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1

A HOWL IN THE NIGHT

The howl woke me up.

Actually, it was more of a screeching *eeeeoh-eeeeoh-EEEEEE-oo!*

I sat bolt upright and banged my head into the low slanted ceiling over the right side of my bed. “Ow!” So much for my nice dream about hitting the tie-breaking home run.

I’d hit my head about a hundred times since we moved from the farmhouse to King’s Grove in the suburbs at the beginning of summer.

I glanced sideways at my purple Nickelodeon Time Blaster clock. For now, it sat on a folding chair on the unslanty-ceiling side of my bed. The goo-green numbers glowed 4:00 a.m. At 6:30 sharp on school days, it would

sing out: “Nick-nick-nick-nick-nick-nick-nick-nick-nick-nick-uh-lo-dee-uhnnn!” The first day at my new school, August 29, 1995, was only a couple weeks away.

I flopped back onto my pillow, just as something white with black spots and the size of my little sister hurtled through the gray dark. She landed—all pointy knees and elbows—right onto my belly.

“*Oof!*” The wind rushed out of me.

The howl must have woken up Midge, too, who was dressed in her favorite 101 Dalmatian pajamas.

Apparently, the Foolproof Anti-Sister Room Alarm I’d rigged up wasn’t so foolproof. Sheesh. Little sisters are no respecters of territorial boundaries.

“Did you hear that, Jack?” she whisper-screamed into my face.

I could smell her morning breath. And chocolate. How Midge always manages to smell like a Tootsie Roll, I have no idea.

“It came from the cem-e-terrrryy!”

Adams Cemetery is on the corner, and our new house is the first house on the block and right next door to the old graveyard, the most ancient tombstones jutting out of the grass like jagged bottom teeth.

Even though both of our bedrooms are in the attic, Midge’s room was technically about ten feet closer to whatever was out there. I know there’s no such things as ghosts.

And there definitely aren't wolves in the suburbs of Chicago.

I shoved her off. Kicking and flailing, I untangled myself from the sheet and scrambled into the dormer window—what my dad calls a doghouse. The window juts out of the slanted ceiling right beside my bed. There's plenty of room for a guy to sit and do important man thinking.

“Yes, the doghouse!” Midge squished in beside me.

So much for plenty of room.

My second-story window looks out over Cherry Avenue. From here, I mostly see bushy treetops. But I can also see the streetlamp standing kitty-corner to my right where Cherry makes a T with Oak Street—my friend Ellison's street. The sidewalk below—heading right—eventually dead ends at the forest preserve. And—heading left—it leads to the cemetery next door.

I slid the top window sash down.

We pressed our faces against the screen. The air smelled like musty metal and wet grass.

Another sound echoed from farther away. A racket of *yeee-ooowwwls* scratched like fingernails over the dark.

“Ghosts.” Midge's voice vibrated the screen.

All my life (I was already ten as of June 2), we'd lived with my grandparents on their farm in Goodnow. I was used to the sound of stray dogs howling at night. Sometimes packs of them roamed the fields. Sometimes they snatched chickens. Before I'd go to bed, I would always make sure my pet

chicken, Henrietta, was locked up safe in the coop.

These howls were different. They sounded almost . . . human.

Midge tugged my arm. “Can we catch a ghost, puhleezzzz? After all, Mom said you can’t have a dog. She didn’t say anything about ghosts.”

I tried to imagine playing fetch with a ghost. But I was still working on convincing my mom how much I needed a *dog*.

Maybe a stray dog was outside, searching for a nice kid like me—smart (no matter what fourth grade math said). Good throwing arm. Nice to animals.

I imagined he’d have sticky-outy fur around his snout and ears and over his eyes. He’d be white with splotches of brown and black. Or black with splotches of white and brown. He’d sit next to me in the window seat—right where Midge was still yanking on my arm and begging to go investigate. When I’d say “Good, um, Snickers? . . . Rex? . . . Spot?” he’d nuzzle my hand with his wet nose. And he’d be one of those dogs that looks like they’re smiling at you when they pant.

That settled it. “Fine,” I said, shaking my arm free. I crawled out of the window seat and over my bed. “Let’s go catch . . . whatever is out there.”

Midge whisper-howled in agreement.

