
THE COLD SPOT
JG Faherty

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This book is dedicated to anyone who's ever been the outcast or felt left out, bullied, or laughed at. Don't let the pain you feel now shape your life in a negative way. Instead, show them you're stronger by using it as motivation to make something great of yourself.

Acknowledgements

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Clay Daniels sat up in his bed, his hair plastered in sweaty clumps against his forehead, and pressed his hands over his mouth to stifle a scream. He looked back and forth in the chilly room, certain he'd find the monster from his dreams waiting for him in the dark room. When nothing moved, and no glowing eyes appeared, he took three slow, deep breaths and lowered himself back onto his pillow.

Just a nightmare, he told himself. The same one he'd been having all week, the one with the *thing* in it, the thing that looked like one of the corpses they find every week on *CSI* or *Bones*.

You're just nervous about starting a new school.

Of course, the fact that the horrible creature in his dream had been pulling itself from a grave had obvious meaning, too, but Clay tried not to think about that.

Instead, he stared at the ceiling and waited for the sun to make its daily appearance, same as he had every morning since arriving at his aunt and uncle's house.

* * *

Clay pushed open the door and ran down the sidewalk as fast as he could, wishing he could fly, or run like the Flash, so he could put even more distance between himself and Oakwood's only public school. Even with the noise of his new shoes slapping the pavement, and his heart pounding so hard the *thump-thump* of his pulse boomed like gunfire in his ears, he could still hear the voices of his new schoolmates.

"Hey, retard! Did you take the short bus to school?"

"Is Clay your name or what your head is made of?"

"Hey, kid! You got shit on your face!"

And, of course, the worst one of all, even though he'd expected it, had lived with it all his life.

"Hey, Spot! Wanna play fetch?"

It had taken them four periods to come up with the same old name that had haunted him as far back as he could remember. Four periods — that was actually longer than he'd expected, a sure sign the local educational system was on a level with Piehole's. In other words, a

high percentage of paste eaters. As he sprinted down the sidewalk, unmindful of the tears streaming down his face, he wondered how he managed to keep ending up in schools overrun by masochistic dullards.

It was more than a mile from the school to the house where he now lived with his aunt and uncle, and their three children, and Clay never stopped running until he was through the gate and past the broken-down swing-set that occupied one corner of the big backyard.

Only when the grass changed from neatly mown to tall and wild did he allow his body to collapse to the cold ground, where he lay on his back panting like a wild animal, his breath sending steaming clouds into the brisk November air.

Colored spots danced in Clay's vision as he struggled to fill his lungs with air. For a moment he thought he might pass out. He'd never run so far in one stretch in his whole life, not even the previous year when he'd tried out for track. Coach had made them run a lot, but he'd also let them catch their breath between sprints.

As the swirling colors gradually faded away, Clay found himself staring at the sky, where mean-looking gray clouds were slowly blotting out the deep blue. He couldn't remember ever seeing clouds like that before; back home in Piehole, Florida the clouds had always seemed friendly, even when a storm was coming in. They might be big and black and ready to dump a shitload of water, but it was always so hot he'd never minded a storm. Of course, hurricanes were another story, but even then the clouds hadn't looked so… cold. It was like the New York clouds were the same as the people, nasty and uncaring.

Something moved at the edge of the forest but he ignored it. Although he'd only been living in Oakwood for a couple of weeks, he'd already seen how the deer and other woodland creatures liked to skirt the edges of the woods as they foraged for food.

A chill from the damp ground worked its way through his clothes and set him to shivering. He wrapped his arms around himself to ward off the sudden cold. The wind picked up, shaking the trees with invisible hands and filling the air with a *shushing* sound that should

have seemed serene but instead reminded him of the way his mother had always tried to soothe him whenever the other kids would make fun of him.

I hate them! They're mean and stupid and I hate them!

Shhh, honey. They just don't know any better. Once they get to know you, things will be different.

But things hadn't changed. Not in Piehole, and not here in Oakwood, either.

Hey, Spot!

Go fetch, Spot!

See Spot run!

"Why can't they just leave me alone!" Clay slammed his fists onto the damp soil.

Shhh, Clay. You don't pay them no mind.

"I'm not Clay," he whispered to his mother's memory. "I'm Spot. You know it. I know it. Now everyone here knows it, too."

Across the field, the back door to the new home he was stuck with opened and his aunt stepped outside, her bright orange housecoat doing a fine imitation of a flag in the rising wind. "Clay? Clay?"

The stiff breeze captured Aunt Sally's voice and tossed it around like a kite, so that it alternately sounded close by and then far away.

The fact that she was calling for him in the middle of a school day meant someone—either his teacher or the principal—had phoned her to say he'd run off. He stifled a groan; he knew he was in store for another one of Uncle Roy's lectures on how things were run in the Martin household. Followed by the inevitable twittering laughter and snide comments from Tammi, Bud, and Kelly, his three lousy excuses for cousins.

"Screw it." He'd get the same lecture whether he went in now or four hours from now. Might as well try to enjoy part of the day first.

Back in Piehole, he'd always enjoyed wandering around the trailer park, and it was no different here. In fact, one of his few remaining sources of pleasure was exploring the fields and woods that extended for miles behind the old farmhouse. The trees and animals were so

different from what he was used to in Florida—back home, the only wildlife that ever ventured into the trailer park were stray cats, the occasional raccoon or skunk, and fat squirrels that made a living begging from the old folks. And the animals he thought of as common— frogs, snakes, turtles—hardly ever made an appearance in the perpetually cool woods of upstate New York.

Sure would be a surprise to see an alligator right now, he thought, making his way towards the tree line, where his aunt couldn't see him.

If I saw an alligator, I'd bring it to school with me. Then no one would dare make fun of me, or they'd be 'gator food.

Of course, Clay knew he wouldn't see an alligator. He might not be a genius, but he knew 'gators didn't come this far north.

Now a maybe a bear—

Clay paused as another flash of white caught his eye. This time he thought maybe it wasn't a deer, after all. Something about the brief glimpse of movement seemed…human, a subconscious impression of an upright figure with arms and legs.

But who would be out in the woods in the middle of the day?

"Hello? Who's there?"

It could be a hunter, even though hunting season didn't officially start for another month. Bud had told him that sometimes the locals went out and jacked deer, hoping to bag a fat buck before they all moved deeper into the forest in mid-November.

But the figure hadn't seemed that tall.

Maybe another kid ditching school?

"Hey!" he yelled, stepping between the first trees. The branches of the closely-spaced birches scraped at his clothes. Once into the forest proper, the trees—now mostly elms and maples, with a scattering of pine—grew farther apart and stood taller, their leaves blocking the light and preventing the scrub trees and underbrush from getting a foothold.

More movement, this time only a few yards away. A boy with blond hair and a black concert T-shirt stepped out from behind a tree, one more shadow in the gloom cast by the interwoven branches and

the darkening sky above them. He looked to be only a couple of years older than Clay's thirteen. Like Clay, he was thin and rather short for his age.

"Hey," the boy said. He took a few steps forward, close enough for Clay to see Ted Nugent scrawled across the front of his shirt in red letters. "Who're you?"

"Clay. I live over there. With the Martins." He nodded his head in the general direction of his uncle's house.

"I'm John," the boy said.

"You from Oakwood?" Clay asked.

"Yeah."

Clay stared at him. John didn't look familiar, but considering Clay was the new kid in school, that wasn't surprising.

Especially if he ditched out today, dumb ass, Clay told himself. Aloud he said, "What're you doing in the woods?"

John shrugged. "Nothin'. We're just hangin' out."

"We?" Clay looked around.

"Yeah. Some of my friends are here, too. Off in the woods someplace, fuckin' around. You know how it is."

"Yeah." Clay nodded, pretending he knew how it was to fuck around with friends, *real* friends, instead of the family dog or his parents.

And now I can't even fuck around with them.

The sudden reminder brought tears to his eyes before he could stop them. He wiped them away on his sleeve, hoping the other boy hadn't noticed, but it was too late.

"What's the matter with you?" John asked. His expression seemed part curious and part bored, as if he was only asking because there was nothing better to do.

For a second, Clay thought the boy was referring to the palm-sized port wine stain on his cheek that had earned him his hated nickname. The purple blemish that was the bane of his existence, the reason he hated every waking moment of his life.

Then he realized John meant his tears.

"Nothin'." He meant to stop there, but the words, like the salty

drops preceding them, burst free with no thought of the consequences. “My parents…they’re dead. A fire. I wasn’t home, I’d gone to the store to buy comic books. When I came home, it was too late. Even my dog…Now I’m living with my aunt and uncle, and I hate them.”

John shook his head. “That sucks. When did it happen?”

The tears were flowing unchecked now, uncaring about the color of the flesh they crawled down. “Two weeks.”

“Man, that’s like, totally shitty.”

Just then, the sun found a tiny break in the clouds, creating a spotlight beam of golden yellow that pierced the canopy of autumn leaves and cut a tunnel through the forest’s gloom.

The glowing shaft angled down between the two boys and touched John’s arm.

Which disappeared.

Clay stared at the spot where John’s arm had been. There was no stump, no bloody bone sticking out, just a black circle right below the elbow. He felt a scream forming in his chest, but before his lungs could power it, the clouds closed ranks, the heavenly spotlight disappeared, and John’s arm returned, intact and unmarked, his hand still resting against a tree as if it had never disappeared in the first place.

With a rueful expression, John pulled his arm back and winked with one blue eye. “Sorry about that. You know how it is.”

Clay tried to say something, but even though his mouth opened, no words came out. A trickle of hot liquid dribbled down his leg to his sock. He took a step backwards, his mind filled with the screams that remained locked in his chest, and tripped over a broken branch. Right before he hit the ground, John jumped forward and grabbed him with a strong hand.

“Watch yourself, dude,” John said, pulling Clay back onto his feet. As John’s body passed through the light, a vertical section disappeared and then returned, as if he’d been split by a laser and miraculously healed himself.

“Don’t touch me!” Clay yanked his arm free, not caring that his

voice had taken on a hysterical pitch. He turned and started running for the field, wanting only to get away from *– the ghost! He's a ghost! –* the woods and the apparition
haunting them.

"Clay, wait!"

Something in the spectral boy's voice brought Clay's feet to a stop, even as his mind shouted at him to keep going, to run away as fast he could.

"I know you're scared," the human-sounding voice said. "But you don't have to be. We're…we're not that different. We like to pal around and have a good time. You don't have to be one of us to be our friend."

Without looking back, Clay shook his head. "No!" He started towards the edge of the trees again, this time controlling the urge to run.

"Okay. But if you change your mind, we'll be here."

Clay kept up his fast walk, never looking back until he left the woods and stood in the comparatively bright light of the cloudy day, a wide space of tall grass separating him from the nearest trees.

Nothing moved inside the gloomy, dark forest. No faces peered out at him, no voices called his name.

He was alone.

Did I imagine it? Was I dreaming? He placed a hand over his heart, which was still beating double time. The idea that he'd seen a ghost seemed pretty farfetched, but imagining such a thing wasn't like him, either. Even though he'd spent most of his childhood playing alone, he'd always been more the practical type, the kind of kid who enjoyed a good book about snakes or birds or even baseball rather than a ghost story or scary movie. The only daydream he'd ever had was that one day he'd wake up and his face would look like everyone else's. When it never came true, he'd given up wishing for anything.

A hand came down on Clay's shoulder and this time the scream burst from his throat without a problem. He jumped away, fully expecting to see the ghost named John looming behind him.

Instead, Aunt Sally stood there, an angry look on her face. "Clay

Daniels, what the hell are you doing out here when you should be in school? Do you know how embarrassing it is to get a phone call from the principal, telling me you ran off between classes?"

"The other kids were teasing me," he said, feeling fresh tears blossoming in his eyes.

Sally put her hands on her hips and stared at him. "Get used to it. That's the way teenagers are. You're the new kid in school. You'll get teased for a few weeks, and then they'll find someone else to pick on."

"It wasn't because I'm the new kid, Aunt Sally. It's because…" He touched a finger to his face, unable to say the words.

His aunt shrugged. "Maybe that's so. But it'll still blow over. This week they're making fun of your face. Next week it'll be the boy who picks his nose, or the fat girl in the back of the class. It's always someone. And no matter how much they tease you, it's still no excuse for skipping school. Now get a move on. You're going to help me with housework the rest of the day. And when your uncle gets home, I'm sure he'll have some things to say as well."

Clay wanted to curse at her, tell her she didn't know what she was talking about, but he kept his mouth shut. What good would it do? His new guardians couldn't control their own dysfunctional children; what made him think they'd understand his special problems?

So instead, he clamped his lips shut tight and retreated to his bedroom, where he closed his door and buried his face in his pillow so his aunt wouldn't hear him crying.

* * *

Uncle Roy's lecture went pretty much just as Clay had figured it would.

"Boy, I don't know where you got the idea that going to school is an option. It ain't. Just 'cause you been through some tough times don't mean you can take advantage of the situation to do as you please. You're livin' in our house now, which means you follow our rules. And that means gettin' your ass out of bed tomorrow morning

and marching yourself right back to school."

