

# THE UGLIES

By

Fred Wiehe

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**Producers, Agents, and Talent Managers can request to read the screenplay based on this story by contacting [fred@fredwiehe.com](mailto:fred@fredwiehe.com).**

Ellie Evans gasped, startled at the sudden thud. She looked up to see yolk and shattered eggshell splattered against the large picture window, yellow *blood* dribbling down the glass. Another thud at the front door immediately followed. Then two more egg bombs exploded against the outside wall.

Maybe she shouldn't have come home from college; the Halloween tradition she dreaded most had already begun, and it wasn't even dusk yet.

"Gran," Ellie called. She threw her magazine onto the coffee table and jumped to her feet.

Another egg found the picture window, adding to the yellow and white carnage already defiling the glass.

"Witch...witch...witch..."

Along with the eggs, a chorus of catcalls bombarded the house now.

"Witch...witch...witch..."

"Gran." Ellie hurried to the front door, long, auburn curls flowing behind her, pretty, pale face set into a grim pose as if chiseled into place by a tormented sculptor. She reached for the doorknob but hesitated when an egg smashed against the other side. Standing at the threshold, biting her lower lip until it bled, she anticipated the next round of egg bombs and listened to the unwarranted jeers outside her home.

"Stand aside, Ellie," Gran said.

As always, Ellie did as her grandmother instructed.

The old woman reached for the doorknob.

"Wait," Ellie warned, bringing her grandmother up short. "What if they still have eggs?"

Gran smiled but without humor. "It wouldn't be the first time I've been pelted with eggs...or worse." Loose strands of gray hair had escaped from the tight bun atop her head. She pushed them aside, revealing steely-blue eyes. "I

must put a stop to this. I must remind everyone that we should be celebrated and not scorned. That we are all that stands between them and destruction.”

“But they’re just kids.”

Gran nodded. “Kids repeating what they’ve heard at home.” Her careworn face hardened. “Their parents and their grandparents have forgotten. They need reminding. Everyone needs reminding.”

Without further argument, the old woman flung open the door. She stepped across the threshold and into the fray, undaunted by the taunts of the children and the eggs that splattered about her. She waved her frail arm as if it were a magic wand and cried, “Be gone.”

The children scattered like autumn leaves in a bitter wind, accusations of witchery still on their lips but quickly dying with retreat.

The old woman charged across the porch but stopped short at the top of the steps. A groan escaped her lips as she clutched her left arm. Peering skyward, she saw black clouds forming on the horizon. A flash of light illuminated the oncoming blackness as she toppled down the stairs.

Ellie screamed. She took out her cell phone, dialing 911 as she rushed outside and across the porch to her grandmother. “I need an ambulance,” she screeched into the phone.

The old woman reached out and dug long fingernails into her granddaughter’s arm. “It’s up to you now,” she croaked, an edge of agony to her rusty voice. “If only your mother was still here.”

“Gran,” Ellie begged. “Don’t leave me.”

“It’s up to you,” Gran repeated, releasing her grip, hand flopping onto the ground.

“Gran,” Ellie cried, tears bursting forth. She buried her face in her grandmother’s bosom. “Don’t leave me alone...”

But it did no good. And with the old woman’s dying breath, the storm above gathered.



On the outskirts of town, an ageless tree stood. Long, heavy branches reached out in all directions—leafless, gnarled and withered, bark peeling. An ugly, jagged scar marked the thick, twisted trunk where long ago there had once been a gaping wound. A small iron box was embedded within that scar, as if put there by magic.

Through the years, many strange tales swirled about town concerning the tree and the box—how the beautiful box came to be fixed within the tree trunk and the secrets the box held—each story more outlandish than the other, each varying in details, but each inevitably weaving itself back to the so-called witches who lived in town.

However, no one anymore truly feared the tree, the box, or any secrets they may have once held. Mostly, the tree had become a place where young people parked to be alone. A Ford Mustang was parked there now.

Overhead, the sky blackened. The atmosphere turned heavy, compressing

the air below, a warning against the oncoming downpour still miles above the earth. A bolt of lightning ripped a hole through the surrounding blackness, ramming the iron box held captive within the tree. A thunderous boom followed in hot pursuit.

The Mustang shook from the nearby blast. The couple's embrace broke. They both stared at each other, wide-eyed and breathless.

"What was that?" Maggie whispered.

