The...  

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As Melinda flipped open the book, she saw words begin to fill the page, penned by some invisible hand. Melinda began to read the words as they appeared.

It is a universal truth that the best way to ensure children will seek out something, is for one to inform the child that said item is exclusively for adults and that they are far too young for such things. Though when Melinda’s late grandmother issued the warning, first to her own daughter and then later to Melinda herself, she was serious in her repeated proclamations that the ancient text which had been handed down through the generations of their family was indeed far too terrifying for children. Especially children with such powerful imaginations, for imagination is a very powerful thing, and no matter how much it may be discounted or dismissed, it is up there with love and fear as one of the most powerful forces of the human condition.

It was seven days after her Grandma Tilly’s death when Melinda’s mother brought her the tattered old thing. She saw the book many times over the years, but until recently it remained only as a speck in the girl’s peripheral, one of many dusty relics floating around her grandmother’s place. The book waited patiently for the next time it would become the center of attention. After all, what is a few years or even decades collecting dust to a thing so ancient?

Grandma Tilly moved in with them shortly before Melinda’s father was taken by a heart attack. She had come at her daughter’s invitation and insistence, to assist with the house and Melinda, as both the girl’s parents were working so often. Besides needing help with the housecleaning, Melinda’s parents were concerned for their only child, who had, they felt, too strong an imagination and spent far more time with books than with other children. And please allow me to clarify that when I say Melinda’s parents were concerned for her, what I actually mean is that the girl’s mother was worried and so of course the father had to get on board. Though in truth the girl reminded the man of himself as a boy, and his daughter’s wild imagination and love of stories delighted him. It was he who first read to the girl, even in her crib, until she was at last able to fulfill her desire to wrench the book from his grasp and read it aloud herself. But William James Henderson had learned some time ago that to argue with his wife, especially in regards to anything concerning Melinda, was to attempt to lasso flies with a fishing line – a near impossible task, hardly worth the frustration and effort required. So when Sandra expressed her desire that her mother – who was just ‘sitting out there alone, waiting around for holidays and death’, according to Sandra – should come and stay with them, William understood that meant his mother-in-law was likely already packed and en route, and he was safe in his assumption. For her part, Sandra’s mother Tilly had refused her daughter’s generous but unnecessary offer multiple times before relenting.

Within a week, Grandma Tilly was unpacking her things, including the book, in the guest bedroom adjacent to Melinda’s. Less than a month later William Henderson’s heart gave out and he died. A short while after that Tilly followed, and still it didn’t stop there.

“Just keep it away from her! She has her father’s imagination,” Melinda overheard Tilly say to the girl’s mother, just days before Tilly herself was dead. “It’s too much for kids like her, Sandra, too much.”
“But I read it as a girl mom,” Sandra said.
“You snuck it as a girl! And, and you’re…well…that was different. We’re just lucky the scariest thing to you was getting lost in the woods,” Tilly said.
“What does that have to do with anything—”
“Just promise me you’ll keep the book away,” she snapped at her daughter. Then she took a breath and in a much softer voice said, “Please, Sandra.”

Her mother had always been eccentric, but after Bill was found dead in his reading chair it seemed to Sandy that her mother was finally going crazy. Tilly, you see, was the one who found Bill.

Sandra was at work and Melinda at school when it happened. Bill had seemed fine the day before but claimed that morning that he was under the weather and was going to stay home to recover and get some reading done. Tilly was bringing him some tea and chicken noodle soup when, just before she rounded the corner, her ears were flooded with a hideous howl of sheer terror. The sound was a high-pitched screech, like that of some massive bird of prey being eviscerated. It was no sound a man should ever utter. Tilly paused, still holding the tray with the pair of steaming mugs in her hand. The scent of green tea and chicken broth mixed in her nostrils and made her feel ill. She called out Bill’s name twice, and then after receiving no reply took a deep breath, steadied herself and turned the corner. She dropped the tray when she saw her son in law.

