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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. "17 years ago she got croaked. 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 a 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 to scared to tell anybody 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 *hero*'s! 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."

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Joe Oliver

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

"You're scared."

"I ain't!"

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 his 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.