

SHACK IN THE WOODS

Written by

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INT. CURTIS FAMILY LIVING ROOM - DAY

AMY CURTIS, 44, is an overworked and worried woman who cares more about her family than herself. She sits on the worn down family sofa, a half-eaten plate of dinner on the coffee table in front of her. A completely full plate sits next to it. She is worriedly talking into the phone she is gripping to her ear.

AMY

Chip's been working later and later every night and I've had to pick up extra hours too, and...I don't know Shantell, I'm worried. Miles just isn't seeing enough of us, and he doesn't seem to want us around even when we are here. He spends all his time in that damn shack. I just don't know what to do.

She hears a car pull into the driveway.

AMY (CONT'D)

Oh, he's pulling up now. Sorry for yammering on again.

(beat)

Yes, of course. Thank you.  
Goodnight.

She hangs up the phone as her husband, CHIP CURTIS, 43, walks through the front door. He puts his keys away and walks to the sofa to kiss his wife.

CHIP

Hey baby, how was your day?

He sits, surveying the plates.

AMY

It was alright. Carol's up my ass about these deadlines again.

CHIP

Oh, she would be.

Amy half laughs.

AMY

Right?

Chip gestures to the untouched plate.

CHIP

Is that for Miles?

AMY

Yeah. I called him for about 10 minutes but I guess he didn't want to come in. Or answer me.

Chip puts an arm around his wife.

AMY (CONT'D)

I'm worried about him.

CHIP

Me too. But he's a teenage boy, we have to give him his space if he needs it.

Amy doesn't respond, instead she looks down at her hands that she has clenched in her lap.

AMY

His principal called me at work today.

CHIP

What? The principal herself?

AMY

Yeah. She said she and some of the staff are really concerned about Miles. He wrote his last English assignment about a boy with no friends who doesn't want to live anymore. Did you know that?

She tears up as she says this. He shakes his head wordlessly. Finally, he manages to speak.

CHIP

No, no I didn't.

AMY

I'm worried this isn't just normal teenage stuff.

CHIP

Should we talk to him about it?

AMY

He won't want to talk.

CHIP

Well this can't continue.

He puts a hand on Amy's knee and pats it lovingly.

CHIP (CONT'D)

I'm going to bring him his food and try to get him in here to talk to us, ok? Try not to worry.

Amy nods, holding back tears. Chip stands, planting a kiss on her forehead. He takes the plate and walks out the backdoor.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Chip walks across the small plot of grass that makes up their backyard. He enters the woods that borders the backyard, and he fights his way through a vegetated path. He begins to call into the trees.

CHIP

Miles? Your mother said she called you for dinner. You shouldn't ignore her like that, you know it upsets her.

(beat)

Buddy, come on up to the house. Mom and I want to talk to you. We know you've been having a hard time recently and we just want to make sure that we're doing everything we can for you.

(beat)

I'm bringing you your dinner. You can eat it out here, but then I want you to bring your plate in and talk to us ok?

He emerges into a clearing in which stands a small shack, obviously built by an amateur carpenter. It looks like it may fall apart at any time. There are no windows, only a door hung on rusted metal hinges. Chip knocks on the door.

CHIP (CONT'D)

Son, I know you can hear me. Open up.

There is no movement. The door stays firmly shut. Chip knocks again.

CHIP (CONT'D)

Miles, this isn't funny. Open the door.

Chip slowly pulls the door open, revealing dimly lit interior of the clubhouse. A small table is pushed against one wall, and the single chair is knocked over on the floor.

Chip drops the plate. MILES CURTIS, 16, has hung himself from a support beam.

CUT TO:

EXT. FRONT OF ROBBINS HOUSE - DAY

It has been 5 years since Miles Curtis's tragic death. His parents moved out soon after, and the house has remained empty, until now. Today the Robbins family is moving in. DARIUS ROBBINS, 36, is carrying 2 moving boxes from the U-Haul, one under each arm. His wife, SIERRA ROBBINS, 38, is laughing at him.

SIERRA

Quit it showoff! You'll break something!

Darius grins, plopping a box to the ground and flexing his freed arm.

DARIUS

What, don't you like what you see?

She walks over and picks up the box Darius dropped.

SIERRA

You are ridiculous.