Bill was propped up in his big brown leather chair, his jaw unhinged in a frozen scream and his thick head of black hair had gone snow white – much whiter than the blank, yellowed pages in the book which sat open upon his lap. Without looking another second at its pages, Tilly snatched the ancient tome from his warm dead hands and returned it to her room. Not that it would do much good, she thought. The book always made sure it was found.

She never shared with Sandra the presence of the book, knowing that her daughter would then try to destroy it.

Tilly’s mother and brother had both attempted to rid the family of the poisonous thing after it claimed Tilly’s father, and both had suffered the consequences. The brother tried first and then, seeing what it had done to her son, the mother tried shortly thereafter. After it killed their mother, she and her then catatonic brother were sent off to be raised in an orphanage in Rhode Island, where the book followed. It was there that her brother managed to choke on his own tongue. When she saw the book lying open on his chest she at first didn’t believe her eyes and assumed it had to be a copy or just a similar book. After she realized her last living family member was dead, she believed.

Tilly buried the book in a far corner of the field near the orphanage and tried to forget it and go on with her life. She watched helplessly as it resurfaced time and again. During her eight years there, she watched as the wretched tome claimed four other children in ‘tragic accidents’. Sad as it was these were acceptable losses to her, she did not know the children well and as long
as the book spared her she was content to simply let it be, until she could leave on her eighteenth birthday.

Then it took the fifth child.

Tilly did her best to keep herself to herself and had succeeded except with regards to Isaak Walton. Isaak managed, after much persistence, to break through the carefully constructed barriers built up around the girl. They became fast friends, thick as thieves, and were often in trouble at the same time. Isaak was in love with young Tilly ever since he spied her burying something in the corner of the field eight years before. He had gone out there shortly after to dig up whatever it was she had tried to hide, but when he removed the loose earth he found nothing. He thought perhaps he’d merely imagined the aged leather book in her hands, until he stumbled upon it resting atop his bed. Assuming it was a gift from his friend he opened the book, and as words appeared on the page he read them.

Isaak’s death was the catalyst which finally allowed Tilly to stop ignoring it and overcome her fear of the vile thing. She tried to burn it but when the fire had run its course from kindling to ashes and the book still didn’t catch, she flung it into the center of the lake by the home place, and was exalted as she watched the dark water devour it whole. She was so happy heading back home that to her surprise she actually began skipping. When she walked into the cavernous communal bedroom, lined with ten beds on each wall, the book was resting on her bed, dry as a bone.

Tilly often wondered why the book did not just put her out of her misery, and why such a cursed collection of pages was ever passed down in the first place. There had always been rumors of a family curse, on account of poor luck and tragic deaths, not mentioning the several cases where parents had tried murdering their children. Over time, after many fatalities and many more failed attempts at destroying it, she came to the conclusion, crazy as it is, that the book really is alive and it wants to stay that way. Perhaps more insane, she deduced that a member of their family line had to be breaching for the book to carry on. So cruelly, it spared her.

Since all conventional methods of destruction failed, the only way Tilly ever saw of getting rid of it was to take her own life and end the line. Unfortunately when she went to a doctor friend for the pills she needed, they learned she was pregnant with Sandra. She weighed her options and with a heavy heart decided not to have the child, but after a failed ‘home remedy’, an unsuccessful operation, and seven months, she had a daughter and the line continued. The baby never should have made it. It was a miracle, they all kept saying. She denied knowledge of who Sandra’s father was, and she never spoke of Isaak again.

She didn’t want to take the time to deal with all of the questions her daughter would ask, and besides Tilly had no more answers than any of her descendants. Despite years of research and attempts at tracking family history in order to better decipher the book’s origins, all she knew was what she had surmised as a girl – the book belonged to their line and could not be gotten rid of. After all her denying and testing and theorizing it was her childhood logic that saw things as they were, despite how absurd it was. It seemed that as long as one existed, so too did
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the other. That was all that was known of its origins, nothing at all. So Tilly circumvented all the explaining – that she was sure would have only served to land her in the nuthouse, her daughter had never been very imaginative – and just asked her daughter again, “Promise?”

“Sure Mom, whatever. I gotta get to work.”

“It’s hardly been a week!”