Roy had walked out before Clay could respond, to commence his daily after-work ritual: sitting in his easy chair and reading the paper while Sally cooked dinner and set the table. After his usual three servings, he'd return to his recliner, belly bulging, and watch whatever ball game happened to be on. Baseball, football, basketball, hockey—it didn't matter to Roy, as long as it involved athletes competing against each other. If for some mystical reason no sports were on TV, he'd retreat to his den, where he'd turn on the all sports talk radio station and read the latest issue of Guns & Ammo.

Clay's pulse was still pounding an angry beat in his temples when his cousin Bud walked in without knocking.

"Hey, little man. Heard you got caught ditching school today. Way to go, buttwipe."

"Shut up," Clay muttered, turning away. He could still see Bud's reflection in the window, the older boy's smile somehow just as greasy as his long, unkempt hair.

"Fuck you, cuz." Bud started to say something else, but his cell phone filled the room with the first few chords of Graveworm's 'Living Nightmare.' Bud flipped his middle finger at Clay as he left the room. "Smell ya later, Spot."

By the time Clay turned around to yell at his cousin, Bud was out of sight, heading down the hall to his own room. Clay caught himself just before he shouted something anyway; the only thing *that* would accomplish would be another lecture from his uncle and a knuckle sandwich from Bud.

He called me Spot. *He's too stupid to have thought of it himself. In all the years I've known him he never said it. That means everyone at school must be saying it, not just the kids in my class.* Clay figured one of Bud's friends must have told him, because Bud rarely showed up at school anymore. Both he and his teachers preferred it that way.

"Kids!" Aunt Sally's voice reverberated through the house. "Dinner's ready."

The slam of the back door told Clay that Bud was skipping dinner again. Most nights he went out with his friends, a group of class-A

delinquents who spent their free time down at Al's Garage, drinking beer and working on their cars.

Heavy footsteps clumped down the hall. That would be Kelly, who had the misfortune to have inherited her father's rotund build. On top of that, she was terminally depressed; she wore nothing but black and spent all her free time in her room listening to dirge-like music from bands with friendly names like Draconis, Magnum Carnage, and Ostia. She trudged past Clay's room without even glancing at him. Since he'd moved in, he'd only heard her speak on rare occasions, and then only in brief, monosyllabic spurts. She still managed to annoy him, however. The thin wall between their rooms did nothing to muffle her constant typing on the computer until all hours of the morning.

Clay slowly rose from the bed and made his way to the kitchen. Beside's Bud's, there was another empty seat. Tammi Martin spent less time at home than her brother, sometimes only appearing long enough to shower, change her clothes, and head out again. Neither Roy or Sally seemed to notice the way their seventeen-year-old daughter disappeared every night. If they did, they didn't care.

Clay had a good idea what Tammi was up to when not at home. He'd seen through his window how a different boy in a different car picked her up each night. At school, she could usually be found behind the building, smoking a joint while some guy slid his hand up her sweater or down her pants.

But I'm *the one who gets in trouble,* he thought, dragging himself to the table. *It's like I'm the one who died, and I came back as Cinder-freaking-rella.*

Aunt Sally placed a big pot of stew in the center of the table and started ladling it into everyone's bowls.

"So," she said to Kelly. "How was your day?"

Kelly looked at her mother, her eyes hidden in a dark raccoon mask of black eye shadow. "Fine." She returned her glance to her bowl and spooned up a big mouthful of stew.

Uncle Roy remained silent, his attention focused on his meal, his hand robotically bringing one spoonful after another to his mouth.

Clay thought back to the dinners he used to have with his family; his mother chatting happily about her day, his father laughing over something funny that happened at work. Peppy, his beagle, would be sitting by his feet, waiting for something to fall from Clay's fork.

At the time, he'd thought life sucked because of the constant teasing he received at school, and because his parents were too poor to pay for the laser treatments the doctors said might help fix his face.

He hadn't known how bad things could be.

As soon as he finished his meal, he asked to be excused. Uncle Roy flicked his gaze up from his second bowl and then back down again in wordless dismissal. Kelly shot Clay a look of pure disgust, as if he'd broken some cardinal rule by being polite. Aunt Sally at least had the good grace to respond.

"Yes, but no television. You go back to your room and stay there the rest of the night. Maybe tomorrow you'll think twice about skipping school."

With his aunt's greasy stew churning in his stomach, Clay hurried to his room, afraid his face might give away his pleasure at not having to spend any more time with his new 'family.' Even being alone in his room was better company.

However, once there, he quickly found that no matter how much he tried, he couldn't keep his mind from returning to what had happened in the woods.

A ghost. Did I really see a ghost? It didn't seem possible, but how else could he explain the boy's arm disappearing? Plus, the apparition had pretty much come out and admitted it, hadn't he? He remembered the dream he'd had the other night, the one about corpses coming from the ground. At the time, he'd thought it was just a subconscious reaction to his parents' deaths, but after meeting John—or this ghost—it took on a whole other meaning.

Maybe John was trying to contact me even then, or maybe somehow I sensed his presence in the woods.

Sitting on his bed, with the lights on and his radio playing low, the idea didn't scare him as much as it had back when it happened. He replayed their conversation over and over in his head. The spirit

named John had spoken like an ordinary teenager; had, in fact, been more friendly than most of the kids at school. No matter how much Clay thought about it, he couldn't remember anything the ghost had said or done that seemed remotely threatening.

He was beginning to feel he'd acted like a real wuss by running away.

Just like I do all the time. God forbid I ever act like a man, instead of a scared little shit. I can't even handle it when people call me names.

Thinking about name calling made him realize something else about his spectral encounter. Not once had the ghost in the woods—was he already accepting that as a fact, not fantasy?— commented on his face. In fact, the spirit hadn't even stared at the mark, the way most people seemed to when they talked to him.

Is that because the dead don't care about physical looks? Or is it because he has something in mind, something that involves me joining the dead?

John's words took another spin through his memory. *"We like to pal around and have a good time. You don't have to be one of us to be our friend."*

Even the dead have more friends than I do, apparently.

He realized the invitation was there; John said they'd be in the woods if he changed his mind.

Could a person actually be friends with a ghost?

Clay put on his pajamas and crawled under the covers, even though it was only seven-thirty.

Staring at the ceiling, he spent the next few hours pondering the question of making friends with the dead.

* * *

Clay was teetering on the edge of sleep when he heard the noises outside. At first he thought it was just music from Kelly's room next door. It wouldn't be the first time she'd left it playing all night long. Then he heard them again.

Laughter. People talking.

Outside.

Thinking Bud and his degenerate friends were out in the yard, Clay

got up to look. Not that he'd have the balls to say anything, tell them to shut up and let him sleep, but if they were going to keep him up, he might as well see what they were up to.

God knew it couldn't be anything good.

A chill ran through him when his bare feet touched the cold wood floor. Uncle Roy's idea of heating the house wasn't much different than his ideas on personal hygiene: a little bit goes a long way. Then Clay looked out the window and his whole body froze.

John and three other teenagers were down on the lawn, holding cans of beer and staring up at Clay's window. Frost sparkled on the grass, making it seem like someone had coated the entire lawn in sugar crystals.

"Clay!" John pointed at him. "C'mon down. I told the guys about you. They wanna hang."

This can't be happening. A shiver ran through him that had nothing to do with the cool temperature in the house. *I've got ghosts standing outside my window, who want me to hang out with them. How crazy is that?*

How crazy was it that he was considering their offer?

Don't do it! the rational part of his brain shouted. And it made sense. But the idea of actually talking with ghosts, experiencing something supernatural, was too good to pass up.

He motioned for John to wait, and then ran back across the room, where he hurriedly got dressed in the clothes he'd worn to school that day. A glance at the clock showed it was just after midnight; his aunt and uncle would be sound asleep. Kelly would be lost to the world, staring at the computer screen, headphones covering her ears. However, Bud and Tammi would still be out, and might come home at any time. If they caught Clay leaving the house, or saw him outside, they'd tell for sure.

He hesitated, wondering if he should just go back to bed. He was in enough trouble already. No need to add to it.

Fuck 'em.

Just thinking it made him feel better, as if he was actually standing up for himself. Why shouldn't he have some fun? Excited by his new-

found gift for defiance, he tip-toed down to the front door, where he paused just long enough to slip on his jacket and a knit hat.

Then he was out the door and into the frosty night air.

When Clay turned the corner of the house, John and his companions were waiting for him, smiles on their faces and beers in their hands.

"Hey, buddy," John greeted him. "I knew you wouldn't chicken out. These are the guys I was telling you about."

The ghost gestured at the other three teenagers, spilling some beer in the process. Clay noticed the beer actually splashed when it hit the ground, melting away the frost where it landed.

The beer is real. How do ghosts drink real beer? Where does it go? He remembered back in the woods, when he'd tripped and John had grabbed him. The ghost's grip had been firm and strong. And *solid*.

Clay opened his mouth, but no words came out. If the others noticed, they didn't say anything about his temporary muteness.

"Clay, this is Chuck, Ricky, and Brian. We been best buds since, man, it seems like forever."

Clay raised his hand in a weak greeting. "Hey."

The three other boys responded with variations on the same theme — "Yo," "Hey," "What up?" Then everyone stood around in an awkward silence. Clay used the opportunity to examine the three more carefully.

Chuck was the tallest, with red hair and freckles that stood out like measles against his pale skin. Ricky had long, midnight-dark hair, down to his shoulders, and eyes that were just as black. Brian wore his hair in a crew cut and had an earring in his right ear.

Like John, Ricky wore a black concert tee, a giant fist grabbing a rainbow with a castle in the background. Chuck had on a nondescript plaid button-down shirt. Brian wore a plain blue hoodie sweatshirt. All of them wore jeans, but none of them had on coats or hats, even though it was close to freezing.

"Aren't you guys cold?" The question was out of Clay's mouth before he even thought about how dumb it was.

"Cold?" Chuck laughed. "Dude, we're always cold. Bein' dead is like living in a deep freeze."

Clay felt his stomach drop down into his guts. *Stupid, stupid, stupid! Three seconds and you're already acting like a dork!*

"Ha!" John reached out and smacked Chuck on the arm. "Good one, Chucky." Then he turned to Clay. "Don't let him bother you. He's always been a wise-ass. Wanna beer?"

"I, uh…"

"Sure you do! Ricky, give the boy a beer."

Clay glanced at the house. It was still dark, but with all the noise… "I don't know. My aunt and uncle…" "Right! I forgot." John motioned to the others. "Pack it up, boys, and let's go someplace where we can par-*tay*!" With his arm around Clay's shoulders, he led the way across the lawn towards the woods.

"Where are we going?" Clay asked, accepting a beer from Ricky. When he opened it, icy foam spilled over his fingers. His first sip was tentative; he hadn't tried beer more than once or twice in his life, and both times it was sly sips from cans leftover after a barbeque or poker game. Those tastes had been sour and warm. But the liquid in his mouth now was so frigid that it slid down his throat like an ice flow before he could even taste it, leaving behind only a trace of bitter, almost metallic flavor.

"This place we hang out at," Brian said from behind them. "Nobody's there this time of night, and the cops never hassle us."

"Can they even see you?" Once again, Clay prepared to kick himself for speaking without thinking. Who knew what ghosts found insulting? Or worse, what might piss them off?

"*Anyone* can see us at night," John said. "It's different in the daytime, 'cept in the woods, where there's a lot of shade, like today. Even then, an adult might not have noticed me."

Clay wanted to ask why adults had more trouble seeing ghosts, but just then they reached the woods and John told Clay to pay attention to where he was walking. "Don't wander off the trail, or you might get lost."

"How come you hang out in the woods?" Clay asked, as they

started down an overgrown dirt path. It didn't escape his notice that he was the only one who seemed to be getting snagged by low-hanging branches.

Chuck held up his can of beer, which remarkably he hadn't spilled. "What happens if someone stops us because they see a buncha kids drinking in the middle of the night? How do we explain to the cops who we are, or why we disappear in the daytime?"

"Who *are* you?" Clay asked the question that had been burning in his mind all night. "How did you end up
as ghosts? Do people know you're… you know…?"

"Dead?" John gave a soft chuckle. "Our families know, that's for sure. As for the other stuff, well, we can't tell you. Not yet. It's a secret, and you gotta do more than just have a beer with us before we can let you in on it." He gave Clay a slap on the back. "Nothin' personal, just, you know, some things you gotta earn. Dig?" Clay nodded, surprised he didn't mind not being told the boys' secret. If someone had said that to him in school, he'd have been depressed for days, convinced it was just another example of how he got excluded from everything, because of his face.

But with John and the others, he didn't feel that way. They treated him the same as they treated each other, kidding around, including him in the conversations as they walked through the woods. Never a word about his birthmark. No insults, no nicknames.

They treated him like an equal.

The path meandered back and forth, went over a hill, and then flattened out. Clay figured they'd gone about a mile when the path suddenly widened.

"What's back here?" Clay asked, following behind John.

