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Untitled

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College of DuPage

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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 Cemetary next door. Clementine, the caretaker of the only cemetary 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 cemetary 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.

"Anything 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.

"Skipper?" 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 persistant 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 cemetary. *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 cemetary. 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 is 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 cemetary 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 thought, 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