Luke used the palm of his hand to clear a fogged window. The squeal of his hand on glass raised the hackles on the back of Maggie's neck. They both pressed faces to the window.

Outside, storm clouds and dusk darkened the landscape. Lightning flashed on the horizon. Far off, thunder rumbled.

"Lightning must've hit the tree," Luke guessed.

The tree again had a gaping hole, the edges scorched. Smoke lingered in the heavy air. The iron box lay open a few feet from the base of the tree, blackened and smoldering, the secrets that had been hidden inside lost forever.

A small, dark figure, not more than four feet tall, staggered through the growing darkness and the lingering smoke.

"Someone's out there," Maggie exclaimed. "I think it's a kid."

"It can't be a kid. What would a kid be doing out here all alone."

Maggie wiped away the returning fog, palm squealing against glass. "I tell you, it's a kid." She peered through the window. "We've gotta help him." She pounded Luke's shoulder with her fist. "Get out of the car. We've gotta help him."

"All right...stop hitting me."

Luke opened the door. The two scrambled out of the car but stopped short once outside.

A pungent odor of ozone hung in the still, heavy air. Lightning flashed, electricity igniting the night.

Luke and Maggie's hair stood on end. They held onto one another, neither of them sure now that getting out of the car was such a good idea.

The small, dark figure staggered toward them.

Maggie reached out a hand. "Don't be scared," she said. "We'll help you."

The figure stopped, answering Maggie with strange chittering sounds.

"Maggie, let's get back inside the car," Luke warned.

A second figure, just as small and dark, staggered out of the darkness. Another followed it, then another, more and more of them escaping through the gaping hole in the tree.

*Chitter...chitter...chitter...*

"Back inside the car," Luke repeated.

They stepped backwards, unwilling to turn their backs on these things.

The chittering grew louder and more rapid. Beady, red eyes blinked in the growing darkness. The leader exposed razor-sharp teeth and spread large, bat-like wings. The others followed suit.

Maggie screamed. Both she and Luke turned and ran toward the car. Luke

tripped and fell. Maggie made it to safety within the Mustang, slamming the door behind her.

The horde shrieked in unison. They took flight, pouncing on their helpless prey.

Luke squealed. He kicked his legs, flailed his arms, but to no avail. There were too many. The things tore into him, ripping flesh and sucking blood. Soon his squeal died. His legs and arms only moved with involuntary spasms.

Witnessing the carnage, Maggie locked the doors and screeched in horror. She screeched again as more of the large, bat-like creatures pounced on the car, skittered across the hood, roof, and trunk, searching for a way inside. Ugly, rodent-like faces pressed against the glass, peering at her from all sides with their beady, red eyes. The constant chittering, the sounds of claws and wings scraping along the car, wracked Maggie's nerves. She eyed the ignition in hopes of finding the keys hanging there. They weren't; Luke must've taken them with him.

Maggie swallowed back burning bile and was considering her options when without warning the creatures took flight. She scanned the landscape and the sky the best she could, seeing no sign of the horrid beasts. When lightning flashed overhead what she did see was Luke, lying motionless on the ground. He had to have the keys. Steeling herself, she reached for the door. But before she could make her move, something rammed the car.

Maggie cried out, piercing and shrill, holding on for dear life as time and again a large, winged creature dive-bombed her sanctuary, rocking it, denting it, cracking glass, until finally the windshield shattered and they were on her.



Ellie sat on the sofa, tears and anguish marring her pretty face. Sobs choked her throat. Her hands fought with balled-up wads of Kleenex. Outside, lightning mixed with flashing red lights as the county coroner took away her grandmother's body.

Deputy-Sheriff James Steady sat on the sofa next to her. "I'm so sorry, El," he whispered.

A far-off peel of thunder answered.

Ellie stared at nothing, mute, trembling hands wrestling with the tissue.

"Those kids," the deputy continued, "they had no right taunting her the way they did, calling her a witch."

Ellie turned and eyed the man sitting next to her as if he were a stranger. But he was no stranger. The sight of his handsome face, brown eyes, and dark, wavy hair still made her heart jump just like when they dated in high school. "Jimmy," she said, "they had no right taunting her for what she was...but Gran was a witch." Choking back a sob, she pushed auburn curls from her face and wiped away tears.

Jim shook his head. "Don't talk like that, El. Your grandmother was a sweat, old lady...nothing more."

Ellie squared her shoulders and gave the deputy a hard look. "Jim Steady, you know better. You didn't want to admit it to yourself when we dated in high

school and apparently you still don't."