"Only the coolest place in town," Chuck said, and the others laughed.

"C'mon." John gave Clay a friendly smack on the shoulder.
"You're gonna dig it."

They'd only walked a few minutes more when they reached a clearing and John stepped to the side.

"Here we are. Party central. Whatcha think?"

A shiver ran through Clay that had nothing to do with the crisp

night air. “It’s a cemetery.”

“You bet your ass!” Ricky pushed past him and sat down on one of the tombstones. Like the dozen or so others in the clearing, it no longer stood straight up, but instead leaned drunkenly to the side. From where Clay stood, the tiny cemetery resembled a mouth filled with gray, crooked teeth, the gaping maw of a giant waiting to swallow him.

John, Chuck, and Brian took seats, and John waved to Clay. “Pop a squat, dude.” He pointed at the ground. “Don’t worry, they won’t complain.”

Clay swallowed hard. Something inside him warned to stay out of the circle.

What’s the harm, though? he asked himself. *It’s not like anything here can hurt me. Besides, John wouldn’t let anything happen to me. Stop being such a chicken!*

He entered the circle and almost immediately felt a cold breeze swirl around him.

“What the…?” His body gave an involuntary shiver, so bad he almost dropped his beer.

“Yeah, kinda hits you hard the first time, don’t it?” John motioned him forward. “Don’t worry, you get used to it.”

Clay took two more steps, stopping by a tombstone so old the carvings on the front were no longer legible. The unearthly chill seemed to come and go, a supernatural breeze that only existed within the cemetery. Taking a seat across from John and Chuck, he sipped his beer and frowned.

“How come it’s so cold here?”

Ricky spat on the ground. “Ask our—”

“That’s part of the secret,” John interrupted, casting an angry glare in Ricky’s direction. “Don’t worry, you’ll find out soon. We just want to make sure we can trust you.”

“Oh.” Clay felt a bit of the old rejection surface. Maybe ghosts weren’t better than real kids.

John got up and put an arm around Clay’s shoulder. Even through his coat, Clay felt the chill of the ghost’s touch, like walking through a

cold spot in a pool or lake.

"Don't take it personal, dude. We like you. You're cool. But we also just met you. Gotta hang out a few times before we know if we can totally trust you, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Hey, don't be like that. I mean it. There's a lot of kids we could have
asked to join us, but we picked you."

"Why?"

"'Cause you're like us." Brian tossed his empty can. It hit a crooked tombstone with a loud *clank* and bounced away.

"Like you?" Clay shook his head. "But I'm—"

"He's not talking about being dead or alive, bro. He means you're out of the loop. Uncool. Friend-deprived."

"Thanks a lot." Clay tried to stand up but John held him in place. Not forcefully; there was nothing mean or angry in his surprisingly strong grip.
Just an unspoken request to listen.

"It's not an insult," he said in a gentle voice. "We were the same way. The other kids in school didn't like us 'cause we were different. Our teachers didn't understand us. And our parents…well, let's just say they didn't have our backs."

"So what's your deal?" Chuck asked. "How come you're on the outside looking in?"

Clay looked at each one of them. They were all staring at him, not with hate or disgust or belligerence, but something he wasn't used to seeing.

Honest interest.

And that was what made up his mind.

"I guess there's all sorts of reasons. My family was poor. I like reading better than playing sports. But the biggest reason is this." He pointed to the discoloration on his cheek.

"Yeah, that would do it," Ricky said, giving Clay a half-grin. "Even when I was in school, kids would've teased the shit out of you. Called

you Big Red, or Spot."

"Spot seems to be the popular choice." Clay heard the bitterness dripping in his words, but for once it wasn't accompanied by tears. Talking to John and the other ghosts was like talking to his parents.

Or friends.

Chuck opened another beer. "Hell, back in the day we'd have probably teased you, too. We didn't know better. But after you die… well, it's not the same. Different things become important."

"Things like friendship, and loyalty." John gave Clay's shoulder a final shake and sat back down on his own tombstone. "When you're dead, it don't matter what you look like, or how you talk, or who your family was. We stick together, because we're all we've got. It's us against the world."

"Fuck the world," Brian said, raising his beer.

"Fuck the world!" The others shouted, raising their cans in a toast. After a moment, Clay raised his, too, and the ghosts all cheered him on.

He might not be a ghost, but he sure knew what it was like to have the whole world against him. *But not anymore.*

* * *

Hanging out with John and the other boys turned out to be so much fun Clay completely lost track of time. When he finally remembered to check his watch, he was startled to see it was well past two in the morning.

"Aw, geez, I gotta get home before I get in trouble." The last two hours had been like heaven for Clay. Just bullshitting about whatever subject came up—girls, teachers, cars— was something new for him. Back in Piehole, he'd had a couple of guys he'd hung out with the previous school year, Ed and Neil Bloom. They'd been total outcasts like him, thanks to their both being total science geeks. The only thing he'd had in common with them was a love of sci-fi movies and nature books. But even that had been better than nothing. Then their family had moved during the summer, leaving Clay totally friendless again.

"No sweat, man. We'll walk you back." John stood up, and the

others did the same. During their time in the cemetery, Clay had gotten the impression that John was definitely the alpha dog in their little group. You could see it in the way they deferred to him when he spoke, the way none of them stood until he did. Yet at the same time, John didn't actually order them to do anything or act like he expected them to obey him. It was almost as if he was an older brother they respected, and wanted to please, rather than an actual authority figure.

Clay was the last to leave the clearing, and he gasped as the temperature went up several degrees the moment he reached the tree line. Just as John had said, he'd gotten used to the frigid air in the cemetery, to the point where he'd forgotten about it. He turned around, ready to go back and see if he could find the exact point where the temperature change occurred.

"C'mon, Clay-man." John gripped his arm. "Gotta get you home before you turn into a pumpkin."

Reeling from the beer and the change in reality, Clay followed the others down the path and back to the park. By the time they reached it, his body had adjusted to the November air once more.

"Do you ever go into town?" Clay asked, sticking close to John. Apparently ghosts had no trouble seeing in the dark, something Clay couldn't say was the same for him.

"Sure, sometimes. That's how we get beer and smokes, you know? The old five-finger discount." He wiggled his hand in the air. "But not too much. Can't have people wondering who we are."

Clay mulled that over. It made sense, but he couldn't imagine having to spend all your time hanging out in the woods. If the ghosts were solid at night, why not go to movies or parties? Of course, there was the problem of having no money, but just the four of them, together all the time? It seemed so…lonely. The idea of it bothered him, but he was afraid that John or the others might not appreciate being asked such personal questions.

The walk back took longer than Clay expected, or maybe it just felt that way because he was tired and cold. His energy returned, however, when they got to his uncle's house and he saw Bud standing

on the porch, smoking a cigarette.

"Oh, crap."

"Trouble, Clay-man?" John asked.

"My cousin. He's a real douche. He's either gonna tell on me for sneaking out, or blackmail me. I'll probably have to do his chores for a month."

"You want us to take the heat? Say you would've been home earlier but we kept you out?" Brian had an eager look on his face, one that didn't seem entirely friendly.

"No. It wouldn't matter what time I came home. I was supposed to be grounded. Plus it's a school night. I'll see you guys later."

Clay headed towards the house, fully intending to walk past Bud without saying a word. Let him tell. Better to get in trouble than be a slave.

Except things didn't work out that way.

"Hey, Spot. Where ya been? Out chasin' cats?" Bud flicked his cigarette butt at Clay's feet. "Who's your friends?"

Sticking to his guns, Clay didn't answer, just went up the steps. At the top, he had to squeeze between Bud and one of the railings.

"Not so fast, dickhead. I asked you a question." Bud grabbed Clay by the arm, spun him around so his back hit a railing post.

"Ow! Lemme go." Clay tried to pull his arm free.

With his other hand, Bud ground his knuckles into Clay's forehead, drawing another shout of pain. "No way. You're in deep shit, Spot. Your new buddies look like major league assholes."

"You should know." The words left Clay's lips before he even knew he was going to say them.

Bud let out a wicked laugh. "Oh, the little dog thinks he's bad. Know what happens to bad dogs?"

Before Clay could respond, Bud's fist pounded into his stomach like a wrecking ball, knocking the air from his lungs and sending him to his knees, doubled over and gasping for air.

"They get beat, that's what happens. Get ready, fuckhead."

Clay tried to cover his head but his arms refused to move, staying locked over his howling stomach. Instead, he closed his eyes and

prepared for the workboot he knew had to be heading his way.

"Hey, man, leave him alone."

Was that John's voice?"

"Stay the fuck out of it, asshole, unless you want some, too."

Bud's workbook hit the porch with a resounding thump, inches from Clay's head. Clay opened his eyes, saw that his cousin's feet were now facing towards the steps.

Towards John.

"Big man, picking on a kid half your size. What's the matter, couldn't find a girl to beat up?" Brian's voice that time. Clay remembered the angry look on the ghost's face earlier.

Was he looking for a fight?

Bud started down the steps, cursing a mile a minute. Clay sat up and watched the scene unfolding before him like it was a movie, with him stuck in his seat, helpless to change what was sure to become an even bigger disaster.

Bud charging towards John, who stood perfectly still, as if he wanted to get hit. Bud swinging his fist towards John's head. John dodging at the very last second, the punch just missing him. At the same time, John's own fists lashed out, left then right, catching Bud first in the stomach and then square in the mouth. Bud falling to the ground.

Brian stepping forward, bringing his foot back, aiming it at Bud's neck…

"Brian, don't!"

The ghost-boy stopped, his foot poised in mid-air. "Dude, he was gonna do it to you."

Clay thought fast. "Yeah, but how am I gonna explain it?"

Brian looked down at Bud, who was motionless on the frost-whitened grass. His leg quivered. Then John spoke.

"Brian, let it be. Let's go."

For a moment, Clay thought even John's words wouldn't be enough to stop Brian. Then he backed up.

Sudden lights flashed on, forcing Clay to throw an arm over his eyes.

"What the hell's going on out here?"

The front door slammed open and someone stepped out. Squinting

against the glare of the porch lamp, Clay saw his Uncle Roy, dressed in boxer shorts and a yellowed T-shirt, looking around the yard.

"Clay? What're you doing out here. And who…Goddamn, is that Bud?"

Clay looked down the steps. Bud still lay on the grass. Of John and the others there was no sign, not even footprints.

How can they be solid and not leave footprints? The random thought got tossed away as his uncle called out Bud's name.

Do something, idiot, before he wakes up and tells everything.

"I think he got in a fight, Uncle Roy. I heard noises and I came downstairs, and I found him like that. I was coming inside to get you and I…I tripped on the stairs."

Bud chose that moment to let out a groan before rolling over and puking into the grass.

"Goddammit. It's those hoodlums he hangs out with. C'mon, help me get him inside. I swear, if it's not one thing, it's another."

They carried Bud into the house and sat him in the bathtub, where Roy ran cold water on him until he regained his senses.

"You're lucky, son. If Clay here hadn't found you, you'd have frozen to death out there. Prob'ly shoulda let you. Teach you a lesson, not to go out drinkin' and fightin'. You wanna tell me who cleaned your clock?"

Bud looked at Clay, who made sure to keep his face impassive. The look in Bud's eyes was pure hatred, but he kept his mouth shut. Clay held a minute hope it was because he didn't want to get his cousin in trouble, but figured it was more likely the fact that Bud didn't want to admit getting beat up by someone younger.

"I don't know, Pop. They got me from behind while I was catching a smoke. Maybe Clay saw them." Bud shot Clay a narrow-eyed glare, evil enough to kill a cat at twenty paces. "I…I didn't see anyone," Clay said. "They must have took off before I got there."

"Yeah, must've." Bud stared at him another moment and then pushed himself up with a loud groan. "I'm going to bed."

"Don't think this is over," Uncle Roy said. "You an' me gonna have a long talk tomorrow."

"Whatever." Bud pushed past them and went up the stairs to his room. Clay waited until he heard the bedroom door shut before saying goodnight to his uncle and venturing upstairs to his own room. He also made sure to slide a chair under his doorknob, in case Bud decided to make a late night visit.

Only when he was in his bed, replaying everything that had happened in a crazy night, did he remember something that caused him to smile in the darkness of his room.

Clay-man. John called me Clay-man.

I have a nickname that isn't an insult. And friends who stick up for me. Still smiling, Clay drifted off to sleep.

And for the first time since his parents died, he didn't have any nightmares.

* * *

School the next day was just as hellish as the day before, but Clay found himself able to tolerate the teasing of his classmates—just barely—by focusing on the miraculous events of the previous night. Hanging out with friends and sneaking beer. Getting away with breaking curfew. Watching Bud take a beating for coming after him. Hard to believe that less than a day ago he'd have thought all those things impossible.

As impossible as having ghosts for friends.

When the final bell rang, signaling the end of another shitty day at Oakwood Consolidated School— whoever decided to put grades six through twelve in one school obviously either never attended public school or was a closet masochist— Clay actually found himself looking forward to going home.

I wonder if I'll see them tonight?