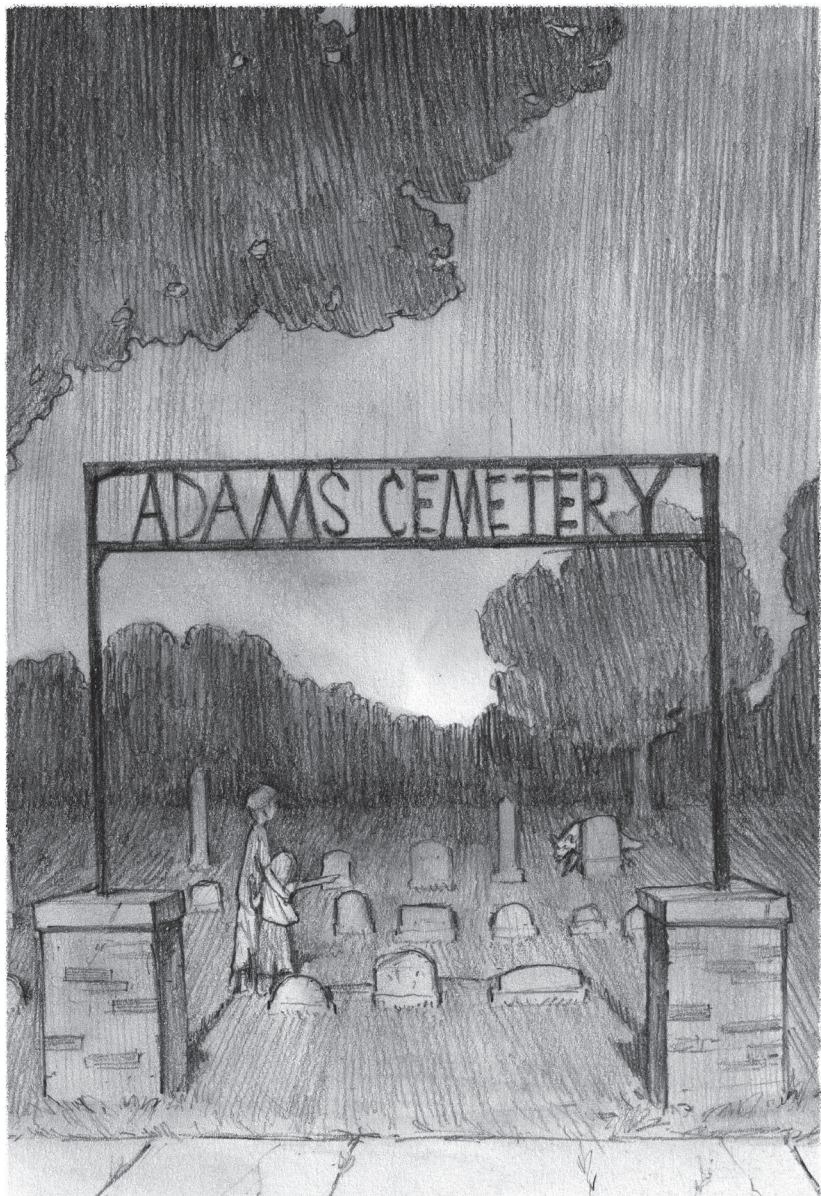
THE GRAY GHOST

We crept around the end of the tall wooden fence that divided our side yard from the cemetery. We stood there in our pajamas, like weirdos, in the cool, dewy grass at the corner of the graveyard.

The fifteen or so rows of tombstones glowed in the hazy light of the streetlamp where the sidewalk ended at the corner of Cherry and Main. I strained my eyes, searching for—I didn't know what.

Some of the tombstones stood tall and shiny with clear words and dates carved into them. Others jutted out of the ground like nubby, chipped teeth.

Midge shivered behind me. Her death grip on the back of my superhero pajama shirt felt way less annoying than



it would have in the daylight. Not that Midge wouldn't come through in a pinch. She was "scrappy" (Grandma's words). But also prone to a left hook "not befitting a Christian young lady" (Dad's words).

I crept ahead, and Midge stuck to my back like a wet leaf. My bare toes caught in the long wet grass, and I lurched ahead. Luckily, there were lots of grave markers to break a guy's fall. I grabbed the edge of an arched tombstone worn smooth on the edges, like the other ones that were so old you couldn't read the names.

I wished I had my camping lantern, but it was in the fort I shared with my friends, the Tree Street Kids. The lantern light might have spooked the gray shadow slinking behind the last row of tombstones at the back of the cemetery.

"Jack, what's that?" Midge pointed at it.

A dark, dog-shaped shadow peeked around the edge of the tombstone. The yellow eyes stared right back at me. And it definitely wasn't smiling at us.

I had never seen one in real life, but I knew what it was: a coyote. I figured it had come from Crooked Creek Woods, the massive forest preserve north of our neighborhood. It'd probably been letting its family know where it was.

