up the notebook and flips through the pages. The first few appear to be journal entries, but the rest are filled with drawings. Drawings that get more indiscernible as they go on. Scribbles mostly, like a child's.

But a figure can be made out through the drawings, something vaguely humanlike. Like a giant bird, or a moth, all black, except for its glowing red eyes.

RAY (CONT'D)

What the hell? Have you seen this before?

CLAIRE

Never. I didn't even know he kept a journal.

RAY

How has he been acting?

CLAIRE

Fine, mostly. I mean, given the circumstances.

RAY

Circumstances?

CLAIRE

Yes, Ray, I mean given the fact that his best friend died, the only person he ever opened up to, I mean given that. Other than his only friend in the world being dead, his father being an abusive alcoholic, and his mother being a complete stranger to him, other than that, yes I guess our son is fine, Ray. No thanks to you.

RAY

He didn't wanna go to the memorial?

CLAIRE

You know how he is about that kind of stuff.

RAY

Yeah...we should camp here for the night, it'll be dark soon.

7

INT. MEGAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

7

Megan enters the front door, exasperated. She heads to the kitchen, sets her keys on the counter, on top of a printed flyer for the memorial service today. She grabs a frozen TV dinner and puts it in the microwave.

She washes the dishes in the sink and loads them into the dishwasher, turning off the kitchen light as she leaves. A figure becomes visible through the kitchen window as the room darkens. The figure bolts from the window as Claire enters the living room, like its following her.

She sits on the couch and turns the TV on as the microwave hums in the background. Through the window behind her, the figure continues to watch. The microwave BEEPS, and Claire retrieves her meal.

She sits back down again, and the figure outside her window bolts out of view. A KNOCK at the door. Megan opens it. It's Ethan.

MEGAN

Ethan? You're not at the memorial?

8

EXT. CAMPSITE - NIGHT

8

Total silence. Not a bird. Not a cricket. Nothing. Ray and Claire are inside the tent - Claire in the sleeping bag and Ray on the hard ground, a noticeable space separating them. But Ray's not sleeping, his eyes are open, contemplating.

He hears a sound cut through the silence. A long, brushing sound. Like something being dragged. He grabs his gun and slowly unzips the top of the tent, peering outside.

Illuminated only by the light of the full moon, a dark figure in the distance, dragging something along the ground. He turns to Claire, but thinks better of it. He unzips his tent all the way and quietly crawls out, watching the figure in the distance.

Ray slowly stands up and crouches behind a tree, watching. It's a person in the distance, and they're dragging something long on the ground. Something shaped like a body. Ray keeps his distance and follows the figure deeper into the woods.

9

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - NIGHT

9

A makeshift altar stands in the center of an open clearing, dozens of candles light the way. Danny is standing in front of it, dressed in a dark cloak. The figure drags its object into the light, in front of Danny. It's clearly a body now, wrapped in a dark tarp, strands of blue hair peeking out of the top.

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The figure pulls its hood down to reveal its face. It's Ethan. Ray is horrified.

RAY

Ethan?

Danny whispers something indiscernible to him, before kissing him on the cheek. Together the two lift the body onto the altar, and both kneel in front of it. Suddenly its not quiet anymore.

The sounds of nature return, but with a remarkable tremor. Birds, insects, even the howling of wolves, like hundreds of creatures at once, almost shouting like they're in pain, filling the entire forest.

Danny stands up and faces Ethan, his eyes glowing red. He beckons Ethan to stand, before Ethan suddenly drops to the ground. He begins writhing in pain, screaming, twitching, convulsing, like a force inside of him is trying to get out.

Ray tries to step in, but he can't. Like an unseen force is holding him back. He's stuck, frozen, unable to move. The cacophany of noises pierces his ears. Then suddenly...quiet. Ethan lays still in the dirt.

Danny's glowing eyes turn down to Ethan, and Ethan rises from the ground as if commanded to. The flames return to every candle, and the body on the altar is gone. Danny leans forward and whispers something in Ethan's ear. Ethan turns around and stares into the darkness of the forest, his eyes now glowing with the same burning red intensity.