That was the one hitch in having ghosts for friends. To see them, he'd either have to sneak out at night, which was dangerous, or hope his aunt and uncle let him stay out late on the weekends, which was unlikely. Not that it mattered to Clay. Somewhere during lunch, while sitting alone and only dimly aware of people tossing food near his table while calling out *'Hey Spot! Beg for some treats!'*, he'd come to the

conclusion that he no longer cared what his half-assed excuse for a family thought. He'd sneak out every night if he had to, or be like Tammi and Bud and just not come home after school.

Fuck the world. His new motto.

All the way home he worked on his plan—should he just not bother going to the house at all, or should he make an appearance and then leave? After staring at the house for a good five minutes, he decided to go in. The day had turned windy and cold, and if he was going to be outside, he wanted warmer clothes.

Plus a snack for his growling belly.

Intent on finding something sweet in the cabinets, Clay didn't notice the note on the refrigerator until he went to get the milk.

Clay,

I went to visit a sick friend in the hospital. Won't be home until supper. Your uncle is working late. Don't disturb Bud, he's resting.

Aunt Sally

Stifling a joyful shout, Clay read the note again, just to be sure he hadn't misunderstood.

Bud's sleeping and no one will be home 'til supper?

Milk forgotten, Clay took a handful of cookies, grabbed his coat, and headed for the door. He had three hours of freedom, and he wasn't going to spend them cooped up in the house.

Not when there were ghosts in the woods.

Unlike his last trip across the field, this time Clay ran with a purpose, and a light heart. He was hoping John and the others would be there—they hadn't mentioned anywhere else they went during the day—so he could thank them for last night.

Then another thought hit him and he stopped, still thirty yards from the tree line.

What if the ghosts weren't there? Or what if they were there, but mad at him for the fight? John had also said they had to stay out of trouble, because they couldn't explain their existence to anyone.

But then why did they protect me?

Suddenly unsure of what to do, Clay started towards the woods,

but more slowly this time. How would he find four teenage ghosts when you couldn't even see them if the sun shined on them? He certainly couldn't search every shadow in the forest!

Stepping out of the sunlight and into the gloom, brought on by the canopy of bare branches overhead, reminded Clay of the magical cold he'd felt in the graveyard the previous night. Although the temperature drop was nowhere near as drastic, a quick shiver did run through him, and he zipped up his jacket to just below his chin.

Now what? He had no answer for his own question. Call out to John and the others? Go left? Go right?

"Hey, man. We were hoping you'd stop by."

Clay gasped and his body jerked involuntarily at the voice. Turning, he found John and Brian standing not ten feet away.

"Uh, hi. Man, you scared the crap out of me!" Clay's heart beat doubletime for several more seconds, then began to settle down.

"Sorry, Clay-man. Forgot how quiet we can be. How's your cousin?" There was sarcasm in John's voice, but Clay recognized it wasn't directed at him. Grateful they weren't upset with him, he allowed himself some sarcasm of his own.

"Oh, Bud's doing just fine. My uncle yelled at him, and then they let him stay home from school today because he didn't feel well enough to go. He's still in his room, sleeping or whatever."

"Fuck him." Brian leaned against a tree and chewed one of his fingernails. "He deserved an ass beating."

That reminded Clay to say thank you. "Yeah, about that. I just wanna say thanks, you know? You guys saved my butt last night. Bud would've really…he…"

John came to his rescue. "No problemo, dude. That's what bros do, we look out for each other. We got each
others' backs, right?"

"Right," said Brian

"Right on," came two other voices. Clay glanced to the side, saw Chuck and Ricky heading towards them. As they walked in and out of the shadows cast by the trees, different sections of their bodies disappeared and reappeared in rapid sequence. It reminded Clay of

the special effects they used in the old Predator movies.

Unsure of how to respond—no one had ever 'had his back' before — Clay changed the subject. "So what do you guys do for fun during the day?"

"We fuck around a lot. Here in the woods, down by the river," Brian said. "As long as we stay in the shadows, we can, you know, chuck rocks at birds, smoke…it's, I don't know…"

"What he means is that even though being a ghost is cool, we miss being, like, solid, too," John interrupted. "In the sun, you can't feel anything or touch anything. Gets kinda boring."

"What's it like, you know…?" A day ago Clay wouldn't have felt comfortable asking, but John's actions had convinced him no one would get mad at the question.

"Being dead?" John gave him a lopsided smile.

"No." Clay shook his head. "I mean, being a ghost. Like, what can you do? Can you fly? What happens when you disappear? Are there other ghosts around?" Aware he was close to babbling, Clay stopped himself.

For a moment, John didn't speak. Clay could see he was concentrating, trying to find the right words. The silence stretched on, broken only by bird sounds high up in the trees and soft *snik* of Ricky flipping open an oldstyle lighter and lighting a cigarette. Clay saw the lighter's flame was an almost iridescent blue. He hadn't noticed that the night before.

Then John started talking.

"It's really hard to describe, Clayman. It's like you're alive, but no one really knows. You know how there's always a kid in school that nobody notices, no one pays attention to? He's like, there, but he's in the background?"

Clay nodded. He'd often wished to be that person.

"It's kinda like that. During the day, most people can't see us, even in the shade. That's why I knew you were special, 'cause you saw me right away. In the sun, no one can see us. But we can see each other."

"Sort of," added Ricky. "Not like this." He motioned with his arms, indicating the four of them.

"Right. We look sort of blurry and see through. I guess the way most people would picture a ghost. And we can't fly. We walk. Even in the day,
we're walking."

"Do you sleep?"

"Naw," Chuck said. "Sleeping's for you breathers. Sometimes, though…"

"Sometimes we kinda lose track," John finished. "Like you go into a daze, and all of a sudden you realize a few hours went by and you don't know how."

"Like History class," Brian said, and all of them laughed, including Clay.

Then Clay had another thought. "When you're invisible, what do you do?"

Brian gave an exaggerated wink. "If you're askin' if we peek into girls' windows, the answer's definitely yes."

"Only in the day, though," John said. "When people can't see us. And in case you were wondering, no, ghosts can't have sex. But we still like to look."

"It sucks, man." Chuck shook his head. "Like havin' blue balls all the time."

"I miss sleeping." Ricky lit another cigarette. "Used to sleep 'til ten or eleven on the weekends. Man, I loved sleeping." He took a deep drag and blew a series of smoke rings, which expanded lazily in the chilly air until they lost their shape entirely and became ghosts themselves. Then he waved the butt at Clay. "On the other hand, at least these things won't kill me."

Clay laughed, but Brian gave Ricky a funny look.

"No, that got taken care of just fine by—"

"Can it," John said in a loud voice. It was the first time Clay had ever heard him give an order that sounded like one. Brian closed his mouth, but didn't look happy about it.

John stared at Brian until the other boy looked down. Then he turned to Clay, his face and tone relaxed again.

"One thing we can do when we're invisible is keep an eye on people. That's how we knew you were coming to the woods today."

"What? You mean, you were out there while I was walking through the field?" Clay considered the boys his friends, but somehow the idea that they'd been watching him, following him, was kind of creepy. What if he'd farted or picked his nose or something? People did things when they were alone that they wouldn't do if other people were around, even if those other people were friends.

What are you worried about? a voice in his head asked. *They're ghosts. They probably don't give a rat's ass about a booger or a fart.*

True. But it still had him feeling weird.

John shrugged. "Not the whole time. We saw you walking home from school, so we headed over here to the woods to see if you'd come back here. We saw you leave the house."

"Yeah, it's not like we were peekin' in your window or nothing," Chuck said. "Don't need to see you spankin' the monkey. Now, maybe that cousin of yours, the one with the big—" "Chuck…" John warned.

"Naw, it's cool." Clay felt his lips tighten. "She's an asshole, just like her brother. You can say anything you want about them."

"You really hate them that much?" John asked.

"Hell, yeah. When I lived in Florida, the kids at school made my life miserable but at least when I went home, I had a family, you know? And a dog. Now, coming home is worse than being in school."

John nodded, but didn't say anything. Brian put his arm around Clay and said "Life sucks. Not much you can do about it. Could be worse, though. Trust me."

Before Clay could ask what he meant, Ricky came over and gave Clay a friendly punch on the arm. "Stick with us, Clay-man, and soon your troubles will be all gone."

"Ain't that the truth." Chuck took a cigarette from Ricky, and then offered one to Clay, who shook his head.

"Naw, I don't smoke."

"Don't like it or never tried it?" Chuck asked, lighting up.

"Um…both, I guess. I never tried it because I didn't like the smell." Plus his parents would've killed him if they'd caught him.

But they're dead now. Left you behind.

A sudden thought struck Clay. Were his parents ghosts? Were they back home, still together and happy, or maybe even in a better place, like Father Tortorici had said during the funeral mass? He'd always figured that death was final, regardless of what the Church wanted you to believe. But now it seemed it wasn't.

Left you behind.

Anger erupted in Clay's guts, a churning, steaming resentment towards his parents for abandoning him to a rotten life with his aunt and uncle.

"Fuck it, I'll try one." He took the cigarette from Chuck and let the heavy-set boy light it.

This is your fault, he thought at his mother and father. *You didn't care what happened to me. Now I don't, either.*

He breathed in and let the smoke burn its way through him, the fire in his throat and lungs melding with the fire in his guts until there was nothing but ashes left inside him.

The ashes of the old Clay.

* * *

Clay spent the rest of the afternoon with John and the other ghosts, doing the kinds of stupid, time-wasting things only bored teenage boys did. Throwing rocks at trees. Seeing who could sneak up closest to a squirrel. Arguing about whether big tits or small tits were better. Stupid things, yes, but doing them with friends made them enjoyable.

When it got close to five o'clock, Clay reluctantly said he had to go. "My uncle will be home soon, and he'll have chores for me to do."

"But it's almost dark, dude." Chuck and Ricky fist-bumped at the idea. "Then we can really get the party started. Get some beer. And it's trash night. That means we can knock over the garbage cans of people we don't like."

"Not tonight. I'm still grounded. But tomorrow's Friday, so I can

probably go out after dinner."

"Cool. We'll meet tomorrow night at eight at the cemetery. You remember how to get there?" Clay nodded.

"All right, then. Later, Clay-man." John gave him a high-five. The others did the same.

That night, even his uncle's snide comments didn't bother him.

* * *

The next day, like most Fridays, was especially bad for Clay. Over the years he'd developed a theory that bullies were more hyper on Fridays, either because of the coming weekend or from having been stuck in school for a week. The reason didn't matter, of course; what did matter was that on Fridays beatings had a tendency to be more violent, insults flew with greater frequency, and teachers— thanks to their own desire to get away from work for two days—had less sympathy for those being bullied.

Gym class: "Hey, Spot! Fetch the ball!"

Bathroom: "You got something on your face, better wash it off."

Cafeteria, just before a quick foot tangled his legs on purpose: "Have a nice trip!"

At his locker between classes: Two swift punches to his thigh, leaving him with a charlie horse for sixth period.

Mrs. Donner, his sixth period teacher: "No one likes a snitch, Clay. Ignore them and they'll ignore you. Now go sit down."

It was a double relief to run down the steps at the end of the day. Not only didn't he have to deal with the bullies anymore, but he actually had something to look forward to on a Friday night for a change, something other than TV in his room.

He was so intent on getting home he never noticed the three boys sitting on the brick wall that marked the beginning of school property.

Until they jumped down and surrounded him.

"Where ya goin', Spot?" Billy Henderson asked, his fists already clenched. "You told Donner I gave you a charlie horse."

"Leave me alone." Clay tried to push past them, but Henderson's accomplices, both fat and stupid like Billy, grabbed him.

Then there were no more words as Billy waded in, fists pumping back and forth, each one hitting Clay's stomach and chest like a mallet. A veteran deliverer of many schoolyard beatings, Billy knew to avoid the face so there'd be no evidence of his handiwork. Most parents didn't consider belly or arm bruises serious enough to call the school or police.

It was over in three minutes, although it felt like a lifetime to Clay. Billy's friends let him fall to the sidewalk, and the three ninth-graders walked away, laughing as if nothing had happened.

None of the other students stopped to help him, or even ask if he was all right.

After a while, he pushed himself to his feet and slowly began the milelong walk home, each step sending stabbing pains through his belly. He wondered if one of Billy's punches had ruptured something inside him, but by the time he got home, the pain had subsided enough that he figured he was okay. He grabbed a bottle of soda from the 'fridge and went to his room, where he lay down with the cold bottle on his stomach until dinner.

"What are your plans for tonight, Clay?" Aunt Sally asked after their usual Friday meal of chicken tenders and French fries was over. Tammi and Kelly had already dumped their plates in the sink and gone to their rooms. Bud hadn't even come home.

"I'm meeting some guys at the park." Clay was prepared to argue if she said no, but she just smiled and kept loading the dishwasher.

"That's great. I'm glad you're finally making some friends. I told you the boys at school would stop teasing you eventually."