Darius grins as they both walk inside.

DARIUS

And that's why you love me.

SIERRA

Maybe.

Their son, CONNOR ROBBINS, 15, comes up behind them, struggling with a box that is clearly too large for him.

CONNOR

You guys are gross.

DARIUS

You'll understand one day kiddo.

CONNOR

I understand now. I understand that you're gross.

Darius laughs as they walk into their new front door. Connor drops his box inside and comes back out for more.

As he walks he notices a girl walking toward him from the yard next to theirs. She is holding a plate of cookies. She reaches him and gives him a cheery smile.

LAYLA  
Hi! I'm Layla!

Darius and Sierra come up behind him. She smiles them as well.

LAYLA (CONT'D)  
My mom wanted me to bring you guys these to welcome you to the neighborhood!

SIERRA  
Aw, that's so sweet!

She takes the cookies from Layla and shakes her hand.

SIERRA (CONT'D)  
I'm Sierra, this is Darius and our son Connor.

LAYLA  
Layla.

She shakes Darius's extended hand. Connor nods politely. Sierra hands Connor the cookies.

SIERRA  
Why don't you guys break these open?

CUT TO:

EXT. CURB OUT FRONT OF ROBBINS HOUSE - DAY

Connor and Layla sit on the curb about 20 feet down from the moving truck, munching cookies and watching Connor's parents carrying furniture into the house.

LAYLA  
So, Arkansas huh?

Connor turns to her, confused.

CONNOR  
What?

She points to the U-Haul, which has a large graphic on the side emblazoned with the word "Arkansas."

LAYLA

That's where y'all are moving from?

CONNOR

No, we're from Connecticut.

LAYLA

Oh. I thought those trucks corresponded to the state they were from.

CONNOR

Yeah, no.

LAYLA

That's disappointing.

CONNOR

Yeah, kinda. You want another cookie?

She takes another cookie.

LAYLA

Thanks. They're my favorite. My mom didn't let me have any this time. "tHeY'rE fOr tHe nEW nEiGhBoRs." So rude.

She shakes her head, taking a large bite. Connor smirks, taking another cookie for himself.

CONNOR

I mean, I appreciate it. More for me!

LAYLA

Ok, kinda selfish, but I understand.

CONNOR

They are really good. Thank your parents for me.

LAYLA

Oh, it's just my mom and I actually. My dad dipped when I was 6.

CONNOR

Oh my God, I'm sorry.

LAYLA

No it's chill, my mom is great, and we're happier without him.

Connor doesn't know how to address this. He looks back at his parents happily laughing and messing with one another.

CONNOR

Sorry for bringing it up.

LAYLA

No, it's fine.

They sit in silence chewing for a moment as Connor contemplates his mistake. Layla scoots closer to him, leans in, and speaks in a low, secretive tone.

LAYLA (CONT'D)

Here's the real question; do you know about your house?

CONNOR

What, did someone like, die in there?

LAYLA

Yeah!

CONNOR

Oh. That was a joke. That's terrible.

LAYLA

Yeah! It wasn't actually in the house, but it was someone who lived there.

She scrambles up enthusiastically, a wild excitement in her eyes. She gestures with her head to the woods peaking between their houses.

LAYLA (CONT'D)

Come on, let me show you!

Connor stands and follows in trepidation. They disappear into the woods, and Sierra and Darius look after them. They turn to each other.

SIERRA

Should we be monitoring that?

DARIUS

Let him have his fun. You remember what high school is like, don't you?

He winks dramatically and Sierra rolls her eyes.

SIERRA

Sometimes with you it feels like I never left.

DARIUS

You love me.

SIERRA

My only fault.

He laughs and kisses her.

CUT TO:

EXT. WOODS - DUSK

The sun is rapidly setting. Layla fights through the overgrown woods, Connor following cautiously behind her.

CONNOR

Where are we going?

LAYLA

Give me a second.

They reach the clearing. Connor looks unimpressed with the clubhouse. Layla turns back to him, dramatically sweeping her arms open.

LAYLA (CONT'D)

This is the shack.

CONNOR

That was so dramatic.

LAYLA

It's more fun that way. Here, come inside.

She opens the door and ducks inside. Connor doesn't follow. He peeks inside.