Jim looked away.

"It was the rumors that broke us up," Ellie insisted. "You didn't say so, but I knew it was true."

"El, I didn't—"

"It's okay," Ellie interrupted, "I understood...sort of." She shrugged. "But when you asked me out again, I assumed you'd come to terms with it." Now Ellie looked away. "I guess we should've talked about it before we made..." Her voice trailed off.

Jim reached for Ellie's hand.

She pulled it away.

"I hope you're not sorry," Jim whispered, "because I'm not."

Ellie looked Jim in the eye. "You're not sorry you love a witch?" she asked pointblank.

Before Jim could answer, what sounded like a sonic boom resounded through town and shook the small house.

Ellie jumped to her feet, ran to the window. "It's started," she cried.

Jim leapt up and followed, stopping behind her, peering through the window at the growing darkness. "What was that? What's started?"

Ellie didn't answer. "Take me to the tree," she said.



Headlights on bright, spotlight lit, the police cruiser pulled up behind a wrecked vehicle.

Ellie gasped at the sight of the Ford Mustang: All four tires were flat. All the windows were shattered. The body of the car appeared to have been slammed repeatedly with a sledgehammer.

"My God," Jim exclaimed. "What happened?"

Ellie had no answer. Instead, she asked, "Can you move the spotlight onto the tree?"

Jim did as she requested.

The tree had been split open, edges burned. A few feet away, a dark figure in ripped clothes was sprawled on the ground, looking like a discarded scarecrow, the stuffing stomped out of it. A few feet from that lay the iron box.

This confirmed Ellie's deepest fears; the death of her grandmother had broken the spell. "They're free," she murmured.

"I need to get out and investigate," Jim said, as if he hadn't heard Ellie's dreaded words. "El, I want you to stay put."

Ellie gathered herself, steeled her nerves. "Not on your life." She opened her door and climbed out.

Jim sighed, opened his door, and followed suit. They both first approached the stomped scarecrow. But the biting odor of death warned them that they wouldn't find remnants of straw.

Still, Ellie had to stifle a cry, the spotlight revealing every gory detail of the ravaged corpse. She held a hand over her mouth and nose, tears forming in her

eyes as she watched flies and other bugs feed on what little flesh remained. “Who is it?” she choked.

The deputy shook his head. “Not enough left of him to tell. It looks as if animals have been feeding for days.”

Ellie knew that nothing natural had done this and that it hadn’t been days either.

Jim continued, “No one’s filed a missing person’s report recently, though.”

*This happened only thirty minutes ago*, Ellie thought, *maybe less*. She scanned her surroundings, fighting an instinctual urge to flee. She thought of warning Jim but decided he’d never believe her, not without evidence. So, for the time being, she kept quiet but alert.

Jim went to the Mustang, still illuminated within the police cruiser’s headlights. He inspected the beaten car inside and out. “There’s no one inside,” he said, “but there’s blood.” He walked to the back of the Mustang and checked the license plate. “I’ll run the number on the computer.”

While Jim did that, Ellie stumbled to the tree, legs wobbly underneath her, still acutely aware that one or more of the things could still be hiding somewhere close. She examined the cavernous hole, glancing about with a nervous eye as she did so. Although seemingly impossible, the hole looked to go on forever—back and then down, as if it were a tunnel leading to perdition.

*And maybe it was*, Ellie thought, *for the things now loose upon this world were certainly born of Hell*.

Shivering, gooseflesh scampering across her skin like the bugs on that corpse, Ellie turned away. She tiptoed around the dead man—as if not to disturb his sleep—to the blackened and damaged iron box. It lay at her feet, opened and empty. She bent over to pick the box up but stopped short.

*Chitter...chitter...*

She stood, straining to hear, turning in circles, scanning her surroundings for the source of the strange noise. But she could see nothing lurking outside the light.

Then the noise stopped. In fact, the night had fallen deathly silent—no more thunder, no pitter-patter of raindrops, no insects, no night animals. The air hung heavy and still around her.

*Chitter...chitter...*

Ellie’s breath caught in her throat. Her heart slammed against her ribcage. At least one of the escapees from Hell had remained behind. It now stalked her, she felt it. She glanced toward the police cruiser. Jim remained inside, safe. Continuing to scan her surroundings, she hunkered down and blindly picked up the iron box. She clutched it to her breast, stood, and crept toward the police cruiser, trying to remain at least outwardly calm.