"Yeah, right." He excused himself and went back to his room, where he donned an extra sweatshirt under his coat and grabbed gloves and a knit hat. The temperature was supposed to go down below freezing, and if they ended up back at the old cemetery, he wanted to make sure he was warm.

"Don't stay out too late!" Aunt Sally called from the kitchen.

"I won't." Considering Bud and Tammi rarely stumbled in before three, he figured the definition of 'late' in the Martin household was loose enough that he wouldn't get in trouble as long as he was back before daylight.

As he stepped out the door, his heart pounded with excitement.

What was in store for him tonight?

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Clay didn't know whether to laugh or run for help.

He'd arrived at the edge of the woods an hour after sunset and found John, Chuck, and Ricky standing there.

"Hey, guys," he'd said. "Where's Brian?"

All of them smiled. "Waiting for us. And you. We got a surprise for you, Clay-man," John had said. They'd headed into the woods, following the trail that led to the cemetery.

A surprise? he'd thought. *For me?* He wondered what it would be. What did guys surprise each other with?

Beer? Comic books? Playboys? He'd thought he'd be prepared for anything.

He'd been very wrong.

Instead of food or booze or porn, he'd found a bruised and beaten Billy Henderson lying on the frigid ground, tied and gagged, with Brian standing guard over him.

"What the…? What did you guys do?"

"Told ya you'd be surprised." John kicked Billy in the thigh, drawing a muffled cry of pain. "We hang out near the school sometimes. Not that we miss going to school, but watching the kids sure beats doing nothing in the woods all day."

John drew back his foot again and Billy whimpered behind the dirty rag they'd stuffed in his mouth.

"Saw this asshole fuckin' with you. We couldn't do anything at the time, but wouldn't you know, on our way here tonight we saw dipshit walkin' all by his lonesome."

Ricky flicked open his lighter and thumbed the wheel. The strange

blue flame wavered back and forth. "Couldn't pass up the opportunity to get him back for what he did. Friends gotta stick together, right? Watch each others' backs." He took out a cigarette and lit it, snapped the lighter closed with a smooth one-handed motion.

"Like this." Without warning, Ricky dropped to his knees and jabbed the cigarette's red-hot tip against Billy's neck.

Even gagged, Billy's scream was loud enough that Clay felt for sure it would bring the police. Even as his fear bubbled and swirled in his stomach, the other boys laughed, apparently unconcerned about getting caught.

Chuck stepped forward and slammed his foot into Billy's stomach, turning the ninth-grader's cries into choking, gagging sounds.

"Eye for an eye, douchebag," he told Billy.

Brian took the cigarette from Ricky and stabbed it into the back of Billy's hand. A nasty smell filled Clay's nose, the stink of burning hair and skin.

"Maybe that'll make you think twice about punching someone." Brian took a drag of the cigarette and then handed it back to Ricky.

"Guys, that's enough," Clay said. All he could think about was how much trouble they'd get in when Billy told on them. Which he was sure to do. Maybe you didn't rat someone out for a playground fight, but when people kidnapped you and burned you, that was a different story.

Then an even worse thought hit Clay. Why should John and the others worry about getting caught?

They *couldn't* get caught.

Only one person in the group was going to get in trouble.

Me.

Clay's legs started trembling and he sat down on a tombstone. He tried to speak, but his first word was only a dry whisper. It took several tries before he worked up enough spit to moisten his throat.

"John. You have to let him go. He's gonna tell his parents. The police. And they're gonna come looking for *me*."

"No, he ain't." John knelt down next to Billy's face. "You're not

gonna tell, are you, Billy-boy?"

Billy shook his head, his eyes wide and bulging. At the same time, he made *mmmph-mmmph* sounds over and over.

Uh-uh.

John looked up at them. "I don't think I believe him. Do you?"

"No," said Ricky. Brian and Chuck shook their heads.

"How about you, Clay-man. You think he's gonna tell?"

Of course he is, you idiot, Clay wanted to say, but he no longer felt comfortable enough with his new friends to talk like that. Instead, he settled for something that was still the truth. "I would."

God, what am I gonna do? Maybe I can convince Billy not to tell. I'll give him my lunch money for a month. I'll –

"That's what I thought." In one swift motion, John took Billy's head in his hands and twisted it sharply to one side. There was a sound like a tree branch breaking. Billy's legs kicked once and then he went still.

"Ain't gonna tell now." Ricky let out a hoarse laugh and tossed his cigarette onto Billy's chest.

Clay stared at the body. Thoughts tumbled through his head like blowing leaves.

He's dead. John killed him. Billy's dead. Dead like my parents. Maybe it's a joke. He's faking. They're trying to scare me. He can't be dead. He can't –

A long, wet farting sound came from the body and a foul odor rose up.

"Jesus, that's ripe!" Chuck waved his hands in front of his face while Ricky and Brian backed away.

John stood up and looked directly at Clay. "We did this for you. You're one of us, now. Which means you have to help us get rid of the body."

"What?" Clay half-slid, half-fell off the tombstone. "No…no, I can't. What if we get caught? I'll go to jail. They'll think *I* killed him."

"You won't get caught." John grabbed him by the shoulders and steadied him. "We'll make sure of that. But we need to know you're not gonna tell. We need to know we can trust you with all our secrets."

"Uh…" Clay looked at the body again. It hadn't moved. It still

stunk like a week-old highway pancake.

Billy was really, truly, *dead.*

And the only way I'm not going to get blamed is if the body is never found.

A shiver ran through him as the cold truth sank in. He'd witnessed a murder and done nothing. And his one chance to avoid prison was to commit another crime.

"Okay, I'll do it."

* * *

Disposing of a body turned out to be easier than Clay ever thought possible. Ricky and Brian ducked into the woods and came back with a large black tarp. Seeing it sent another round of shivers through Clay.

They always intended to kill him.

He pushed away the idea he was hanging out with murderers so he could focus on doing what needed to be done without leaving any clues to his involvement. He'd already decided never to see or talk to the ghosts again.

John had given him a pair of cheap rubber gloves to wear, the kind women used when washing dishes.

"What about you?" Clay noticed none of the four dead boys were wearing gloves as they rolled Billy's limp, stinking body onto the tarp and began folding the heavy material around him. Brian took out a knife and some thin rope and started cutting lengths of it.

"No worries here." Brian paused and brought the knife up to his own hair, cut off a handful. He let the clump fall to the ground, where it instantly disappeared. When he looked up at Clay, there was no sign of any hair missing from his head.

"Ghosts don't leave evidence," John said.

Clay remembered how none of them had left footprints in the frostcovered grass the other night. He looked around the clearing. Several cigarette butts and beer cans littered the area.

Things they take from the material world can get left behind, but nothing of themselves remains. He assumed there would be no fingerprints on

the cans, no DNA on the cigarettes.

Except the ones I drank, the ones I smoked. Shit.

Suddenly, what had looked like a simple party site took on the sinister appearance of a crime scene, with all clues pointing directly at him.

I have to come back and clean all this, he thought, as Ricky and John easily lifted Billy's body onto their shoulders.

"Where are you taking him?" Clay asked.

"*We* are taking him that way." John pointed into the woods, and Clay understood that by 'we' he meant Clay was going with them. "It's not far."

They started down a small path, heading in the opposite direction than the way back to Clay's house, the four of them talking and laughing like they were carrying a bag of leaves instead of a dead teenager. The short walk seemed to take hours, with Clay constantly looking in all directions and listening for anyone following them. He was still afraid Billy's calls for help, or the boys' talking, would attract attention. At the same time, he was too frightened of the ghosts to shush them.

Not long after they left the cemetery the path took an abrupt downhill angle, and Clay realized they were heading to the river that divided the town in half. Although the month of November had been dry, September and October rains had been unusually frequent and the river was still running strong, its rushing and roaring drowning out all other sounds when you stood near it.

John and Ricky dropped the body on the bank and cut open the ropes holding the tarp closed. They unwrapped Billy's body and began stuffing his coat and pants with rocks.

"Give us a hand, Clay. You need to be part of this."

Touching the corpse was the last thing Clay felt like doing, but something in John's voice told him 'no' wasn't an option. He took a few stones and slid them inside the coat, doing his best not to breathe the stench of Billy's voided bowels.

When they had several pounds of stone packed, John signaled them to stop. Then he, Brian, and Chuck lifted the body, waded into

the freezing water up to their waists, and let it go. It sank before it could float more than three feet downstream.

When the three boys emerged from the water, they were completely dry.

"Why didn't you leave him in the tarp?" Clay asked, the question popping out of his mouth before he could stop it.

"Muskies." Ricky nodded at the river while he retied the tarp into a small, compact bundle. Clay frowned at the word, and the ghosts all laughed.

"Muskellunge," John said. "It's a kind of big-ass fish that lives in the river. People catch thirty and fortypounders all the time. Thanks to them, there'll be nothing left of Billyboy in a few days except some bones. But if we left him in the tarp, he might last for weeks. Or months."

John approached Clay, who stepped back nervously. Pretending not to notice, John put a friendly hand on his shoulder. "Look at that river, Clay-man. What do you see?"

"Um, nothing? Just water." Clay wasn't sure where John was going, but he hoped the ghost would get to the point quickly. He wanted to go back to the cemetery and remove any evidence of his ever having been there.

"Exactly. Think about it. Today a fucking douchebag beat you up for no reason. And now tonight, because you have friends who care about you, that douchebag is gone forever. And you're in the clear. You honestly believe anyone's gonna think you—the scrawny kid everyone picks on—killed a ninth-grader and got rid of the body?"

Clay stared at John for a moment and then looked at the river again. Something inside him seemed to break open, an emotional epiphany that sent a massive shiver through him. He saw the river in a new way. Instead of a rushing body of water, it was a shower, a bath, washing away the anger and embarrassment and self-loathing Billy and his friends had ignited, washing away the pain of getting hit.

The river had cleansed him without ever touching him.

Clay smiled.

"You get it now, don't you?" John asked. "With us, you're free to do almost anything. The old rules don't apply."

John's words dampened Clay's joy. "That's not true, though. You can do anything, but I can't. I still have to make sure I don't get caught. I have to go back and clean the cemetery so no one finds my fingerprints. I'm still human."

He turned to John. "But if I was a ghost, like you…"

"No!" John shook his head. "Don't say that. You don't want to be like us. We'd give anything to be alive again."

"Tell him the truth, John. Tell him how we got like this." Ricky was snapping his lighter open and closing it, over and over. *Click. Click. Click.*

John nodded. "It's time you learned our secret, Clay." He paused, and the others moved closer.

"We became ghosts because our families killed us."

* * *

Our families killed us.

The words repeated themselves over and over in Clay's mind, bouncing back and forth like frightened shouts in a cave. He didn't even notice John was still talking until a finger poked him in the shoulder.

"Hey, you there? Earth to Clay."

"Wha…? Sorry. I flaked out. What'd you say?"

"I said, that's why you can't become one of us. It's not just a matter of dying. If it was, everyone would come back as ghosts. It takes a certain set of circumstances for a person's…spirit…to break the rules, so to speak."

"Being murdered?" That didn't make sense. Lots of people got murdered.

"Not just murdered. Murdered by a close family member. It was my parents who killed me."

"My father," said Ricky.

"My mother stabbed me in the back." Chuck made a stabbing motion with his fist.

"My aunt and her new husband poisoned me," Brian said. "I was like you, Clay, living with them after my parents died."

"Wait." Clay shook his head. "You guys all knew each other when you
were alive?"

Chuck and Brian nodded.

"We were in school together," John said. "Me and Ricky were supposed to graduate in seventy-eight. Brian and Chuck were a year younger."

"Seventy-eight? But how… why…I don't understand any of this. You all talk like…like I do. Not like…" Clay's voice trailed off. He had too many questions and they were all fighting to get out, causing a traffic jam between his brain and mouth.

"Some old hippies? It's not like we just woke up from a coma, dude." Ricky flicked his lighter again, felt his pants pocket, and then cursed when he didn't find any cigarettes.

"Remember, we walk around during the day and no one can see us. We listen to people, watch people. Go to movies. We even go to school."

"Not classes or anything," Chuck interrupted, rolling his eyes. "But we'll sit in the cafeteria during lunch. Hang in back of the school, where the kids always go to smoke or get high."

"We might not know what the top TV shows are, or what kids are listening to on their iPods, but we keep pretty current with how people talk, how they dress, all that shit."

"Yeeah, boyeee, fo shizzel!" Brian crossed his arms and made downward-pointing peace signs, while shrugging his shoulders in a pretty fair imitation of a rapper.

"Ignore MC Casper over there," John said, and the others laughed. "The point is, we stay pretty current, but most of the time that just makes things worse. Because we can watch, but we can't *experience* things."

"You can at night." Clay poked John's arm. "At night you're solid as anyone else. You can drink and eat. You could go to parties. Hell, you could steal a car and drive away from here. Go to LA or Miami or

anywhere at all."

Ricky and Brian gave each other a strange look, and John shook his head. "Can't. Something about being a ghost, we're tied to the town where we died."

"Oh." Clay didn't know what else to say. Stuck in a shithole like Oakwood forever? Nothing could be worse than that, not even the whole sex thing.