“I’m going crazy just sitting around all day. I need to be moving, to be working,” Sandra said.

“You’re not just sitting around, honey, you’re recovering, you’re mourning. And what about Melinda?” The last bit came off sounding almost accusatory, which was not her intention.

“She’s strong, Mom. Plus she’s got you here to protect her from all the books out there.”

Tilly just stared at her daughter and though that venomous stare still had much of its former potency, Sandra had developed an adult’s immunity to the look. Sandra started towards the door and Melinda, eavesdropping on the staircase around the corner, bolted as quietly as she could up the flight of stairs, taking them two at a time.

When her mom called up, “Bye, love you,” the girl responded, trying her best to hide her labored breath, “Love you.”

Melinda was strong but still struggled with all the loss, as anyone would. Her personal grieving process was burying herself deeper into her books and tearing through her immodest collection in no time at all. Were it not for her grandmother, the girl would likely have disappeared altogether into the world of fantasy, but never understanding that the make believe can help us to face the unreal.

Grandma Tilly and Melinda shared a love of stories and always got on better than the girl and her mother ever had. The two of them spent evenings and secret days off reading tales of all sorts, the girl always ecstatic to show her grandma some new book she was sure nobody knew of – rarities like The Wizard of Oz, or Lord of the Rings. They went exploring though the parks and would drive out to forest preserves looking for fairy tale cottages. Once they came upon an old stone dwelling which had burned down sometime in the distant past. Ignoring the blackened mattress springs and old magazines, Tilly explained to Melinda that the house had been the home of a great witch, but she had been chased by the townspeople and burned in the house. The girl enjoyed these stories so much that she thought of nothing else for a time, and that was good. Tilly was instrumental in helping the girl after she lost her father. Unfortunately when Tilly herself died a short time later, the girl’s mother was lost, gone, operating on a malfunctioning auto pilot. She left it up to Melinda’s books to get her through. But only Melinda’s books.

Bill always let his daughter take any book she wanted from his vast personal collection, but Sandra locked Bill’s office, saying nobody could touch his things, no not even his books. After her mother’s death, Sandra drowned herself in wine while Melinda buried herself in stories. They had a vast wine cellar in the basement but a limited library and long before the red ran dry, Melinda was out of things to read. So the girl started hunting for the forbidden text she’d heard her mother and grandma talking about.
She looked everywhere for it, only to find it hiding out in the open, beside her bed, on her very own bookshelf. Melinda assumed that her mother, in the drunken haze she’d been stumbling around in, found it and tossed it in with her collection. The young girl had long ago surpassed the literature of her age group and after falling in love with *The Shining*, Melinda became a horror aficionado and couldn’t find a book scary enough to suit her. She took on all the titles supposedly ‘too scary for kids’ and devoured all of them but was never satisfied. After all the hype and warnings even the most terrifying of tales – while delighting her – only left her craving one more terrifying. She itched to reach her limits, to see how much she could take. And here was the forbidden book of insanity and horror just waiting to be picked up.

The aged brown leather spine jutted out half an inch or so from the selections beside it, as though it were inviting her to indulge in its secrets, reaching out its hand and offering a forbidden dance. She hesitated for half a second, thinking of the genuine fear and concern she heard in Tilly’s voice that day in the kitchen and heard her grandma as clear as if she were standing beside her, whispering in her ear. *Keep her away from it...promise.* In the end temptation proved too great, so after checking to make sure her grandma wasn’t really there, Melinda reached out her hand and removed the book from the shelf.

She felt electricity surge up her arm. As she grasped the book, it felt alive, like some small creature writhing in her grip. The cover was faded brown and to Melinda’s touch – which was quite the seasoned one, despite her age – it felt as though it were made of some ancient leather, but none she’d ever encountered. The exquisite craftsmanship that showed in the book’s construction took the girl’s breath away. She was after all a book lover and this was by far the finest specimen she ever beheld, and it was not in a museum under protective glass but in her hands. The book’s binding was warm to the touch and for a moment, just a moment, Melinda felt ill holding it. It felt in that instant as though the book was crawling under her skin, latching on, fusing with her. Glimpses of eons gone by flashed before her, then she blinked and they were gone. All at once she wanted to tear this piece of literary art to shreds, to burn it and drown the ashes.

