

**THE TREE OF LIFE**

A Screenplay  
by  
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First Draft  
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#### PREFACE

The "I" who speaks in this story is not the author. Rather, he hopes that you might see yourself in this "I" and understand this story as your own.

PART ONE

## EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

An ordinary house in central Texas. A neighborhood at the edge of town.

Three children -- brothers -- are playing in the back yard. The eldest, 11, is JACK. RL is two years younger, and STEVE is 6. Their MOTHER and FATHER, Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien, look on.

In the center of the yard stands a tall oak tree. The year is 1956.

## OTHER ANGLES

The boys play with their dog, SHEP. Their mother smiles, content. Life has covered her with blessing. There is nothing she sees but it means her good.

Her heart, it seems, is especially drawn to her middle son; the sweetest, most genial of the boys.

The sun is setting in the west. A doorbell rings.

## EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE - TWELVE YEARS LATER

Twelve years later, a Western Union man walks away from the house. Mrs. O'Brien leans against a wall as she reads a telegram.

## INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

Mr. O'Brien watches as his wife stares out the window.

FATHER

Can I do anything?

She shakes her head. She lets him kiss her, but generally seems unaware of him. She notices nothing; says nothing.

He must be strong. There will be time enough for tears. He grieves for her more than for himself -- that she should be stricken in this way, a woman so faithful, kind and upright -- who through the whole of her life has denied herself -- who has loved the good -- given to the poor, comforted the desolate. A flashforward: Men rise up and bow when she passes by.

## INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

Friends have come to visit.

BETTY

You did everything in the world to make him happy. No one could have had a better life.

JAN

He was such a fine boy.

RUTH

-- Such a fine musician! The sweetest child I ever saw.

BETTY

He only goes a little before the rest of us.

RUTH

It's all so bitter now, but -- you'll have lovely memories of him. Those can't be taken away.

The memories are a torment to her, not a consolation.

JAN

He'll always live in your heart.

Live? That is what he will not do.

BETTY

We never really part. Not from those we love.

JAN

The pain will pass away.

She does not want it to. No, she wants to keep it, always. A shard of glass in her heart.

RUTH

He's at peace.

Let them live in their naive illusion. If only she still could! To hear his name spoken is more than she can bear. Does no one understand?

Now, when others look at her, they glance quickly away. She is aware of being an uncomfortable presence to everyone she meets, particularly when she speaks.

BETTY

...He's in God's hands now.

Where is God? Where was he then? Nature gives no answer, whispers not a word. The child was in God's hands the whole time, was he not?

JAN

...He didn't suffer. He's better off where he is... It's so hard -- you can do everything right, and still --

Their voices seem far away, as though they were speaking to her through a tunnel. Let them talk to each other. Not to her.

A vast, barren plain. Death reveals ~~the~~ emptiness that was there before.

Nothing is but it. The fact is like a wall. She can see nothing else. Nothing beyond.

Shattered, so many lives; cast blindly here and there, like water from rock to rock.

INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

She cannot look in his room. When she does, he dies to her a second time. She paces before the closed door.

INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

Her would-be comforters go away dismayed and apprehensive: Why she, and not ~~they~~? They are themselves bewildered, some reduced to tears.

JAN

*The best* woman in the whole town!

RUTH

There may be things that we don't know.

BETTY (O.S.)

She still has two left.

She overhears their voices after they are gone. How much more easily they speak as soon as they are out of her presence!

Not just her child -- it seems that all creation has died. Nature has betrayed the heart that loved it.

A child appears with a casserole.

BOY

Mom sent this.

He quickly retreats, his eyes fixed on the ground.

In the next room, Mr. O'Brien laughs and shakes his head. He does not seem quite to have taken it all in.

FATHER

That rascal! I remember how you couldn't get him into the tub. Then, once he was in, you couldn't get him back out!

The grey dawn of the next day. The O'Brien house seems no different from any other on the block. The postman goes about his business. The paperboy.

The men of the neighborhood speak among themselves in hushed voices as they set their sprinklers out at dusk. The fall of the O'Brien house strikes awe in them. A family once happy and prosperous, brought down in sorrow and doom.

TIGHT ON MRS. O'BRIEN

Through a crack in the bedroom door she sees her husband on his knees. What good has it brought him? Would he pray to a spider?

Gardenias, a climbing rose. Nature puts forth life at will. Why should a dog have breath, her child none?

Later, when someone reaches for the child's guitar, she hears her husband insist that it not be moved. Not an inch.