"Yeah. So while you might think being dead is cool, 'cause you don't have to listen to nobody, and you can do pretty much whatever you
want—"

"At night," Brian cut in.

"—as long as it's at night," John continued, "it's not all that great. Even if you could become a ghost, which you can't."

"I don't know about that. I'm pretty sure Bud would have no trouble at all sticking a knife in my throat if he thought he could get away with it."

"Only one breather in town could get away with that." Ricky clapped Clay on the back. "That's you, buddy. 'Cause you got the ghosts with the mosts at your side."

Before Clay could respond, John tapped his wrist as if indicating the time. "We better get moving. Clay's got some cleaning to do before he goes home."

Climbing the hill back to the cemetery, a thought took root in Clay's head and refused to leave.

I just got away with murder.

Oddly, it didn't bother him at all.

* * *

Clay was still wide awake when the first weak rays of the sun turned the sky from black to gray. He'd gotten home just after three, tired, cold, and filthy. After cleaning the cemetery and burying the cans and butts in several different places in the woods, he'd left the arctic zone he thought of as the Cold Spot. John and the others had stayed behind, after saying they'd see him tomorrow night.

His thoughts whirled like eddies along the ocean shore as he stared at the cracks in his ceiling. How could parents kill their children? He knew it happened—he'd seen it in the news, read it in the papers—but it still seemed so…impossible. And to have it happen four times in one town.

What the hell's in the water here?

Actually, he knew the answer to that, now.

Dead bodies.

Billy's final seconds played themselves back. The way John had so casually snapped his neck. It was obvious he'd killed before. How many times over the years? And for what reasons? To protect a friend? Or get rid of one?

Something John had said the first day they met came back to Clay. *"You don't have to be one of us to be our friend."*

If that was the case, how come Clay was the only living friend they had? Where were the others? Had there ever been any? Had something bad happened to them? Or was it just that only teenagers could be their friends, and that growing older meant you couldn't see them anymore? Hadn't John mentioned that adults had more trouble seeing ghosts?

Clay tried to imagine how hard that would be, to make friends with someone and then watch them get older while you remained the same. Did the ability to see ghosts gradually fade away, just another aspect of friends growing apart, taking different paths in life? What of the ghosts left behind—knowing the whole time that eventually their friend would leave them, or no longer be able to see them? Were they angry? Sad? Bitter?

And did those feelings lead to violence?

Staring up as the morning light gradually filled his room, Clay knew two things:

John and the others truly were his only friends in the world.

And…

Being friends with them was the most dangerous thing he'd ever done.

* * *

After a weekend of hanging out with the four ghosts, Clay was exhausted when he arrived at school on Monday morning. Still, it didn't dampen his new-found ebullience. He found himself acting like a completely different person, a person who no longer gave a shit what people thought about him. Why should he? They weren't his friends and never would be. His real friends were outside the school, waiting for him. Or maybe even right behind him, keeping an eye on him. That thought alone gave him extra courage. When two boys his age called him Spot, he frightened them by growling and barking like a dog and chasing them down the hall. At lunch, he passed a group of girls who asked him if he wanted some table scraps. Instead of cringing inside and heading for the furthest table, he stopped, grabbed a sandwich and cookies off one of their plates, and said, "Thanks, I do."

After school, he brought his new attitude home with him. Instead of doing his homework at the kitchen table, he took it to his room and shut his door. When Bud walked in unannounced, Clay told him to get the hell out.

"Screw you, asswipe," Bud said. "I'll do whatever the hell I want. This is my house."

"Yeah?" Clay stood up. "Better think twice. Or next time someone's giving your drunken ass a beating, I might not stop them. In fact, I might tell them where to find you."

"You little shit." Bud took a step forward, but instead of backing away, Clay moved forward as well, a pair of scissors gripped in one hand. The two stared at each other, and then something changed in Bud's eyes. Clay saw it happen, the anger draining away, replaced by something else.

Caution? Fear? Clay hoped so.

"Fuck you, Spot." Bud flipped Clay his middle finger and left, but his act of bravado didn't fool Clay.

I could get used to this. I never realized how different it was to have friends who had your back.

It never occurred to him to ask why their parents had killed them.

* * *

The next week passed by quickly for Clay, each day much the same as the previous one. After dinner he'd hurry to the cemetery, where John, Ricky, Brian, and Chuck would be waiting. Sometimes one of the ghosts would have a six-pack or two; Clay never asked how they got it. He figured they either bummed money or shoplifted it. Most nights they'd hang out at the Cold Spot, bullshitting the hours away. When he told them his nickname for the cemetery, they all agreed it was a cool name.

"We should've thought of it sooner," Brian said. "The Cold Spot. The place to really chill out."

At the end of each night, Clay would head home and collapse in his bed just in time to catch three or four hours sleep. In the morning, he'd wake up with barely enough time to grab a slice of toast before hurrying to school, where his combination of attitude and exhaustion had him fending off any potential teasing or bullies with a stare or snarl. If he was lucky, he'd catch a quick nap in study hall.

Then it was back home to start the cycle all over again.

One night, while sitting in the cemetery and talking about the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday—what was worse, having to spend it alone in a cemetery or being stuck celebrating with a family you hated—Clay finally asked the question that had been eating at him since the first night John introduced him to the other ghosts.

"How come you guys picked this place? And why is it so damned cold?"

The four spirits looked at each other, and Ricky shrugged. "Tell him, John."

John pursed his lips and then nodded. "Okay. I guess there's no reason you shouldn't know." He pointed to the ground.

"This is where we were all buried."

"What?" Clay frowned. "That doesn't make sense. I've looked at these tombstones. They're so old you can't even read them anymore."

"He didn't say those were our tombstones." Brian tossed an empty beer can at a spot between two of the weather-beaten grave markers. "This is where they buried us."

"I'm over there, next to that tree." Chuck pointed to a large elm whose roots had toppled over one of the granite headstones.

"I'm right here." John stomped a foot on the ground, right below where he was sitting. "They actually buried me right on top of somebody else. And Ricky's only a couple of feet to my left."

There was a moment of silence following John's words. Clay tried to speak, but nothing seemed appropriate. He finally settled for a simple

"I'm sorry."

"No big deal," Ricky said, although his tone indicated it definitely was. "That was a long time ago. Ancient history."

John opened a beer and took a long swallow. When he started speaking right after, Clay noticed for the first time that none of the ghosts burped when they drank. Was that because they didn't breathe?

He decided to save that question for another day.

"I've got no idea why it's so cold here." John indicated the cemetery. "It's been that way as long as I can remember. Is it 'cause we got buried here without a ceremony? Or maybe there's something here, something older than we are, that helped us turn into ghosts? We'll probably never know."

"Oh." Clay sipped his beer, wishing he hadn't brought it up. Then Brian changed the subject, and Clay soon forgot about burials and cold spots.

The next time he thought about them, it was too late.

* * *

Thanksgiving was even more horrible than Clay had anticipated. His depression came back with a ven-geance. He'd been able to put his grief aside to a degree, thanks to having friends he could spend time with. But the thought of never seeing his family again, never spending another holiday with them, hit him like a sack of bricks. If he hadn't been ordered to join the family for supper, he'd have stayed locked in his room, crying into his pillow over what he'd lost.

Even the meal itself was a celebration of despair. Aunt Sally's

turkey was so dry it sucked all the moisture out of Clay's mouth and scraped painfully down his throat when he swallowed. The mashed potatoes were salty enough to cause a stroke, and all three vegetables—corn, cauliflower, and peas—swam in a watery cream sauce that only differed in temperature from the skim milk Clay had in his glass. The gravy was a brown, congealed mass. Obscene islands of yellow oil and white turkey skin floated on top of it.

All of which was heaven compared to eating with the Martin family.

Bud and Uncle Roy dug into their food as if they hadn't eaten in weeks, scooping seconds and thirds onto their plates before they even finished their first servings. Between belches, snorts, and chewing noises, the only sentences they spoke all began with
"Pass the" or "Hand me the."

Kelly wasn't much better, shoveling food into her mouth like a man loading coal on a train, but she at least had the grace not to speak. That duty was left to Aunt Sally, who kept asking the table in general if 'everything was okay,' who 'needed more of this or that,' and 'didn't the turkey come out so much better than last year?' She seemed oblivious to the fact that no one answered her.

Clay was actually grateful he'd been seated next to Tammi, who ate nothing but three slices of buttered white bread and spent most of her time texting x-rated messages to a series of different boys. At least she wasn't spraying food from her mouth or reaching over him as if he wasn't there.

When dessert came out, Clay had to hold back a groan. Apple pie, the same thing his mother always made for the holidays. Another reminder of what he'd lost. Except her pies had never been soggy, pale abortions cowering inside undercooked dough. One bite was all it took for Clay to know he'd be on the toilet all night if he finished the pile of grossness on his plate.

"Can I be excused? I'm awfully full." He knew his uncle and Bud would remain at the table until every last bit of death-pie was gone, and he wasn't sure he could watch that without puking.

Aunt Sally quickly dashed his hopes of an easy escape.

"Not yet, dear. There's a lot of dishes to clean, and we all take turns doing it. This year, it's your turn."

"What? Why…?"

"Well, you're the only one here who hasn't done it before, right? So if you don't feel like eating no more, go ahead and get started."

Figuring anything had to be better than watching the endless gluttony at the table, Clay went into the kitchen, anticipating a pile of greasy pots and dishes to wash.

Instead, he found a mountain.

There was a moment when he was sure his aunt had purposely held off on doing dishes for a week just to make his life miserable. A person couldn't possibly use that many pots, pans, dishes, bowls, and utensils to cook one meal. And there were still all the plates and silverware in the dining room that hadn't come in yet.

Clay groaned, realizing the true nature of the monumental task before him. It would take two, maybe three hours to wash, dry, and put away the Everest of dishes and cookware.

And John and the others were waiting for him.

I could just sneak out. Say fuck it and go.

So strong was the impulse that he found himself walking towards the back door before he was even aware his feet were moving. His hand was already reaching for the knob when a snide voice broke his trance.

"Goin' somewhere, Spot? Doesn't look like you're done yet."

Clay turned and saw Bud approaching him, an evil sneer on his face and a bowl of creamed corn in his hands. Before he had a chance to move, Bud took a huge step forward and dumped the bowl right on Clay's chest.

Rivers of cold, gooey corn ran between the shirt buttons and down Clay's belly. More slid down the front of the shirt and onto his pants and sneakers.

That was when something inside Clay snapped.

"You asshole! I'll kill you!" He threw himself at Bud, fists swinging, not caring that his cousin was five inches taller and twenty pounds heavier.

And promptly found himself on his back, struggling to breathe.

"You fucking little shit." Bud had his arm pulled back, ready to throw another punch. "I am so gonna kick your ass for that. And the best part is, you won't ever know when it's coming."

"What's going on in here?" Uncle Ed came into the kitchen, his eyes widening when he saw the mess on the floor.

"Clay threw food at me," Bud said, taking advantage of Clay's inability to speak. "So I threw some back. Then he slipped and fell on his ass."

"Nuh..nuh…no," Clay gasped. He pointed at Bud. "He…started…"

"I don't care who started it." Uncle Ed glared at them both. "This ain't the place for goddamned food fights. It's a waste of hard earned money. You want to throw food, buy your own and do it outside. Now clean this place up." He opened the 'fridge, grabbed a beer, and went back out to the dining room, grumbling the entire time about 'wasteful ingrates.'

Bud wiped corn off his shirt and flicked it at Clay. "Get to work, douchebag. Looks like you got a lot of cleaning to do." He flipped Clay his middle finger and headed upstairs.

"Fuck you," Clay whispered to the empty kitchen. "Fuck all of you."

* * *

By the time Clay finished cleaning the kitchen, it was well past nine o'clock. Uncle Ed was already asleep in his recliner and Aunt Sally had gone to bed an hour earlier, claiming 'exhaustion' from all the work she'd done. Bud and Tammi were long gone, and Kelly was locked in her room, music blaring to wake the dead she adored so much.

How pissed would she be to find out that not only were ghosts real, but even they *found Tammi more attractive. That might just push her over the edge and out the window.*

Thinking about death brought Clay's mind back to the incident in the kitchen. As he changed his shirt, he considered all the different options. Have John and the others beat the shit out of Bud? Arrange

an ‘accident?’ Or maybe just sneak into his room when he was sleeping and…

And what? Kill him? It was one thing to watch while four ghosts killed a bully. It was another thing altogether to kill your own cousin. He’d be the prime suspect in that murder case for sure, unlike the death of a kid who half the school had a grudge against.

“I’ll ask John. He’ll know what to do.”

After quickly changing his clothes, Clay hurried across the back field to the trail that led to the Cold Spot. When he got there, John and the others were already halfway through a case of Old Vienna.

“What happened, dude? We thought maybe you weren’t gonna make it.”

Clay took a beer and told them what had happened.

“Well, that’s interesting,” Brian said. “We saw your cousin like an hour ago, heading down to the river with some of his buddies.”