That was only for a moment though, and then the moment passed.

It was only then that Melinda noticed it was the back of the book she’d been looking down upon. She turned it over in her hands, loving the way the cover of cured flesh felt sliding over her own. *Pig skin*, she wondered. Close, but she somehow felt sure that wasn’t it. Embossed on the front of the thing in her hands was a strange symbol Melinda could not comprehend. She snuck one of her father’s Lovecraft books once and saw something similar drawn within. Before she had a chance to study it, the odd mark clearly became a word and she found she could not remember what had been there before.

Printed now upon the face of the book was a title consisting of a single word. It read only *The...*  

Her excitement was beyond measure as she opened the book to read the story of *The...* To gaze upon the ‘forbidden text’ in all its hideous glory. That thrill died the moment she looked upon the first yellowed page. Melinda opened her mouth in a silent protest of disbelief. The
whole thing had been a joke they were playing on her. They knew she was listening, they
must’ve. She began flipping through the soft thin pages one by one, but there was nothing
written upon any of them.

Melinda slumped down upon her bed with *The...* opened to its first page, wondering if
perhaps her mom had just slipped her a fake. That was when it happened. On the page, letters
began to appear. Her mouth dropped open again as she watched the letters populate the page,
spreading like a virus, forming first words and then whole paragraphs. Above where the first
sentence was still forming, the title appeared. Just below *The...* was printed, ‘by Melinda
Henderson’.

Melinda stood up on rubber legs and tried to let the book fall from her grasp, but it stuck
in her hands as though it were glued. She tried to close the book but found she couldn’t even do
that. All went quiet then, and a single voice began to speak inside the girl’s head in a language
that was ancient when man was grunting at one another over scraps of raw meat. Her gaze was
pulled to the first line and she was just about to start reading what was there, when her mother
smacked the book out of her hands and onto the floor.

She looked up at her mom in a daze and though she saw her mother yelling at her, all she
heard was a high-pitched tone. Somewhere below it, fainter now but still there, was the voice of
the book which now lay at her feet, the pages once again blank.

Her mother smacked her across the face, spilling some of the wine she was holding onto
the cream carpet. Melinda’s mom never struck her before, but as she stared at the purple droplets
sinking into the carpet she was glad she had. For as soon as she hit Melinda, it was as though the
girl’s head was cleared of cobwebs. The mutterings ceased, her ears popped and at once she was
able to hear her mother clearly again. She was yelling something about the book, snooping
around and stealing. Then she grabbed *The...* off the floor and stormed from the room, slamming
the door as she went.

Melinda collapsed on her bed and started crying. She hadn’t cried when her father died
and she had just started to accept he was really gone when she lost Tilly. None of it seemed real
to her, it was all too terrible and too familiar, like something out of some tragic book. She kept
waiting for the heroic part where things all turned around and were good again, like in the
stories, but somehow that smack had clarified it all – this was all really happening. So she buried
her face in her pillow and the dam burst.

She lay there in bed until the sunlight fled from the world.

Sandra was well drunk and smoking on the porch, trying to understand why her daughter
would have taken such trouble to get that book. She couldn’t figure out how Melinda even knew
about it. Since losing her mother, Sandra threw that ugly thing in the trash three times and each
time it kept ending up back in the house. She knew she’d been drinking more than normal –
things weren’t, after all, very normal – and until she caught Melinda red handed she’d started to
wonder if she was losing it, but now figured the girl was obviously fishing the book out of the
trash.
By sunset, Sandra had reached the reflective phase of her drunk and the more she thought about everything the more awful she felt for the way she’d treated her little girl. All over some stupid book. She thought, *They were always so much better with her, Mom was the only one able to get her to stop crying the day she was born and Bill was a natural from then on.* Then Sandra realized the girl just missed her grandma, and must have wanted something of hers. The girl did love old dusty things Sandra would’ve thrown away. What harm could it really do anyways? Plus, she wanted her daughter on her side, she was going to need all the help she could get.

