

MYSTERY IN CROOKED CREEK WOODS



AMANDA CLEARY EASTEP


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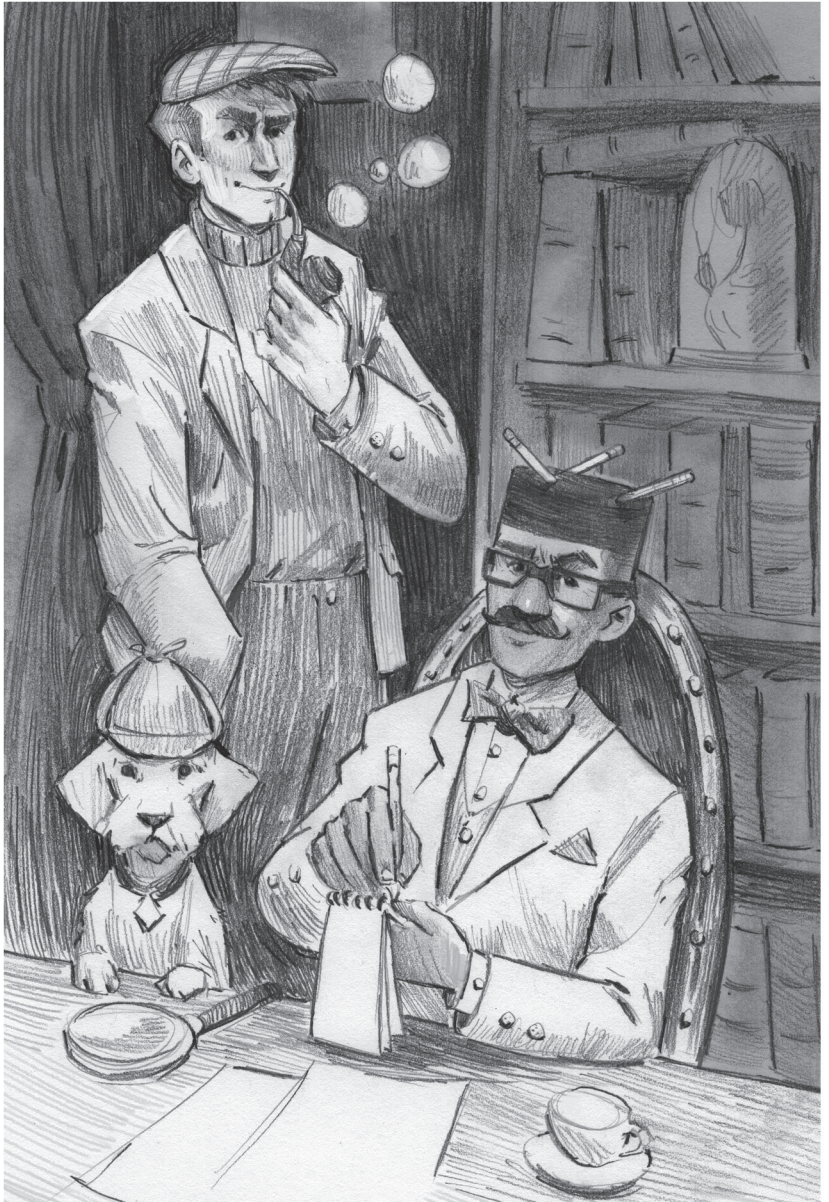
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ON THE CASE

 “My goldfish has been kidnapped!” the woman wailed, as she burst through the door of the Dewey, Ketchum . . . and Howe! Detective Agency.

Like a tornado of pink and smelly “grandma” perfume, she cleared a path across the office, sending chairs, important papers, and empty fruit snack wrappers flying around the room. “Ohhh, my poor Goldy-woldy! My sweet, sparkly, and very expensive guppy-pup!”

This sounded like a job for Dr. Ellison Dewey, Inspector Jack Ketchum, and their trusty furry sidekick, Howe, the crime-sniffing dog.



Their motto? “Do we catch ‘em? And how!”

“Tell us everything,” Dr. Dewey said from behind his massive desk. He slid a sharpened No. 2 pencil out of his flattop. Three more stuck out of his hair. Dewey had a tiny and ridiculous black mustache, without a whisker out of place. His suit and bow tie were spiffy and cookie crumbless.


Words sputtered from between the lady’s bright pink lips like she’d just discovered her mom had hidden peas in the tuna casserole. (Although it’s unlikely she’d actually eat fish.)

The woman sputtered, “Her name”—SNIFF—“is Goldy! She’s short”—SNORT—“and gold!”