CONNOR

I think I'll stay out here. I don't want to get trapped when it collapses.

Layla pops back out, standing in the doorway.

LAYLA

Oh come on, it's been standing for at least 5 years. It hasn't fallen yet.

She disappears back inside. Connor follows her slowly, trying not to touch anything.

INT. CLUBHOUSE - NIGHT

Layla pulls the string on an exposed light bulb hanging from a wire on the ceiling. Connor looks up at it and around the clubhouse.

CONNOR

Where is the electricity coming from?

Layla looks up too.

LAYLA

That's a great question.

CONNOR

And I have a thousand more. First of all, where are we?

LAYLA

Sit.

She sits on the floor, and Connor sits against the wall.

LAYLA (CONT'D)

I'm going to tell you the tragic tale of the kid who used to live in your house. So! This all happened a year before I moved into my house, so 5 years ago. A family very similar to yours lived in your house. A happily married mom and dad-

CONNOR

How do you know my mom and dad are happily married?

LAYLA

It's obvious?

CONNOR

Hey, maybe that's all a show.

LAYLA

Do you need to talk about something?

Connor grins.

CONNOR

No, I'm messing with you. They're very happy. Continue.

LAYLA

As I was saying! A happily married mom and dad with a teenage son. They seemed like the perfect family, but the son wasn't happy. He spent all his time in the woods, building this very shack. They say he built it to fill with friends, but he never had any. He finally finished it, and realized he had no one to share it with. He spent all his time in here, until one day he had enough.

She pauses dramatically, and points up to the rafter above Connor's head. The lightbulb flickers ominously.

LAYLA (CONT'D)

That's when he hung himself from that rafter.

CONNOR

You know, I don't know if I appreciate being compared to this kid.

The lightbulb flickers again. Connor looks up at it in concern.

CONNOR (CONT'D)

Does that always do that?

LAYLA

It's probably fine. But here's the best part!

CONNOR

There's more?

LAYLA

Yeah, if you'd let me tell it.

CONNOR

By all means.

LAYLA

They say he still haunts this very shack, searching for friends.

At this point the lightbulb flickers again and then goes out completely. Layla and Connor's eyes both snap up to the bulb.

CONNOR

I'm assuming it isn't supposed to do that.

Something near Layla falls to the floor. Her eyes are still fixed to the bulb, but Connor's eyes try to locate the source of the noise.

CONNOR (CONT'D)

That isn't funny.

She looks down to him.

LAYLA

That wasn't me.

He stands, tugging on the string attached to the bulb.

CONNOR

Of course it was.

Layla doesn't answer. She's staring in terror at the spot Connor was just sitting in. A boy Connor's age is slowly materializing. This is Miles Curtis, in the ghostly flesh. Connor is still pulling on the string to no avail. When the boy fully forms the light comes back on. Connor looks pleased with himself.

CONNOR (CONT'D)

There, see? It just needed-

He turns to Layla and sees Miles. He steps back, knocking into the table on the opposite wall from where he had been sitting.

CONNOR (CONT'D)

Oh my god!

He whips around to Layla.

CONNOR (CONT'D)

Is this a prank or something? How long has he been here??

MILES

Oh, no, I just got here.

Layla is in shock.

LAYLA

He just, he just appeared. I  
don't...

She shakes her head, her words failing her.

MILES

I heard you talking about me, so I  
figured I'd come clear some things  
up.

CONNOR

You're the dead kid?

He clearly does not believe Miles.

MILES

Yeah, my name's Miles.

He sticks his hand out to Connor for him to shake.

CONNOR

Connor.

He attempts to shake Miles's hand, but his hand passes right  
through the ghost's hand. Connor looks down at his own hand.

CONNOR (CONT'D)

Holy shit.

Miles looks at his hand as well, frowning.

MILES

Huh. I've never tried that before,  
but it makes sense that it doesn't  
work.

CONNOR

You're really a ghost.

MILES

How could you tell?

He turns to Layla.

MILES (CONT'D)

I've seen you around here before.  
What's your name?

LAYLA

Layla. You've been watching me?

MILES

There isn't really much else to do out here. I can't leave so I just watch whoever comes in here. Sorry if that sounds creepy.