*Chitter...chitter...*

A shadow moved across the lighted area as if a giant bird flew overhead.

Ellie dared not look skyward but could no longer pretend ignorance, could no longer maintain composure. A scream escaped her lips as she fled toward the

car. Within only a few frantic steps, her stalker dropped out of the sky, pouncing on her as a hawk springs on a field mouse. Pain seized her neck and shoulder, sharp claws digging into her flesh. Crashing to the ground face first, a mouthful of dirt stifled her screams. She kicked and flailed as the thing dragged her along the ground.

Once outside the light, the thing collapsed on top of her. It folded its wings and wrapped them around her like a protective cocoon. But it offered no protection, only death as its dagger-like teeth ripped through her shirt and struck flesh.

In her mind, Ellie screamed and fought back. But in reality, with her face pressed into the dirt, with the thing weighing down on her and pinning her within its membranous wings, she couldn't move or make a sound.

Muffled gunfire struck the night. On top of her, the thing convulsed. More gunfire followed. Teeth mercifully left her flesh. A shriek shattered her hearing. Wings released their grip. More gunfire hit the night. The thing rolled away, its shrieks turning to wails. One more shot and the night again fell deathly quiet and still.

Ellie raised her head, spitting and coughing up dirt. She rolled onto her back, tried to sit up. The pain pushed her back down. Clutching her neck and shoulder, her hand found wetness—warm and sticky.

“El,” Jim hollered. He ran to her, squatted beside her, and helped her into a sitting position.

Ellie groaned and coughed. Although her hand still applied pressure to the wound, blood flowed freely through her fingers.

Jim brushed dirt-caked curls out of Ellie's face. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he placed it over the wound.

Ellie winced.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you.”

Ellie blinked away dirt. “You saved me.”

Jim pulled the blood-soaked handkerchief away. “Not yet, we better get you to a hospital.”

Ellie shook her head. “No.”

“El, you could bleed to—”

“No,” Ellie insisted. “Don't you have a first aid kit in the car?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Get it. Stop the bleeding.”

Jim hurried off. He returned, setting the first aid kit on the ground. Hunkering down, he dressed the wound. “What was that thing?”

Ellie flinched and grimaced. “An Ugly,” she answered, seeing no reason to hold back, the proof of her claim lying dead just a few feet away. “At least that's what Gran called them.”

Jim hesitated. He shook his head. “I've heard the story. But that's all it is—a scary story. There's no such thing.” He finished and closed the kit.

“See for yourself,” Ellie said. She put an arm around Jim's neck.

Jim stood, helping Ellie to her feet. Holding onto each other, they both stumbled toward the hideous corpse and the pool of blood that surrounded it.

“Does that look like just a story?”

Jim shivered at the sight. “Where’d it come from?”

Ellie shook her head. “I don’t know. Gran didn’t even know. They swooped out of the sky and attacked the town one night when Gran was just a girl. It was her mother’s magic that imprisoned them in the tree.”

“They? How many are there?”

“I don’t know.”

“How’d they get out? What happened to the magic spell?”

Ellie almost choked as she answered, “Gran died.”

“But when your grandmother’s mom died the magic still held.”

“That’s because by then Gran’s magic was as strong as her mother’s, and as her mother lay dying, Gran came to the tree and performed a ceremony. My mother should’ve been next in line to hold the magic spell.”

“But she died when you were just a girl,” Jim murmured.

Ellie nodded. She grimaced, pain shooting through her neck, throbbing into the back of her head. “And I was unprepared.”

Jim pulled Ellie closer. “You can’t blame yourself for your grandmother dying so suddenly.”

“We should’ve been ready,” Ellie explained, tears soaking her dirt-smudged face. “We weren’t because college was more important to me than my craft or protecting the town.” Suddenly, the young woman’s vision blurred. Her world spun. She barely kept her feet, leaning on Jim ever more heavily.

“We’ve got to get you to a doctor,” Jim warned. “That bandage is almost soaked through. There must’ve been some kind of anticoagulant in that thing’s saliva.”

Ellie shook her aching head, pulled herself up straight, and steadied herself. “No time. I’ve got to put those things back.”

“How?”

“I need the iron box.”

“I’ll get it.” Cautiously, Jim released his grip.

Ellie swayed but remained standing as she waited.

When he returned, Jim asked, “Now what?”