Inspector Jack Ketchum stood next to Dr. Dewey, scratching his head under his plaid cap. He repeated the facts in between puffing on this great, curved pipe (the kind that blows bubbles because smoking is really bad for your lungs).

The doctor jotted them down in his Very Important Clues notebook. “Goldy, the goldfish . . .”

Howe, the crime-sniffing dog, put his paws up on the edge of the desk. His scruffy white, brown, and black fur and his detective hat made him look like the kind

of dog you wouldn't want to mess with. He barked something that sounded like, "Why can't we ever be searching for lost hamburgers?" 

I dotted the end of the question mark with a fat period. "This mystery story is awesome," I said, slapping closed our writing notebook. On the red cover, I'd crossed out "Science, 5th Grade" and added:

*The Case of the Fishnapped Gold Fish
A Dewey, Ketchum, and Howe Mystery*

by Jack Finch and Ellison Henry

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"But is it 'win-the-Young-Authors-contest' good?" Ellison asked.

My scruffy dog, Arrow, jumped up onto my lap where I sat on an overturned five-gallon bucket.

"One slobbery vote for yes," I said. Confident our story was going to win the contest, I sucked down the last of my juice box with a noisy slurp and smashed the box against my forehead.

Ellison and I had been meeting in Da Bomb Shelter for the past week to brainstorm plots. (The 1960s shelter in my next-door neighbor's yard is the official fort of the Tree Street Kids.)

Ellison's right arm was still in a sling after he'd made the most epic touchdown in Deer Creek Lions peewee football history. So I'd been doing all the pencil work.

We now had our first scene written, and the story wasn't due until November.

The first prize for our school's writing competition was a brand-new 1995 XZ 1000 typewriter. (Not that I cared about typewriters. I just like anything that sounds like it's equipped with turbochargers.) The fifty-dollar second prize would be way easier to split between us. And third prize? Welp, Ellison could keep the whole set of *The Boxcar Children*. He is the bookworm.

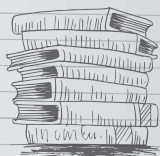
I'd be good with a trophy and five minutes of Deer Creek Christian School fame.

Ellison twirled the end of an imaginary mustache. He was really into his story character. Ellison said he wanted Dewey to be just like Hercule Poirot, the detective in the mysteries written by Agatha Christie.

"*Mon ami*,"¹ Ellison said—he'd also been pretending he was from a country called Belgium—"Eet is not Agatha Christie good. But we have made an impressive start, no?"

ELLISON'S BOOKMARK

Hercule Poirot (pronounced EER-kyul pwa-RO) is a famous Belgian detective in the novels by Agatha Christie. Poirot takes great pride in his neat appearance, especially his well-groomed mustache. That could get messy since the detective is a big fan of hot chocolate.



I had learned over the past week that when a Belgian detective who sounds French asks, “No?” he actually means, “am-i-rite?”

“So if you’re like Hercule Poirot, who am I like?” I asked.

Ellison looked at me like he was checking the notes in his head. “Definitely Encyclopedia Brown, kid detective,” he said.

“Encyclopedia? *You’re* the one who is always quoting stacks of books,” I said. Even my little sister Midge seemed to fit that character better than I did. Her brain was full of more random facts than an entire library reference section.

Ellison gave a sure nod. “You’re also an inventor and a problem solver. That’s kind of what detectives do. They gather all the pieces, then figure out how everything fits

together.” He crooked his index finger and held it underneath his nose. “Besides, I’m the one with the pretend mustache. How do I look?”

“Like you have a finger underneath your nose,” I said.

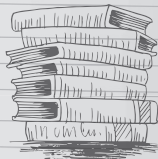
Ellison heaved a sigh. “I suppose I’ll have to settle for an invisible mustache.”

“At least it won’t itch,” I offered.

ELLISON'S BOOKMARK

Leroy “Encyclopedia” Brown² is the ten-year-old main character in a mystery series for kids that’s been around since your grandparents were kids. (That’s a really long time.)

Encyclopedia uses his sharp memory and thinking skills to solve mysteries in his town of Idaville. Like Jack, Encyclopedia has an arch nemesis too—neighborhood bully, Bugs Meany.



“Eureka!” A screech echoed down the concrete shaft of the bomb shelter. A metal spiral staircase in the shaft connected our underground fort to the world above.

A cluck and *bok-awk!* followed.

What sounded like a creature with fluttering wings and the larynx of a third grader floofed and clanged down the metal steps. My little sister, Midge, charged through the open door. In her arms, she cradled my pet chicken, Henrietta.

“I’ve solved the mystery!” Midge cried.