MR. O'BRIEN

Her husband, too, attempts to console her. But having an equal cause for sorrow, he is no more convincing than her friends have been.

Grief so deep has made her unfamiliar to him; almost holy. Still he must say something.

FATHER

We have -- to be strong -- for them  
-- for the other boys. We can't let  
them see --

(she looks away)

I haven't been the husband you  
deserve -- I haven't loved you  
enough -- still -- let me into your  
heart. Let us share the grief.

FATHER (CONT'D)

It's too hard alone. I thought we would go first -- never have to know -- to see --

(she looks up)

I wish it could have been me. I took the confidence out of him. I never got a chance to tell him -- how sorry I was! I made him unhappy -- anxious -- I did it out of love! Forgive me!

She hesitates, waits until she can swallow back a sob to speak -- then can find nothing to say. What did they do to bring such a calamity on themselves? What did the world gain? It neither knew nor cared.

FATHER (CONT'D)

I'm going to be strong for him. That's what he'd want, and that's what he's going to get.

An empty swing. A slide. A bridge. Grass fading in the August heat.

He takes her into his arms. How small their differences seem now! He loves her wholly. They are one at last, in grief.

MOTHER (O.S.)

Do we say we have three boys, or two?

(in a whisper)

I hate my life -- I want to die -- to with him -- my child!

She will not be consoled. He looks at her, helpless.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

(suddenly)

Whatever I say, don't believe it.

Alone, she prays. She hears no answering voice.

Mr. O'Brien closes the lid of his piano.

Her soul is gone. Her good. She goes about her life; she walks, eats, sleeps, wakes up. But she does not live. Each place, each hour is the same.

The best of her lay in his soul. She lived through him, saw through his eyes. Apart from him she cannot see the work of God, or nature's order. In her is death; in him was life.

A bare tree in winter. Nature lied.

## JACK (ADULT) - SERIES OF ANGLES

Gradually we become aware of Jack, their eldest son, grown up now. The others have tried and failed to console his mother. How shall he?

JACK (O.S.)

It broke your heart. Never afterwards were you the same -- your faith in goodness shaken -- though carefully you kept it secret, lest our faith be shaken, too.

(she walks alone)

In vain! We knew!

Gone. He has left the world a sham. A friend whispers in Mrs. O'Brien's ear:

MRS. STONE

Don't let them console you. Don't forget! For a long time you'll have the pain. But it will turn to joy -- in the end.

We are aboard a train, plunging through the countryside; the locomotive far ahead, barely visible. A blind, overwhelming force.

JACK (O.S.)

Why do you grieve and waste away?  
You see love flowed out  
un- ly!

The rails weave in and out beneath the wheels. The steel lines of fate. It runs along its way, defies all other paths, all walls, crashes through every obstacle.

She cannot be persuaded to turn or look. She sits with her face averted, staring at the ground.

Each day she finds it harder to bear. She cannot read, or sleep. The dawn light coming in through the window is ghastly to her. It is as though he had died again. And yet she would not be surprised if he were to walk into the room.

Children play. Spring comes. The crocus raise their heads. The redbuds blaze. They return.

A door through which one fears to look. A path one shrinks from taking. Empty parks. A vast, neglected garden. A gate. The past consuming all.

Decaying statues in a long, straight lane of trees. The figures of forgotten gods. They gaze at the horizon as though in search of their deliverer. Balustrades; a drained pool. Walks strewn with sodden leaves. Stairs that lead nowhere. A butterfly.

She remembers when the sun shone about her, when it seemed that she would die in her nest.

Crows hovering over a stubble field, foraging in the furrows.

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

Who are you that took him? You  
smash what is most dear -- send  
flies to wounds you might have  
healed. Who can hinder you?

Friends come by less. She does not mind. Her child is more present to her in death than, really, they in life.

Good night, my child. She shall not see him. Till heaven and earth have passed away.

Sent for nothing. The faces of those who live on; strangers, preferred to him.

High overhead, migrating geese call to each other; separated, lost in the clouds.

A buoy, clanging in the fog.

Nature has returned to chaos.

A hand on a curtain. What is death? What will it be like? The pictures stop. The movie ends.

Jack stops on the street, listens. It is as though the wind were trying to tell him something.

He finds himself on a staircase, its upper and lower reaches lost in the darkness.

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

You whom we met in the woods and on  
the hills, whom first in her eyes  
we knew -- how shall I name you?

CUs to show his mother's air of embarrassed shyness; her good humor and truthfulness; her affectionate, sorrowing face, always looking into him, wishing him strength and happiness.