“The river?” Clay couldn’t imagine why his cousin would be there.

“Yeah.” Ricky lit a cigarette. “There’s a bunch of juniors and seniors who have this spot where they party, not far from where we dumped your friend Billy. Like a little beach. They even got some old picnic tables and a fire pit. Sometimes we sneak down after they’ve been partying and take any leftover beers.”

“Maybe we should take a look, see what they’re up to.” John stood up and motioned for Clay to grab some beer. “Don’t want to get thirsty on the way.”

“If we get him alone, are we gonna kick his ass?” Clay asked, walking alongside John.

“I dunno. It’s your fight. Maybe we’ll just hold him for you. Let you get your licks in.”

Clay imagined the look on Bud’s face as he was held down while his own little cousin delivered a beating. Should he go for the mouth and nose? Bloody him up real good? Or maybe a good hard kick to the balls?

He was so lost in thought that he walked right into Chuck’s back before he noticed the ghosts had stopped.

John signaled for Clay to join him behind a wide oak tree.

"Down there. See?" John pointed to a long stretch of sand that paralleled the river. Two picnic tables sat on either side of a dying fire. An empty case of beer sat on one table, and bottles littered the area. The only two people in view were Bud and a girl Clay recognized from school, Missy something, a real burn-out.

At the moment, she had her mouth plastered against Bud's and he had a hand inside her coat.

"Now what?" Clay whispered.

"We wait." John smiled, his face moon-pale in the darkness. "Sooner or later, one of them's gonna have to take a piss."

It didn't take long. Missy broke their embrace, whispered something in Bud's ear, and took off into the woods.

"Time to have some fun." John nudged Clay forward. "Go ahead. I'll be right behind you."

Clay made his way down the slope, the rough bark of the tree trunks scraping his hands as he used them to keep his balance on the slippery, frost-coated leaves. He was almost all the way to the bottom before Bud noticed him.

"Hey, who's…what the fuck? Spot? What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm here to kick your ass. I'm sick of you treating me like shit, and I'm not gonna take it anymore." Clay stopped, surprised by his own words. Behind him, John clapped his hands softly.

Bud's look of confusion changed to anger as he recognized John. "Oh, you brought your pal to help you? I'll fuck you both up. And I think I'll start with you." He pointed at John. "I owe you big time."

John joined Clay, facing Bud from a distance of only ten feet. "Anytime you're ready."

Fist clenched, Bud took a step forward, his lips twisted in anticipation of violence. John's expression was just the opposite, calm, almost blank.

Somewhere in the woods, a girl screamed.

Bud paused and turned his head. "Missy?" His voice rose. "Missy, was that you? Are you okay?"

In the split second that Bud's attention shifted, John charged

forward, catching the taller boy by surprise. His first punch connected with Bud's mouth, sending him stumbling backwards. His next was a solid blow to the stomach that knocked Bud to the ground, where he lay doubled up, his breath coming in hoarse wheezes.
Blood ran from his split lips as he looked up at John.

"Pfthuck u, ath hole."

John smiled and kicked him in the head.

Clay gasped at the meaty, solid *thunk* of John's boot hitting Bud's temple. It was the kind of sound that made you think of a watermelon landing on the floor. Thick and yet sort of hollow. He stood stunned while John leaned down and grabbed Bud under the shoulders.

"Give me a hand, will you? Your cousin ain't light."

"What are you going to do?" Clay asked, grabbing Bud's ankles and lifting.

"*I'm* not going to do anything. This is your show now. All I'm doing is making sure you have the advantage this time."

Clay remained silent as they carried Bud to a nearby tree and propped him against it.

"Hold him there," John said. "I'll be right back." He disappeared into the woods before Clay could ask any questions. Hands against Bud's chest, Clay hoped John returned before Bud woke up, or John and the others were going to be cleaning the bloody mess that used to be their friend. His worries barely had a chance to take root, however, before John came back with a coil of rope in his hands.

"What's that for?" Clay had a scary image of Bud hanging by his neck from the tree.

"We're gonna tie him to the tree. When he comes to, you can do whatever you want. Hit him. Piss on him. Scream at him. Or just leave him there 'til someone finds him. Whatever tickles your nuts."

John showed Clay how to wrap the rope around and around, binding Bud's body and arms securely to the tree before tying a confusing knot Clay couldn't have repeated in a million years.

Clay was just stepping back to admire their handiwork when Bud let out a groan and opened his eyes.

"Wha…what…" He blinked several times and then his senses

seemed to come back. “Clay, what did…you tied me to a fuckin’ tree?” He twisted his body back and forth, veins bulging in his forehead with the effort to try and free his arms, but John’s bindings held tight. “You fuckin’ little shit. I’m gonna kill you when I get loose. You hear me? You can’t keep me here forever, you little freak. I will —”

Clay drove his fist into Bud’s stomach as hard as he could. “I’m not a freak!”

“Fuh…fuhking fuh…freak,” Bud gasped.

A dark red blanket of rage descended over Clay’s thoughts. All the taunts, all the insults, all the fists he’d endured over the years, all of it combined to overload his brain, leaving only an anger that burned brighter than an atomic explosion.

“I’M NOT A FREAK! STOP CALLING ME THAT!”

The next few minutes were a blur. Clay couldn’t see, couldn’t think. There was pain in his hands, but it was distant, dull. He heard nothing but his own voice shouting “Who’s a bad dog now, huh? Who’s a bad dog now?”

A sharper, more immediate pain erupted in his hand and the rage disappeared, the red and black clouds dissipating like thunderheads after a storm. As the darkness faded, his vision returned and he found himself staring at his own hands. They looked like he was wearing red gloves.

Before he could process what that meant, something else caught his eye. One of the fingers on his left hand was sticking out at a forty-five degree angle from its fellow digits.

That’s when the pain became real.

“Aaaah!” The scream tore from his throat. Without thinking, he grabbed his injured hand with his good one. There was a sound like wet wood popping in a campfire and his injured finger shifted sideways, the movement accompanied by an agony so intense it was like a cherry bomb detonating inside his hand. Then it was gone as fast as it had come, the burning-hot pain replaced by a duller, belly-turning ache. He opened his hands and saw all his fingers were pointing in the correct direction again.

"Dude, that must've hurt." John's voice. The ghost put a sympathetic arm around Clay's shoulders, which sent tiny sparks of hurt through his injured finger and caused him to groan. "I dislocated my thumb once. Fucker hurt for two weeks. You'll be fine, though. It'll swell like a bastard, but keep it taped up and you'll be good to. Now, tell me, was it worth it?"

"Was what worth it?" Clay looked at John, who was pointing straight ahead of them. He let his gaze follow the line of John's finger, right to…

His first thought was they'd found a dead deer on the road and tied it to a tree. That didn't make sense, though, 'cause why would anyone put clothes on a deer? Then he remembered.

Bud.

His cousin's head hung down. Blood covered Bud's clothes, big, red splotches of it on his shirt and pants, even on his shoes. More of it matted his hair into thick clumps.

"Jesus, did I do that?" Clay looked down at his hands, gloved in his cousin's blood.

I couldn't have. Not me. John must've…

"Shit, you sure as hell did. I never seen anyone go to town like you did." John went to Bud and lifted his head.

Clay gasped.

Bud's nose was a flattened, crooked piece of flesh dripping gobs of red and green slime. His lips were split in so many places they looked like he'd chewed barbed wire. At least four of his teeth were missing. Both of his eyes were swollen shut. Greenishbrown bruises had already started to appear beneath the blood that coated his face and dripped from one ear. He looked…dead.

Is he? Did I kill him?

The thought of it no longer engendered the same feelings in Clay. Now the idea of killing someone—killing his own cousin!—with his bare hands suddenly seemed worse than any teasing, any heartache, he'd ever endured.

John let go of Bud's head and it dropped down. When his chin hit his chest, a low groan, barely audible, escaped from between his

grotesquely deformed lips.

"He's alive!"

John nodded. "And now it's up to you to choose how he dies."

"What?" Clay stopped in the act of moving towards his cousin. He wasn't sure what he'd been going to do—apologize? Hug him? Set him free?—but John's words halted him in his tracks. "No. Why would I do that?"

With a shrug, John motioned at Bud. "Because he's already dying, thanks to you. Concussion, maybe a bone into the brain, maybe organ damage. Hard to say. But he's definitely on the way out. Take it from someone who's been there, who's seen it more times than I want to remember. Now it's just a matter of choosing how he goes."

Clay shook his head, unable to find any words.

"Listen." John poked Bud in the chest. This time there was no response. "You can take him to the hospital, where not only will he suffer for hours before he kicks, but you'll get arrested for killing him. Or, you can leave him here, and he'll slowly freeze to death, or maybe his heart will just give out. Either way, you're talking a long, painful demise. Then
there's the third way."

"The third way? What's that?" Clay didn't want to think of his cousin dying at all, let alone in the manner John suggested.

"Fast and quick. Put him out of his misery, just like you'd do to a dog that got hit by a car. Let him go with some dignity."

John reached behind the tree and picked something up. Turning, he held the object out to Clay.

It was a knife.

No, it was more than a knife. It was a fucking sword of a knife, a giant, shiny blade that would have seemed large in Rambo's hands.

Clay took it, his hands shaking as he accepted the heavy weight. "I…I can't."

"Clay-man. I won't lie. It'll be hard. But don't think of it as murder. Think of it as…release. You're releasing him from the pain. And, at the same time, you're releasing your own pain, the pain that he caused you every day. Calling you Spot. Telling you to go fetch.

Humiliating you in front of your friends and family."

John pressed his hands over Clay's, squeezing them around the rubberized grip.

"One second, and then you'll be free forever."

Echoes of past torment rebounded inside Clay's head. The names. The fights. The food thrown at him in the cafeterias.

Just like Bud did to you tonight.

It was the memory of Bud's earlier aggression, the sticky corn sliding down his shirt in cold, gummy rivers, that did it for Clay. He didn't know if it was his voice or John's reminding him of it, and he didn't care.

He took the knife and ran at Bud, holding the blade in front of him like a crazed soldier charging the enemy one last time.

Cold steel slid into Bud's flesh as easy as cutting air. The force of Clay's attack sent the knife all the way through and into the tree trunk, jarring Clay's shoulders. He tried to pull it out but it wouldn't move.

Bud gave a long, shuddering gasp, bloody spittle dripping over his lips, and then fell silent. Clay waited for him to breathe again, for his chest to rise and fall, but the body remained still.

It was over.

Clay stared at the corpse, his heart pounding, his breath heavy and deep as if he'd just completed a race.

I did it. I stood up for myself, showed him, showed them all, that I'm not gonna take any shit anymore, from anyone. And if someone in school fucks with me, they'll end up the same way.

He turned around, intending to ask John what they were going to do with the body.

Except John was no longer behind him.

Glancing around, Clay saw him heading towards the trees, where Brian, Ricky, and Chuck were coming out of the woods, holding another person by the arms. A person staring at Clay with wide, horrified eyes.

Oh, shit. Missy. I forgot about her. She saw everything.

"John? You can't let her tell. I'll go to jail." Clay pointed at Missy.

At that moment, he didn't care what they did to her, as long as he didn't get in trouble. The thought of killing her didn't bother him—it wasn't like he knew her, cared about her. She was probably as big an asshole as Bud; she'd have to be to spend her nights fucking him. So no great loss.

"Don't you worry, Clay-man. She won't be talking to anyone. Ever." Ricky laughed, and the others joined in.

Missy screamed and pulled one arm free. She was still trying to get her other arm loose when Brian punched her in the face. Her screaming stopped and her legs gave out; she would have fallen to the ground if Ricky didn't maintain his grip.

"Strip her," John said, and the other boys immediately started tearing her clothes off—jacket, shirt, pants, underwear—until she stood naked and crying.

"Guys, what are you doing?" The moment he asked, Clay already knew it was a stupid question. John was taking his clothes off as well.

"What's it look like? Time for some fun."

"But I thought…you said…you can't…"

"We lied." John's voice was like the night air, cold and cruel. "Truth is, we can bang just like always. We just like it when they're scared." He motioned with his hand and Ricky forced Missy onto her back.

"What about Bud?" The idea that John had lied, that he was about to rape and kill a girl, didn't make sense, and rather than deal with the confusion Clay's mind reverted back to the main problem. "We can't leave him there."

"Do whatever the fuck you want." John spread Missy's legs and climbed on top of her. "Leave him. Bury him. Toss him in the river. He's your problem now."

The others cheered and clapped as John started moving up and down on the struggling girl. Clay looked away, embarrassment and guilt and a growing sense of betrayal warring with the fear inside him.

"Hey, Spot!" The words stabbed at him like a dagger, but Clay instinctively turned back. Ricky was staring right at him.

"C'mon over and join us. You can hump her leg!"

More laughter, and this time it was all too familiar to Clay. There was no happiness in it, just ridicule, the same kind of laughter he'd heard all his life on playgrounds and in classrooms.