The beam of her headlamp hit me square in the eyes.

I blocked the light with my palm and turned up the camping lantern sitting closest to me. “What mystery?”

Midge set Henrietta on top of the table.

Hen pecked happily at the crumbs of some cheddar cheese goldfish crackers. “The mystery of the vanished brother and his smart, nice, and always impeccably dressed friend,” she said.

I noticed she’d left out any complimentary adjectives to describe me.

“Where else would we be?” I asked. “We’re not in the house, Da Bomb Shelter hatch is open, and we have an author deadline.”

Midge hopped up and down like she was riding a pogo stick. “Ooo, can I be in your story?”

Before I could say no way, no how, not in a bazillion years, Midge laid out her storyline. “I can be an evil genius named Mad Professor Midge who rides a pterodactyl chicken that I captured with cheesy goldfish crackers and a giant

net then brought back in a time machine I built out of pipe cleaners and Popsicle sticks.” She stuck her arms out and zoomed around the room.

“*Bok-bok-bok*,” Henrietta clucked at Midge, cocking her head right-left, right-left.

“Henrietta says that’s science fiction,” Ellison interpreted.

Arrow hopped off my lap and started following Mad Professor Midge around the room. He wouldn’t make a great dog detective like Howe. The barking and tail wagging would give him away fast.

I flipped our writing notebook open again and turned to a clean page. “Besides, we already have a villain.” I started doodling.

“I say, old boy, what villain?” Ellison asked in what I figured was a British accent.

“I thought Hercule Poirot was French,” I said.

“Belgian,” Ellison said, “but I’m trying to sound like Sherlock Holmes.”

Midge zoomed her way back to the doorway and turned toward us.

The fading daylight couldn’t reach the bottom of the shaft now filled with shadows. But the light of the camping lanterns on the table threw an eerie glow across her face.

She glared at us through narrowed eyes. “I am the villainy-est villain in the history of villains!” she cried.

“And you’ll never catch me on my terrifying pterodactyl chicken!” She spread her arms, then threw her head back and crowed, “*Bwah-ha-ha-ha-haaa!*”

“*Bok-AWK!*” Henrietta squawked. She fluttered off the table and—*plop*—right into Midge’s outstretched arms.

Impressive and very villain-y, I had to admit.

Midge spun away. She hopped over the threshold and into the darkening shaft. Her clanging footsteps echoed ominously.

“Impressive,” Ellison said, echoing my thought. He scooched his overturned bucket seat closer to mine. “So, what villain are you talking about? We haven’t gotten that far in the story yet.”

I pushed the notebook toward him and pulled the lantern closer so he could see what I’d doodled. There was only one villain I knew: my arch nemesis and everyone’s favorite neighborhood bully . . .

Buzz

Rublatz

THE MYSTERIOUS BLACK ARROWHEAD

Great news!” Ellison skidded his bike to a stop at the end of our driveway. Gravel crunched and scattered.

He held up his right arm. “No more sling. I’m cleared for riding and writing!”

I popped the front wheel of my bike, excited to get on the forest preserve trail since football practice had been canceled for the day. The Lions still had a few games left in the season. “Can you come back to the team?”

His shoulders slumped. “My wrist is still too weak. But I’ve been exercising.”

Ellison's idea of exercise is lifting books up in front of his face all day.

He made a page-turning motion with his right arm. "This morning I started reading *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. One thousand, one hundred and thirty-seven pages. Great wrist workout."

I'd been itching to try out the bike trail since Roger (our friend on Pine Street) had scouted it out with his older brother and reported back.

About ten minutes later, we met Roger at the trail entrance of Crooked Creek Woods, right where Cherry Avenue ended. The late afternoon sun seemed to set the trees on fire. They blazed red and orange and gold.

"I'm so glad I live in a world where there are Octobers,"³ Ellison said in his book quote-y voice.

As always, Roger, who was from a military family, wore his trusty Army-issue backpack and had his walkie-talkie clipped to his belt. He led us down the familiar gravel hiking trail. After a few minutes he veered right. We entered a tunnel cut through a dense thicket of honeysuckle bushes. The narrow dirt path was nearly hidden by dead leaves and only wide enough for us to ride in single file. Small branches flicked at our jackets and caught at our hair.

We finally emerged from the tunnel of low-hanging branches and green leaves. The trail widened some, twisting

and turning deep into a part of Crooked Creek Woods I'd never been. We followed Roger's lead, move for move.

Duck! Low-hanging twig.

Hug the right to dodge the thorny wild rose branches, invisible until they draw blood on your leg.