“Now we need salt, holy water, and dirt from consecrated ground.”



After changing the blood-soaked bandage, the two raced off on their quest. Ellie’s house was their first stop, where they were sure to find salt.

But they also found a town under siege. The large, bat-like creatures bombarded houses—shattering windows, breaking down doors, crashing through roofs. People ran from their homes. Screams echoed through the streets. The creatures pounced on their prey. There was no place to hide. No one was safe.

Jim drove the police cruiser across the lawn, skidding to an abrupt stop in front of the porch. Grabbing the shotgun mounted to the dashboard, he pumped



a round into the chamber. He took the pistol from his holster and held it out to Ellie. “I’ll give you cover. Get inside...get the salt.”

Ellie nodded. Reluctantly, she took the pistol, understanding the need to protect herself.

With the car still running, they both vaulted into the night. Ellie almost fell, somehow kept her feet. An Ugly swooped down. Jim opened fire, hitting it twice. The thing shrieked. It fell from the sky, a hard thud. Ellie staggered up the steps, into the house. She stumbled to the kitchen, gunfire outside booming much like the thunder had earlier. She found the salt easily enough, plus a small, glass vial, stuffing it into her pocket.

Retracing her steps, the house began to spin. Warm and wet, blood trickled down her back and her arm, the bandage no longer holding it at bay. Consciousness started slipping away. But somehow she managed to maneuver on unsteady feet to the front door.

Outside, war had broken out. Jim’s shotgun boomed. More gunfire echoed throughout the town, other people having gotten out their guns and joining the battle.

But Ellie knew there were too many Ugliers and not enough townspeople with guns to kill all the foul things. She needed to hurry, despite weakening from loss of blood. Back at the car, she slumped in her seat, slamming the door.

Jim got off one more round before getting back behind the wheel. He reversed the car across the lawn and onto the street, tires squealing as they hit pavement. The tires squealed again as the car lurched forward, rocketing down the street in a cloud of smoke.

Sitting beside him, Ellie moaned.

“El, you okay?”

“Just drive,” Ellie whispered. “Get me to the church.”

They drove in silence, mesmerized by the pandemonium outside their windows. Gunfire still echoed in the night. But most people were just running for their lives. Winged creatures swooped out of the black sky, taking victims down, feeding at will.

Jim hit the gas. With emergency lights flashing, the police cruiser zoomed down the street, swerving around fleeing pedestrians and speeding cars alike. When the car skidded to a stop outside the church, Jim grabbed the shotgun. He loaded shells and pumped a round into the chamber. “Let’s do it,” he said.

They both immediately hurled themselves into harm’s way. Jim’s shotgun boomed. Ellie clutched the pistol in her blood-drenched hand as she hurried up the church steps. Pure adrenaline kept her conscious, kept her moving. She rushed through the door, pulled out the vial, and immersed it into holy water.

But as she capped the vial and turned to leave, she heard that same awful sound she’d heard out by the tree, before being attacked.

*Chitter...chitter...*

She whirled around, brought the pistol up, blindly fired. The report echoed through the church. The recoil almost knocked her off her feet. She screamed in

pain. Blood dribbled from her gun hand to the floor.

The thing scrambling toward her shrieked. Blood gushed from its chest. It stumbled in its advance but kept coming.

Ellie braced herself, took better aim, and fired. Her own scream of pain equaled the creature's wail. But in the end Ellie remained standing. The Ugly lay dead in the aisle.

Ellie turned away, staggering from the church like a drunk on a binge. She made it down the steps and collapsed onto the pavement.

"El, hurry," Jim hollered, shotgun booming.

Ellie climbed to her feet, the world around her spinning, her mind swimming. She shuffled to the car, fell into it, and slammed the door.

Jim jumped in next. The car rocketed away, swerving, tires squealing.

Ellie closed her eyes and trusted herself to the deputy's driving skills. Consciousness fought her every second of the way. Drifting in and out, aware but not aware, the world around her was nothing but loud noises and darkness. Before she knew it, the car lurched to an abrupt stop.

"El, we're here." Jim gave her a gentle nudge.

Ellie moaned. Opening her eyes, her blurred vision focused on Jim, noticing the nasty gash across his forehead. "You okay?" she whispered.

Jim didn't answer. Instead he said, "I better change that bandage."

Ellie nodded. "Jimmy, do it fast. We're running out of time."