Which was more than I could say for me and Midge. If I let Midge get eaten, I'd be grounded for life. I needed to figure something out. And fast—

Midge jumped out from behind me. "BOO!" she shouted

at the animal. She waved her spaghetti-noodle arms over her head. "I'm the ghost of Christmas presents!"

I yanked her back behind me just as the yellow eyes blinked out. The shadow spun around. The coyote was blocked by the fence, and Midge and I were standing smack between him and his path back to the woods.

Panicked, he sprinted toward us . . . then, *whoosh*, in a flash of gray fur, he darted past us and around the end of the tall fence.

We spun around, tripping and scrambling our way back to the sidewalk.

The coyote was already a blur, disappearing down Cherry toward the woods.

"Were you trying to get eaten?" I grabbed Midge by the hand. We needed to get back into the house before Mom and Dad woke up. "And it's the Ghost of Christmas *Present*, not presents."

Midge skipped to keep up as I hauled her down the sidewalk, past the end of our driveway, and across our side yard.

"You're supposed to make yourself look big and scary when you see a coyote."

Midge tosses out science-y facts like I do empty candy wrappers.

"Maybe you just looked like a bigger snack," I said. "Besides, coyotes should stay in the woods where they belong."

“Maybe he didn’t want to move to the suburps, either,” she said. “Just like you.”

“It’s *suburbs*, not burps,” I said, instead of admitting she might be right.

We hurried across the dewy grass, the bottoms of my pajama pants plastered to my ankles.

The sunrise was smearing pink across the sky. Mom and Dad would be awake any second. We scrambled up the back porch steps and halted at the back door.

“Shhh! Don’t make a peep.” I slowly pulled open the squeaky screen door. I turned the doorknob and carefully pushed open the back door.

The smell of coffee whacked me in the face.

“Uh-oh!” Midge said. “Smells like trouble.”

We tiptoed up into the kitchen.

Yep. Even bigger trouble than Dad being awake.

Mom stood at the counter, about to take a sip of coffee. Calmly, she turned and glared at us through the steam rising from her cup.

The light of the fluorescent bulb over the coffeepot twitched across her face.

After just being in the cemetery, I imagined the whole scenario might have looked like a spooky *Goosebumps* episode. Except this was real-life scary. You get grounded in real life.

She took a long sip and closed her eyes. Without even opening them she said: “Okay. In ten words or less, please.”

Before I could build a short, punishment-proof, mom-acceptable answer—

“Catching coyotes!” Midge blurted.

Mom’s eyes got crazy wide.

How do moms do that? I don’t ever want to *see* the eyes in the *back* of their heads.

Dad shuffled into the kitchen and straight to the coffee pot. “Moor-in,” he mumbled, behind Mom. He poured coffee into the “Daddy Saurus-rex” mug Midge had given him for his birthday three years ago. Then he turned and squinted over Mom’s shoulder. “Why are you two up”—he took a slurp of coffee—“and covered in grass?”

“We were in the ceme—” Midge started.

I reached around the back of her head and clamped my hand over her mouth. “We heard a noise.”

Midge licked my palm.

Blech. That always made me let go. I wiped my hand on my already trashed pajama pants.

“It was a coyote hiding behind the tombstones!” She dropped to her knees, raised her head, and let loose an irritating—but impressive—yowl.

“Jack, I know how much you’ve been wanting a dog, but we just can’t adopt the local wildlife.” Dad chuckled at his coyote joke.

Mom didn't.

This seemed a perfect time to change the subject. "So, Dad . . . speaking of dogs . . ."

"What if that animal had attacked you?" Mom asked, ignoring my excellent segue.

Midge crawled to mom on all fours. She wagged her pretend tail and pretended to beg.

Mom absentmindedly petted Midge's head.

I wondered if I acted like a dog if I'd be in less trouble.

"It could have had rabies. Do you know how painful rabies shots are? Do you know how long the needle is?"

Mom always knows just what to say to make a kid sorry for ever stalking wild animals in cemeteries at 4:00 a.m.

"I'm talking to you too, ma'am." She simultaneously snapped and pointed at Midge. (Another cool Mom trick.)

"This isn't the country, kids," Dad said, yawning. "There's busy roads and far more people and thousands of acres of forest preserve. Not tractors and cows and cornfields. The suburbs are a different world."

That was for sure. Compared to the country, the suburbs were Jupiter.

"You kids get cleaned up," Dad said. "As long as we're all up, I'll start the pancakes."

My chance to focus my parents' minds on a furry, loving, loyal, and very tame pet streaked away, just like the elusive coyote.