LAYLA

Yeah, it kinda does. Have you, have you been out here the whole time?

MILES

What, since I died?

LAYLA

I was trying to avoid saying it like that.

MILES

I don't mind. My death is a pretty major factor in my existence.

Connor sinks to the floor. Miles turns to him, concerned.

MILES (CONT'D)

Are you ok man? You don't look too hot.

Layla grins widely.

LAYLA

Yeah, you look like you've seen a ghost or something.

MILES

Ha, good one!

CONNOR

That was awful.

CONNOR (CONT'D)

And I think I have a right to be shocked.

MILES

You do. You're actually taking this a lot better than I thought you would.

LAYLA

I wouldn't have been surprised if you fainted.

CONNOR

You know what, I came out here for a ghost story, not to be attacked.

MILES

Hey, I'm not a story. I'm genuine,  
all-natural spirit.

LAYLA

But you do have a story?

MILES

It isn't as dramatic as the one you  
just told.

LAYLA

Aw.

CONNOR

That makes it more believable. So,  
why did you kill yourself?

Layla is taken aback at Connor's rudeness.

LAYLA

Connor!

CONNOR

What? He said he was ok with  
talking about his death.

For the first time, Miles seems to not know how to approach  
his situation.

MILES

Um, well, as I said, I want to  
clear some things up.

CONNOR

Were you really that much of a  
loser?

MILES

Um...

Connor rushes to smooth the situation over.

CONNOR

And don't worry if you were. I  
mean, I don't have any friends here  
either. I'm about to start school  
and be very alone.

Layla interjects.

LAYLA

You don't have to talk about it if  
you don't want to.

Miles sits in silence, contemplating. Slowly, he speaks.

MILES

No, it's ok. I came tonight because you've got it all wrong. I wasn't a loser at all. I was actually pretty popular. I had people back here all the time. It's kind of where the coolest kids would come when they didn't want to be disturbed, because parents were usually too spooked to come back here.

LAYLA

What? Really?

MILES

Yeah. After I died everybody pretended the clubhouse was this big creepy place in the middle of the woods. It being haunted by a loser who killed himself only made it scarier I guess.

CONNOR

Then how did you die?

Miles shrugs.

MILES

Got hit by a truck.

LAYLA

Oh my god, that's awful.

MILES

Yeah, wouldn't recommend it.

CONNOR

I can't believe that they just made all that stuff up.

MILES

I mean, what can you do?

Layla leans forward, inhibitions gone.

LAYLA

So what's the afterlife like?

MILES

Oh. Fine I guess. I just chill here mostly.

LAYLA

Oh come on, don't hold out on us!

CONNOR

Dude, you've conquered everyone's greatest fear! You must have some wise insights!

Miles hadn't thought of it like that. He considers his options. As he thinks Layla turns to Connor.

LAYLA

I mean personally my biggest fear is having to watch robots torture my family to death, but I'd say death is at least 4th.

CONNOR

Why specifically robots?

MILES

You guys really want advice?

LAYLA

Yeah.

CONNOR

Also, can you tell us about how you got so popular? I'm really nervous about this school year.

LAYLA

Hey, at least you won't be starting alone.

CONNOR

What?

LAYLA

You'll have at least one friend to start with.

Connor looks perplexed.

LAYLA (CONT'D)

Me, idiot. We're going to be friends.

MILES

Count me in too. It gets lonely being stuck out here.

CONNOR

Aw, you guys. Thanks.

LAYLA

You can't leave? How are you supposed to show us all your ghost hangouts?

MILES

Hate to break it to you, but this is it.

CONNOR

Guess we'll have to do all our fun friendship stuff back here then.

MILES

You act like having our own clubhouse is a bad thing.

LAYLA

Clubhouse? I've only ever heard it called "The Shack in the Woods."

MILES

It's a clubhouse.

CONNOR

I think shack is generally the word used to describe buildings in this condition.

MILES

This condition? It's looked like this since I built it!

CONNOR

Oh. We can go with clubhouse then.

LAYLA

My mom calls it "A tetanus-filled heroin den with a side of rabies."

CONNOR

Clubhouse.

LAYLA

Yeah, sounds good.

Connor's phone buzzes. He has a text from his dad telling him to come back.

