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College of DuPage

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CLEMENTINE'S YARD
by Tom Catalano

Most everyone in town just kept the bizarre disappearance of Clementine's young daughter hidden away in the back of their minds. The subject surfaced only occasionally in the barbershop, the grocery store, or some other unlikely place. For the most part, the adults rarely spoke of it at all. But it was a favorite subject among the children. Their fascination for the supernatural (or at least the unnatural) never ceased. Especially at this time of the year - late summer - for that was when it had happened. And today was the exact day.

"Jimmy Duesser told me that he jumped over the fence last year and was there almost all night!"

"And he never got caught?" The 10 year old Skip asked.

"No. He never did," answered Roy.

"What did he see?"

Skip sat silently waiting for the story he knew he would probably not believe.

Roy took his time before answering. He cracked each knuckle on both of his hands. It calmed him down. It drove Skip crazy.

"He didn't see nothin'," he said finally, "No Clementine, no daughter, no nothin'."

Skip sighed and sat back in his chair. "He didn't see nothin'."

Roy looked around slowly at some of the other lunchroom tables to see if anything they had said had been overheard by anyone else. No one was looking at them.

"Look, there's a lot of reasons why we gotta do it." He looked around again. "It was near about 11 years ago she got crooked. And every year on that day, she comes back and somebody sees her. This year it's gonna be us. And besides," he began, "Duesser is always braggin' his head off about some stupid little thing. isn't he? Well, he ain't braggin' ABOUT THAT."

"What's there to brag about, he didn't see nothin'."

"Maybe not. But don't you figure he'd at least brag that he did it?" Roy asked.

"I don't know, maybe..."

"I think he knows somethin'!"

Skip looked at his friend in awe for a moment, ignoring his lunch.

"What could he know? He didn't see nothin'!"

"I think he seen one of 'em and is just too scared to tell any- body what he saw."

"So who cares?" Skip asked, almost inaudibly, then returned to the sandwich that he brought from home. His interest in Clementine was dissipating quickly.

"I care. And you should too," Roy answered. "Somebody has to stay long enough to see what there is to see. See?" Roy laughed and finished his milk.

"You're a retard."

"And you're a chicken!" Skip defended. And I still think you're a retard.

"Look, it'll be easy. Really. Hardly nobody ever goes down there. Until they die, of course!" Again he laughed. "Another reason we gotta do it is that nobody ever spent the night. We'll be heroes! The girls will think we're cooler than 8th graders!"

He saw Skip's head pop up at attention and eyes brighten for the first time since they started talking about the whole idea. Admiration from the girls? That alone may be worth the risk of a confrontation with Clementine, Skip thought.

"I'd be dead if my old man caught me!"

"You sneak out. Tell them you're going to bed, open your window, crawl down the gutter and you're out. Just like you was comin' over to my house. You've done it before."

He had done it before. Just 2 weeks ago, as a matter of fact. And many times before that.

"You're scared."

"I ain'!"

Roy smiled.

Chauky Melville came up to their table. "What's new?" he asked.

"Me and Skip are going to spend the night in Clementine's Cemetery," Roy boasted.

"No kidding?! You guys are real going over there?" He was understandably excited, they were the closest friends he knew that would even attempt it. Except of course for Jimmy Duesser, who no one believed anyway. "For the whole night?"

Skip looked up and saw the excitement beaming from Chauky's eyes. Roy was sitting back in his chair smiling from ear to ear. He knew then that it was decided — more or less.

"When are you guys doing it?"

Roy refused to let his eyes meet Skip's.

"We were just talking about the whole thing now," Skip said, staring directly at his partner.

Chauky wished both of them 'good-luck', grinned, and hurried off to his next class. The sat in silence for a moment.

"Then it's settled," Roy said at last.

"I think it's the stupidest thing I ever heard!"

"You're just chicken."

"I ain't chicken. Skip insisted.

"Anyway, you're in it. Whether you want to be or not. Once Chauky opens his mouth the whole school'll know. It's up to you now. You can go along and be a hero, or stay home and tell everybody you were too scared."

Skip looked down and saw that his milk carton had been crushed. Again, Roy was smiling.

They were to face Clementine and her daughter that very night. On the anniversary of her death. When it was almost certain that she would reappear — or so went the legend.

All through dinner Skip ran the list of preparations through his head. Flashlight, pocket knife, Kleenex, burnt cork — to camouflage his face and hands from evil spirits — and a Milky Way candy bar in case it was a long night. When the time came, he wanted to be ready, physically and mentally, but his mind wandered. It often did when under the pressure of a late homework assignment or having to face his father after doing something wrong. This time it was only slightly different. This time he knew he had even less time to prepare himself.
During dinner he pushed the buttered carrots from one side of the plate to the other. His mind was cluttered with stories... rumors... fears. He had heard most every version of Old Man Clementine’s life since he was old enough to listen.