A shiver went through Melinda when she heard the door shut behind her mother, followed by the familiar muted steps up the carpeted stairs. Her parent’s room, or rather her mother’s room, is just down the hall from the staircase. In order to get to Tilly’s old room you go up an extra two steps and the first one creaked, always giving Melinda just enough time to shut off the flashlight and tuck away her book. When the step groaned in protest the girl’s stomach let out a strange gurgle. Her eyes were closed but she felt her mother move across the room towards the bed, where she sat beside her daughter. After a few seconds, she whispered her name. Melinda had the blanket Tilly knitted for her over most of her head, but could still smell the alcohol on her mom’s breath. As her mom started to speak, Melinda just rolled over so that her back was to her.

“Okay, that’s okay, honey,” she said. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry and…and I know you miss them too. I love you, honey. We’ll get through this together, you, me, and your new little brother or sister.”

That was enough for the girl to forget her anger and turn to face her mother with wide eyes.

“Uh-huh,” she said, and then smiled.

Melinda thought of the quantities of wine her mother had been downing and said, “The wine, you-”

“It’s okay, honey. It’s just a little, and early on doesn’t matter anyway,” her mother said. “You’re fine, aren’t you?”

“I thought that makes babies retarded. That’s what they said happened to Chris Jacobs, that his mom-”

“Jesus Christ! That’s great, that’s just fucking great,” she said, as she stood. Looking down at her daughter she continued, “I’ve lost my husband and my mother in the last month, don’t I deserve some slack?!” She moved to the door.

“Sorry mom, I just…”

Without turning back, her mother said in a sturdy emotionless voice, “I left something for you on the bed.” Then she was gone, shutting the door behind her. The girl listened to her mom slump away.

Melinda looked down and saw the book. The voice in her head spoke up again, clearer and louder than before. She picked the book up and opened it. The words looked as though they had just been set down in fresh ink, yet when she rubbed her fingertip over the fine paper none smeared. She began to read.
Sandra stormed down the steps to the kitchen and refilled the freshly drained wine glass. “Jesus,” she said to the empty room.

Sandra hadn’t really wanted to have kids but Bill was set on it and all her friends had told her that she would just fall naturally into it, that it was in all of us. Nothing had ever materialized of their instinctual promise, and most of the time, especially in moments like this, she was adrift without a compass. Typically Bill would take over and help keep the peace. Failing that, Tilly would have calmed both her and Melinda down. Thinking on that seemed an invitation, for the memory came of finding her mother dead.

She came home from work early and discovered Tilly in the backyard, next to a plastic tub filled part way with acid she’d gotten from god knows where. She was lying beside the tub, face down. When Sandra turned her mom over, she saw the woman’s face was burned nearly beyond recognition, the skin washed away like wet newspaper, exposing scalded lidless eyes and dentures smiling a lipless smirk.

As Sandra threw up beside her mother’s corpse she saw the book was lying there in the grass beside the bucket, unscathed. That was the first time she threw it away. As they wheeled Tilly away, Sandra swore her mother’s white hair somehow appeared lighter.

Melinda’s scream bellowed so loud that Sandra jumped and dropped her wine glass, and then darted upstairs. The dead girl that was her daughter had always had her father’s dark hair, but the little cadaver frozen in a scream now had her grandma’s.

Sandra Henderson walked over and took the book from her dead daughter’s hands. She looked down upon a strange symbol which looked to her like a mix between Egyptian hieroglyphics and Greek letters, then it was gone and the title read only The... She’d never been very imaginative but she was now familiar with terror, and knew real horrors. She opened the book, and as the text was freshly inked, began to read.

Eight months later Thomas Henderson was born. He was called ‘the miracle baby born from tragedy’ in the local press. The baby born from a catatonic woman who’d lost her whole family. Thomas was born into humble celebrity, and after his mother died in childbirth, he was adopted by a well to do family in the Northeast.

On his first birthday a family heirloom, arrived for the young orphan. It was a small brown leather book and the message that came with it was written on old paper. The message read only, For Thomas Henderson.
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