MILES

I can't believe you'd just come into my home and insult my carpentry like that.

CONNOR

I just got here, ok. I didn't know!

He turns to Layla.

CONNOR (CONT'D)

We should go.

LAYLA

Aw!

CONNOR

It's getting late. Come on.

They stand.

LAYLA

Thanks for showing up for us Miles.  
We'll be back to hear all your  
secrets.

CONNOR

Definitely.

MILES

I'll be here all week. And all  
year. And probably forever.

LAYLA

We'll try not to keep you waiting  
then.

CONNOR

Night!

The two living kids walk out of the door, leaving Miles to exhale heavily in disbelief.

MILES

Did that actually work?

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY

It's been a few weeks since Connor moved into his new house, and now he has to face his big challenge: 11th grade. He carefully walks through the hall, doing his best to appear confident, but not cocky enough to attract attention. He holds his paper schedule, periodically referring to it as he searches for his first class. He remembers what Miles told him on a subsequent visit to the clubhouse.

MILES (V.O.)

Here's the thing about Ridgemont; everyone is trying so hard to be cool, so the key is to not look like you're trying. You're cool, you're confident, so show them that.

Connor squares his shoulders and puts a half grin on his face. He slows to a wide, confident gait. He smiles and nods to 2 girls by a locker. They cheerfully smile back. Layla rounds a corner, spots him, and runs up to walk next to him.

LAYLA

Hey! Happy first day!

She looks him up and down. He is dressed completely differently than any other time she's seen him. It's a good change, his clothes are trendy and fit well.

CONNOR

Thanks. Do you know where 23a is?

LAYLA

You look...cool.

CONNOR

Thanks, that's the idea.

He lowers his voice.

CONNOR (CONT'D)

Remember, Miles said to dress like you're cool and people will assume you are.

LAYLA

Yeah, I remember.

Connor looks judgmentally at her outfit.

CONNOR

Are you sure?

LAYLA

I dress this way because I like it. I'm popular enough without trying to impress people.

CONNOR

You are?

LAYLA  
Yeah, people value being yourself  
apparently.

She looks over at his schedule and points down the hall to their left.

LAYLA (CONT'D)  
23a is that way.

She turns and disappears down a hallway to their right. Connor stops and looks after her.

CONNOR  
But Miles said-

He stops when it becomes apparent that she isn't listening. He takes the left down the hallway, leaving us looking down the main hall.

MILES (V.O.)  
Absolutely do not be yourself.  
You'll get bullied for being your  
own person. Remember, your goal is  
to fit in, and fitting in means  
being just like everyone else.

CUT TO:

INT. LUNCH ROOM -

Connor walks away from the lunch counter with his tray, surveying the cafeteria for a place to sit. He sees Layla at a table completely surrounded by friends laughing and joking. They're all clearly edgy, skaters, art kids, or nerds. He sighs, turns away, and sits down at a table with a kid reading a book. He sits for a moment, staring woefully at his floppy french fries. The kid looks up.

ERIK  
Hey, are you new here?

CONNOR  
Yeah, hi. I'm Connor.

Erik sticks out his hand for Connor to shake.

ERIK  
I'm Erik, like the Skyrim  
character. Actually like two Skyrim  
characters if you count alchemists,  
which obviously I don't. Do you  
play Skyrim?

As Erik speaks Connor looks back to Layla's table. He turns back just as he finishes speaking.

CONNOR

Hmm?

Erik sighs and picks his book back up. He is used to this sort of reaction.

ERIK

Never mind.

As he begins to read again Connor sees that it's a Skyrim guidebook. Connor is a bit overwhelmed by the Skyrim of it all, but that doesn't stop him from interrupting Erik.

CONNOR

Hey, can you tell me where the popular table is?

Erik gestures to Layla's table.

ERIK

They're pretty popular I guess.

CONNOR

No, I mean like the football players and cheerleaders and stuff.

ERIK

Oh, we don't have a football team.

CONNOR

We don't?

He looks back to Layla's table. They are all having an insufferably good time. He sighs and begins to eat.

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY

It's the end of the day. Connor trudges out of class and spots Layla in the hall ahead of him. His face lightens and he walks up to her and the 3 friends she is with.