Bunny hop over the small washout.

When the trail forked into a Y, Roger hit his brakes. We halted beside him.

At the fork, a huge oak tree—its red leaves blazing—rose like a giant torch. The path to the left was clear and open. On the right, the path—or what may have been one a long time ago—was blocked by a huge fallen tree and a tangle of honeysuckle. Nothing was getting through that.

MIDGE'S PHENOMENAL FACTS

Honeysuckle bushes smell sweet in the spring, and deer love to make their beds under them. But don't let their "sweetness" fool you. These plants are considered invasive species in Illinois where Jack lives.⁴ That means they aren't native to the ecosystem. They grow and spread quickly, taking over and even harming the environment.⁵



“What’s down there?” I asked, pointing at the blocked path.

Roger shrugged. “Just trees and ticks and crazy people.”

“Crazy people?” Ellison said, his head nearly swiveling all the way around.

“Affirmative,” Roger answered. “My brother tried to hike back there in the spring. He made it through the thicket, and *bam*, he runs smack into some guy who starts yelling at him about stomping on some rare species of wildflowers with his Army boots.”

“Was it Hank?” Ellison asked.

Hank was the local forest ranger. He had found me and Midge last summer when we got lost in the woods.

Roger shook his head. “Negative. My brother knows Hank.”

You couldn’t really miss Hank once you met him. Hank was tall and pulled his black hair back in a long, thin ponytail. He didn’t smile, but he wouldn’t yell at anyone.

“He said the guy didn’t look official,” Roger added.

“That’s a clue,” Ellison said. He was in mystery mode. “I’ve never seen Hank wear anything besides his official tan shirt and green pants.”

I started to roll my bike toward the rotting log blocking the path. “If your brother made it past the thicket, maybe we can—”

Just then, the honeysuckle bush on the other side of the log rustled. A bike tire pushed through the wall of leaves.

I froze.

Angry words came next, followed by the rider. Someone's head appeared. The head was bald except for a tall strip of spiky black hair down the middle. Pieces of dead leaves stuck to the spikes. Then a snarling face looked up as the bike and rider emerged from the bushes.

Buzz Rublatz, enemy No. 1.

Buzz didn't even notice us until he'd wrangled his bike over the fallen tree.

We couldn't have made a run for it before he spotted us. So all three of us stood—as my grandpa always says—like deer caught in the headlights.

Buzz straddled his bike and brushed the leaves out of the strip of hair that stood at least five inches high. Then he saw us.

“Finch!” My name came out of him like a messy sneeze.

Before I could say anything, Buzz rolled his bike up to me and shoved his front tire into the side of my bike.

Roger whipped his slingshot out of his back pocket and loaded a fruit snack.

I held up my hand to stop him. Fruit snacks would just be wasted on Buzz Rublatz.

Buzz reached into the front of his jacket. “Hey, Finch, I



bet you've never seen one of these." He pulled out something that hung from a thin leather cord around his neck. Dangling from his fist was a shiny, black arrowhead.

I leaned forward for a closer look. The arrowhead's sharp tip pointed right at me. One of the last rays of sunlight glinted off the glassy rock. Tiny divots ran along the slanted edges where the rock had been carefully chipped away.

It was one of the coolest things I'd ever seen. And I wanted one too. But I played it cool. "Cool. Did you find it back in the woods?" I nodded in the direction of the honeysuckle thicket.

Now Buzz looked like a deer caught in the headlights. "Um, no, there's nothin' back there. My friend gave it to me for helping him out with some, *uh*, chores."

Friend and *helping* were two words I never thought I'd hear Buzz say.

"Can I s-s-see it?" Roger stuttered. He was a brave kid. But Buzz had a way of striking fear even in a kid with an Army-issue backpack. "I know a lot about history."

Buzz glared at Roger like Roger was a fly that had landed in his chocolate pudding. Buzz snatched his hand back, clenching his fist around the arrowhead. Then just as quickly, he opened it back up. He said some words that would have gotten me grounded until 1996.

The super sharp arrowhead had nicked him. Blood ran from a small slice in the middle of his palm. He put the

cord back over his head and tucked the arrowhead back into his jacket. He wiped his bloody hand on his jeans. “Outta my way!”

The three of us got tangled up trying to move out of slugging range.

“Argh, you babies need to stay on the baby trail,” he huffed, pedaling his bike around us and heading back toward the main trail.

We watched till he disappeared down the bike path.

“Hmm, this looks like the Case of the Mysterious Black Arrowhead,” Ellison said in a spooky voice.

“The only mystery,” I said, “is where I can find an arrowhead just like that one.”