The rage rose up inside him, only this time it wasn't a blinding, hot anger. It was ice cold, frigid as the river behind them, bitter as poison. Clay went to Bud and pulled the knife free, yanking so hard that something tore inside his shoulder. He paid no mind to the pain. Walking calmly and surely, he crossed the small clearing and approached the ghosts, making no effort to hide his intentions. For their part, Chuck, Ricky, and Brian simply watched him, their smiles never leaving their faces. Even when he plunged the blade into John's back, over and over again, the other ghosts just stood there.

John's reaction was not calm by any means. He cried out with each blow, his body twisting and arching. His hands beat at the hard ground. His legs kicked. Clay kept stabbing him, again and again, until finally John stopped moving. Pulling the knife from the body, Clay looked at the others.

"If any of you try to follow me, I'll do the same thing to you. I'm not afraid."

Chuck held up his hands in surrender. Brian nodded. Ricky took out a cigarette and lit it. "Whatever, man. Do what you have to."

Clay turned and ran up the hill, sprinting as fast as he could, unmindful of the branches slapping his face and snagging his jacket. It was only when the path turned from dirt into gravel that he realized the dark and his own haste had sent him the wrong way. Instead of coming out in his uncle's field, he'd ended up behind the town park.

From there it was only a five-minute walk to the police station.

He made it in two.

Bursting into a police station well after midnight, with a bloody knife in his hand, was not the smartest move. In fact, it almost got him shot. But the weapon, combined with his disheveled appearance and extreme desperation, convinced the desk officer to send a patrol unit with Clay to check out his story of stumbling across a murder scene

and killing the boy who'd killed Bud. So it was that less than an hour after leaving Bud's body, Clay was leading the two officers back to it.

Stepping into the clearing, Clay froze in disbelief. John, Chuck, Ricky, and Brian were gone.

The bodies of Bud and Missy were still there, though, Bud's corpse slumped within its bonds and Missy's naked and bloody on the ground.

"Jesus fucking Christ." One of the officers pulled out his radio, started shouting for backup and an ambulance. The other ran to Bud and checked him for a pulse.

Clay ignored them. He was staring at Missy. The knife wounds stood out clear against her pale skin.

"How…she was alive when I left," he whispered. It didn't make sense.

Then suddenly it did.

He'd been stabbing John. Except John was a ghost, wasn't he. And ghosts weren't alive. He remembered how none of the ghosts left footprints when they walked. Was it so hard to believe a knife would go right through one?

And into the living person underneath?

"Oh, no. I killed her, too."

The officer had left Bud and gone to Missy, was shaking his head at the other cop, who was still on the radio. At the same time, they both turned and looked at Clay.

Who realized his only alibi was gone.

Clay turned and ran into the woods, panic overriding any rational thought. He let his legs carry him wherever they wanted to go, his mind filled with nothing but white noise and a desperate desire to not get arrested. He ran through the darkness until his muscles gave out and he collapsed. Rocks and frozen dirt scraped his face and hands, and the force of hitting the ground sent new pains through the shoulder he'd hurt.

Then it all disappeared into blackness.

* * *

It was still dark when Clay woke up. Dark, and much colder than before. He checked his watch and saw he'd only been out for a half hour or so. Rolling over, he noticed a house not far away and wondered if he was dreaming. He blinked several times, but the house remained.

Groaning from the aches and pains that covered every inch of him, he got to his feet and said a heartfelt thank you to his legs for bringing him to the one place he needed to be.

Home.

I can sneak in, leave a note saying I didn't do it, and then pack some clothes and find a place to hide until I can figure out how to solve this mess.

Of course, that wouldn't be easy. Not at all. The only way to possibly save himself was to prove the ghosts existed, and that they'd made him kill Bud and Missy.

Clay paused at the bottom of the driveway. Where would he hide? In the woods? In town? No matter where he went, John and the others would find him.

I'll have to run away. Go somewhere. Then I can contact one of those TV shows, the ones who go on ghost hunts. They have all the right equipment to spot ghosts. Once I prove they exist, I'll be famous. And famous people don't go to jail.

Feeling a little better about his chances, Clay hurried across the yard. He unlocked the front door, careful to close it slowly and quietly behind him. Although he'd only been living there a few weeks, he was familiar enough with the house to make his way down the hall in the dark. He had just put his foot on the first step when the kitchen lights came on behind him.

"Hello, Clay-man."

Even without the nickname, Clay would have recognized John's voice. Cold dread ran through him as he turned and squinted into the glare.

"We've been waiting for you."

Instead of frightening Clay, John's words felt like a godsend. They were all right there, in the house. At night, when anyone could see them.

"Uncle Roy! Aunt Sally! Help! There's someone in the kitchen!"

A moment of silence followed Clay's shout.

"Try again, dude," someone said from farther in the kitchen. It sounded like Ricky.

"Help! Tammi! Kelly! Anyone?"

John stepped forward. His shirt was covered in blood, which Clay knew couldn't be his own.

"You tried to kill me, Clay-man."

"You lied to me." Clay backed up, placing his feet on the second step.

"Yeah, we did." More figures moved within the kitchen. His eyesight adapting to the brightness, Clay spotted Ricky, plus figures behind him he assumed were Chuck and

Brian.

John continued talking. "We lied about a lot. We do that. We're fuckin' ghosts, man. We don't play by your rules."

"Why?" Clay felt a strange need to know the reason behind the betrayal. "Why?" John looked at Ricky and then back at Clay. "Because we needed you. Only you could give us what we wanted."

"What was that?"

"Me." One of the figures came forward. A terrible chill ran through Clay when he saw it wasn't Brian or Chuck.

"Bud?"

His clothes were no longer torn and bloody. His face had healed as well, looking pale but whole. He looked exactly the way he had when he'd left the house after supper.

"Hello, Spot. Glad to see me?"

"No. It can't be. I…" Clay's mouth failed him. His stomach churned, and he thought he might puke.

"You killed me? Yep, you sure did, you little fuck. And don't think I'm not gonna kick your ass for that. But it turns out you did me a favor. See, now I can hang out forever, never worry about getting old, or working a shit job, or getting stuck with some snot-nosed rug rats."

All wrong. This is all wrong!

Clay shook his head. "How…?"

"One thing we didn't lie about." John put his hand on Bud's shoulder. "One of the few ways to become a ghost is to get killed by a family member. You know how hard it is to convince someone to kill a person in their own family? And before they do, you have to be sure the person they kill is someone you want hanging with you for eternity. We've tried before, but no one came through for us. Now, for Bud, we had our sights set on the fat one—"

"Kelly," Bud said.

"—But she never leaves her fuckin' room. And the other one's too busy sucking dick every night. And then *Pow!*" John slapped his hands together, "You came along. A total head case. Dead parents, all the kids make fun of you. It was like God said, 'here, take him. I don't want him.'"

"No. NO!" Clay turned and ran up the stairs. It couldn't be. *Couldn't be!* The people he'd thought his friends had just used him to turn Bud into a ghost? They wanted Bud over him?

Not fair. *Not fair!*

At the top of the stairs, he headed for his uncle's room. How they hadn't woken up with all the noise he didn't know, but he'd wake him up now, he'd tell him –

Clay's feet slid out from underneath him and he landed hard on his back. Cold wetness seeped through his pants and covered his hands as he tried to push himself up. More lights came on; the hallway, the bedrooms.

Every light in the house, blazing.

He was lying in a pool of blood, the metallic stink of it filling the air around him. Raising his head, he saw the bodies of Uncle Ed and Aunt Sally in their bed, dozens of kitchen knives sticking out of them, turning them into human porcupines.

"Don't worry, Spot, I didn't do it." Bud stood in the doorway, snickering. "Last thing we need is those two assholes living forever, right?"

"And he didn't do his sisters, either," John said. "One of our club rules. No bitches allowed."

"Yeah. Who the hell wants to spend the next couple of hundred

years with some yapping gash?" Ricky entered the room, his clothes just as bloody as John's. "When we feel like getting laid, we find ourselves a nice girl, like Missy. Thanks for solving that problem for us, too, by the way."

"He can't be a ghost." Clay sat up and pointed at Bud. Everything was suddenly clear in his mind. It was a test. Or a dream. But it couldn't be real. "His body was still tied to the tree when I brought the police back. You were all buried in the old cemetery. The Cold Spot. That's part of coming back. You said so."

John shook his head. "You really are stupid. We lie, remember? Where you get buried doesn't matter. Only the killing."

"But…the Cold Spot…it's not natural."

"You could be right about that. See, the reason our parents buried us in that cemetery was because they found out what we did there at night."

"What you…?"

"Devil worship, they called it." John licked some blood off his fingers. "We didn't take it real serious. Sacrificed a few animals, read some spells from books we stole from the library. It was cool, you know? Different. But our parents…they were real strict when it came to religion. Told us to stop. And when we didn't…"

John drew his finger across his neck like a knife.

The last of Clay's mental defenses gave way, defeated. Nothing was as he'd thought; all of it was lies. He hung his head. "So now you're gonna kill me, too?"

"We were gonna, but Bud here had a better idea."

Tears ran down Clay's cheeks, and he didn't look up as the boys moved closer. "I don't care. Whatever." And it was true. Nothing mattered anymore. Coldness took root inside him and expanded, eating away the last of his hopes and dreams. He'd always be the freak, always be the one with no friends. Better dead than a life like that. And he knew they were going to kill him, no matter what they said.

After all, they lied.

Something hard struck him in the back of the head, and everything

went dark.

* * *

"Hey, Clay, wanna do a puzzle with me?"

Clay glanced away from the TV, where a funny baby with a footballshaped head was pointing a ray gun at his mother. The baby's name was… Clay couldn't remember, but it didn't matter. He was a bad baby. Mothers were nice. Clay remembered his own mother, sort of. Nice. And there was a dog…

"Clay. Please help me with the puzzle." It was Kevin. He was two years older than Clay but he still liked baby games. Sometimes Clay did, too. They were easy, and he didn't have to think.

"Sure, I'll help." Clay moved his chair over to the table where Kevin was moving puzzle pieces around. Kevin was one of his many friends at the hospital. Kevin, Sam, Dotty, Billy…after his arrest, he'd never expected to make friends. But here at the hospital, no one cared what he looked like. Or what he'd done. They just liked to talk, and play.

The drugs helped with that. They made everyone happy and kind of sleepy. But that was okay, too. There were worse things than happy and sleepy. Sometimes at night…sometimes he remembered those things. Then the orderlies would have to give him extra pills to stop the screaming.

"It's almost Christmas," Kevin said. He'd been saying it all week. Kevin was a big Christmas fan. He had the day circled on his calendar. "Only five days. Five days 'til

Christmas."

Clay knew Kevin was looking forward to Christmas because it meant his family would bring him toys. But for Clay, it meant something else. It would be one month since they put him in the hospital. He'd been so scared. And now he wasn't. Because now he had friends. Real friends, not fake ones.

And no one ever teased him.

"Here." He handed Kevin a cardboard shape with a piece of a tiger's nose on it. "Put this one there." He tapped an empty place on the board.

"Thanks." Kevin smiled, and Clay smiled back.

Happy and sleepy and *safe*.

* * *

"Hey, Spot. Wake up."

Strong hands shook Clay's shoulder. He opened his eyes. He tried to scream, but another hand covered his mouth.

John, Bud, Ricky, Chuck, and Brian stood around his bed. In the dim glow of the nightlight in the ceiling, they finally looked more like ghosts than living people.

"Took us a long time to find you, Spotty," Bud said. He leaned forward and gave Clay's nipple a vicious twist. Clay cried out again, but Chuck's wide palm muffled the sound.

"But now we know where you are, we can visit anytime we want." Ricky pulled the sheets down and grabbed Clay's underwear, yanked it up hard in a reverse wedgie that tore the elastic and squeezed his balls painfully together.

"And we'll be watching you, even when you can't see us." John waved and then walked through the wall. The others followed. Bud was the last to leave.

"See ya tomorrow, Spot."

Clay's screams didn't stop until the orderlies stuck him with a needle. Even then, as they tied the white coat around him and sleep started to claim him, he knew the screams would come back.

Just like the ghosts.

About the Author

A life-long resident of New York's haunted Hudson Valley, JG Faherty has been a finalist for the Bram Stoker Award® (Ghosts of Coronado Bay, The Cure) and ITW Thriller Award (The Burning Time), and he is the author of five novels, nine novellas, and more than 50 short stories. He writes adult and YA dark fiction/sci-fi/fantasy, and his works range from quiet suspense to over-the-top comic gruesomeness. He enjoys urban exploring, photography, classic B-movies, good wine, and pumpkin beer. As a child, his favorite playground was a 17th-century cemetery, which many people feel explains a lot.

He is also a member of the Horror Writers Associations' Board of Trustees as well as the head of the HWA's Library & Literacy program, and an active member of the Science Fiction Writers of America, Mystery Writers of America, International Thriller Writers, and Romance Writers of America. You can follow him at www.twitter.com/jgfaherty, www.facebook.com/jgfaherty, http://about.me/jgfaherty, and www.jgfaherty.com.

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