Jim retrieved the first aid kit. He cleaned and dressed the wound the best he could. "El, you stay put and let me get the dirt."

"No—"

"El, you need to save your strength for the ceremony." Jim turned on the spotlight and scanned the graveyard. "There's no sign of the creatures. I'll only be a minute."

Ellie knew she should finish the task herself. She knew she shouldn't let Jim go in her stead. But he was right. She needed to conserve energy. The ceremony would take all her strength. "Okay," she agreed, "but be careful. Take the iron box. Fill it about a third full."

Jim grabbed the box. "Be right back. You hang on, El. We're almost finished." He climbed out of the car, took three steps toward the cemetery, and froze.

*Chitter...chitter...*

It came from behind. He whirled toward the sound.

One of the horrid creatures perched itself on the roof of the police cruiser. It shrieked and spread bat-like wings.

Jim reached for his holster. Empty; he'd given the pistol to Ellie and foolishly left the shotgun in the car.

Razor-sharp teeth bared, the Ugly launched itself at Jim. Both man and beast hit the ground as one. The creature wrapped wings around its prey, ripped into flesh, feasted on free-flowing blood.

The commotion outside the car woke Ellie from a semiconscious state. She

jerked upright, scanning her surroundings. Within the harsh glare of the spotlight, she saw Jim and one of the creatures in mortal combat.

“Jimmy!” Ellie screamed.

Adrenalin shot through her. She scrambled out of the car. Clutching the pistol in her sticky, blood-stained hand, she ran toward the battle. She fired, screaming in both pain and horror. She hit the thing square in the back, but it refused to release its hold on Jim. Skidding to a stop over the two combatants, she took careful aim and again fired. The creature’s head blew apart, skull cracking open like an egg, gory yolk of brain tissue and blood splattering the air and ground.

With her foot, Ellie shoved the thing away. She hunkered down, desperate to see Jim’s handsome face. But what she saw sickened her. She turned away, retching and heaving. After emptying her insides, she dared not look again but forced herself to check for a pulse. She found none.

The iron box rested a few feet from the dead. Ellie choked back her grief, wiping away tears as she stood. Scooping up the box, she stumbled through the cemetery, determined to complete the mission. At a gravesite, she dropped to her knees and clawed with her fingers at the sod, dumping into the box clumps of hallowed ground.



The police cruiser crashed into the banged-up Mustang. Ellie spilled out. She staggered toward the tree, dropped to her knees, and laid out everything in front of her. She first poured a ring of salt around herself for protection. After opening the iron box, she poured the remaining salt in with the sacred dirt.

She chanted, “*Aboon dabashmaya, nethkadash shamak. Tetha malkoothak. Newe tzevyanak aykan dabashmaya.*”

Overhead, lightning flashed. Thunder boomed.

She poured in the holy water then slammed the lid shut.

“*Af bara hav lan lakma dsoonkanan. Yamana washbook lan kavine aykana daf.*”

Nature’s strobe light lit the night sky. Rapid-fire thunder bombs exploded all around. A multitude of shrieks echoed above it all. The swarm of Ugliers covered the night sky like fast-moving storm clouds.

Bleeding, barely hanging onto life, Ellie raised both arms to the heavens. “*Hanan shabookan lhayavine oolow talahn lanesyana. Ela fatsan men beesha.*”

With that, the swarm dive-bombed past her like guided missiles, back through the cavernous hole in the tree from hence they came. When the last of the horrid creatures entered the hollow tree, she picked up the iron box and threw it after them. The tree miraculously healed itself, a scar appearing where seconds ago there’d been a gaping hole. Embedded in that scar was the iron box.

Ellie collapsed, everything going black.



Twenty years later, Ellie lay dying, riddled with cancer. Her daughter Jamie sat at her bedside, keeping vigil.

“Jamie,” Ellie croaked, “there’s not much time...go to the tree...perform the ceremony.”

Jamie pushed back auburn curls and wiped away free-flowing tears. “I want to stay here with you, Mama.”

“You must be strong, Jamie. Go to the tree now, before it’s too late.”

Jamie stood. “I love you, Mama.”

Ellie gazed into her daughter’s face for the last time. “I love you, dear. Now go, make your father and me proud.”

Jamie turned away, rushing to her destiny.

Black storm clouds gathered overhead. Lightning flashed. Thunder rumbled. On the outskirts of town, the tree stood, withered and twisted.

And the Uglies waited for another chance at freedom.

THE END