Her hands when she is very old: those worn hands that once held so much that was dear to them, that once he could take and hold as tightly and for as long as he wished. Soon he must lose her, too, with all he loves.

Change; the spring of all sorrow. Is anything exempt from birth, growth and decay? Nothing everlasting?

A shadow dancing on the ground. This world is passing away.

His father, who at first was careful to remain calm and composed, rips off his coat and tears at his hair in grief.

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

Teach me the way to you.

The oak tree in the front yard. Its roots reach down into the darkness of the earth, towards its center and source. The branches spread towards the light, towards discovery and utterance; a fountain of life.

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

Brother, dear brother -- We had one heart within us. One soul -- where you left off and I began, I could not tell.

The immovable trunk, a universe of leaves spreading above it, whispering; an oracle.

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

Where are you? How shall I find you again? I will go in search of you -- through all the worlds.

The camera rises through the branches, seeks a way towards the sky above.

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

Brother, speak through me! Guide me! Answer me from where you are! See what I was, what I am now! Lend your spirit to this song!

He discovers himself on the verge of falling asleep at the wheel of a car. He fights to stay awake. The car is drifting off the road, and still he cannot rouse himself to consciousness, to the required act of will.

A hand touches his shoulder, waking him --

EXT. CITY OF DESTRUCTION - THE ARTIFICIAL WORLD - LATE DAY TO NIGHT TO DAWN - JACK (ADULT)

Jack wakes to find himself in that landscape of paralysis and despair which today goes by the name of a city. The familiar world has assumed a threatening aspect.

A number of scenes with the adult Jack follow encounters with friends and strangers. To avoid interrupting the flow of the narrative, we will not specify them here. From time to time we hear Jack's thoughts. He leads us through the story.

The cutting is quick and staccato, to suggest the fractured quality of modern life.

His eyes are bright with longing. He never lingers anywhere for long but is forever off, forever moving on. Where did he go wrong, or wander from the path?

The stars are washed out. The sky is a haze. The moon shines down like any other senseless light, high above the towers of steel and glass. Where in these streets can he find any evidence of the world's order, any sign to help him on his way?

The others do not meet his eyes. Each makes his way alone, shut up within himself. None can be sure of the other. No tie is fixed or lasting.

Like a bird trapped inside a room, beating against the windows and ceiling, the soul struggles for a time, then sinks down in defeat.

The buildings hem him round like the trees of a wild forest. A false nature; a universe of death. A sightless world, roofed over, shut off from things above. Here one must stoop to walk. A world that would exclude the transcendent, that says: I am, and there is nothing else. A world without love.

It seems he could escape if only he could bring himself to will it. Somehow he cannot. He has gone to sleep, he cannot wake up. He wakes from one dream to another.

The sights of a modern city: it could be Chicago, New York, Houston, Paris, Mumbai, Los Angeles, or a composite of them all. We never see it whole -- no skyline or defining monument -- fragments only -- a frenzy of things and people on the move -- a continuous flow of trains and cars -- a new Babel.

Change seems the only constant in this city; disappearance, loss. Being is a shadow. There is nothing but this endless flux. Nothing eternal, nothing sure.

In the faces of strangers that anguished look of our times which betrays itself beneath the smiles and courtesy -- which, increasingly, even children wear.

Each a shadow to the other, each with his own eyes fixed on the ground in front of him, absorbed in his private world. Spectators in a movie theater.

JACK

Sweet brother -- you who filled our hearts with light -- who drew us close, who made us one -- a family, a home -- gone. Into the night which has no dawn.

He stops, listens. The grey light of a television flickers on the ceiling of a lonely apartment. *Somewhere* a couple rage and howl at each other.

Time lapse shots of tall buildings, with clouds passing above them. Hallways. Offices at night. Walls.

JACK (CONT'D)

What was it that you pointed to -- knew better than I? You overlooked insult and injury. Were gentle, kind --

Nothing adds up, or leads to anything else. He lives in succession.

The shadows of passersby on the street. A dry streambed. A garden in winter. *The* stiff, dead stalks of sunflowers; their heads bowed in *defeat*.

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

*Speak!* Let me hear -- see! Let it not have been in vain! Sing with me -- through me -- you, the true artist -- lend me your strength!

Everything conspires to lead one to go on as before. To rest in the tomb. To sleep.

The concrete banks of the L.A. river. Nature is dying. Without nature, will the spirit die? The eye flits here and there, like a frightened bird.

The others guess nothing of his condition, and he speaks not a word. What would he say?

Fog from the beach. Faces, indistinct.