The most common was that Clementine’s 7 year old daughter had wandered away from the house many years ago and was killed by a spirit which had invaded the Clementine Cemetery next door. Clementine, the caretaker of the only cemetery in Mooseheart County, declared war on all evil spirits and stalked the graveyard every night with a huge ax hoping to catch evil spirits loitering where normal spirits lie in peace. To this day they’ve never even found her body.

Everyone in town knew that an old man who lived alone next to a cemetery at the edge of town with no wife and a dead kid killed by spirits was better off left alone. Usually, everyone took the other road out of town. There were only two.

“Anthing interesting happen at school, Skipper?” his father asked.

Skip immediately looked up after quickly flattening the miniature tombstone he sculptured out of mashed potatoes. His father rarely asked about school. He usually talked about the lumberyard, or putting a new roof on the barn, or some other uninteresting adult stuff. Strange that he should ask about school on that particular evening, Skip thought.

“Will?” asked his mother, “Are you paying attention?”

“Nothing!” he answered.

“Classes okay?” his father asked.

“Fine,” he said, thinking that he’d better come up with some news to avoid suspicion. “Marianne Brewster is going to flunk English.”

After he said it, he was sorry he had. Out of all the trivial news he could have shared why did he choose Marianne? She lived closest to the Clementine place, and all it would take would be to have his father mention that name: Clementine, and the predetermined guilt would be written all over Skip’s face.

He had never before considered himself to be a dishonest kid, but to try and keep a secret the magnitude of stalking Clementine’s property was nearly as dishonest as an out-and-out lie. Not being a good liar, Skip’s father most always caught him whenever he tried. He knew he couldn’t get caught this time, there would be a tanning in it for sure.

He wondered if fathers could read minds. That certainly would explain the persistent school-related questions. He couldn’t be sure, but he wasn’t willing to take any chances. He tried to think of anything besides the cemetery. Anything. It was hard.

The Clementine stories had been a part of the heritage of Mooseheart County for as long as anyone could remember. The more he strained to think of something else, the more his mind seemed to drift back to the cemetery. He began to feel tiny beads of perspiration accumulating on his brow. He had to be careful, if his mother thought he was sick, she would keep a motherly eye on him all night and he would be trapped. He was lucky, she did not see his brow.

“That’s a shame about Marianne,” his father said. Not that interested in Marianne Brewster’s command of the English language, his father redirected the conversation; “Bobbie Allison with child from a boy in Middleton,” he said. Whew! That was adult enough for him to daydream of other things without drawing suspicion. What luck.

After dinner, Skip waited until it was late enough to say he was going to bed. He especially did not want any extra attention tonight. At nine thirty it was time. He usually went to bed at ten, but it wouldn’t be noticed, and he couldn’t wait any longer.

He said goodnight, went up to his room and changed clothes. He stuffed his pockets with all the things he needed to bring, careful not to crush the Milky Way. He replaced the t-shirt he had been wearing with a dark blue sweatshirt. He didn’t have black. Roy said to wear black so that neither Clementine nor the evil spirits would see them. It would mean torturous things if either one did.

He took special caution in tying the laces of his sneakers. If it meant leaving the cemetery in a hurry, he did not want to be slowed by shoes with loose laces. They would surely cause him to trip and fall into the clutches of Old Man Clementine... or worse. Again, Roy’s suggestion. He darkened his face and hands with the burnt cork until he’d begun to look like a black child.

Lastly, there had to be a note. Just in case.

Dear Mom and Dad,

If you are reading this, I must be killed. It was probably Old Man Clementine that done killed me. Roy is probably killed too. Please don’t be mad.

love,

Your son Skip Monroe

He folded the letter in half and propped it up against his pillow. With that, he slowly looked around the room, perhaps he though, for the last time. All his childhood items... a foot ball helmet... his skateboard... a half dozen various baseball cards scattered on his desk... those text books... a chair with several days worth of dirty clothes still piled on it... would all be left behind. Waiting for him to return.

He was ready, it was all memorized. Slowly, he opened the window and carefully scurried down the gutter, as he had done so many times before. Only this time he made it a point not to look back.

“What do you think he’ll do when he realizes that Roy isn’t coming?” Mrs. Monroe asked her husband after the dinner dishes were washed and put away.

“The same thing I did when my ‘partner’ never showed up: spend the night alone.”

“It was very nice of Roy’s parents to call and tell us. If Roy hadn’t confessed, we might never have known.”

“Yes. Very nice,” Mr. Monroe repeated.

“What about Mr. Clementine?”

“Bill? He’ll keep his eye on Skip. Seems like every year some fool kid has to go and prove to himself that nothing’s going to happen.”

“My baby.”

“My son.”

Joe Oliver

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