



Ghost Girl | A Mystery

by Steve Schatz

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Chapter 1: Her Flesh Peeled Back from Her Scream

"I hate it here and I hate you!"

Nate slammed out the back door, charging up the hill behind their house. The hill was steep, nearly vertical. No way Mom would try to follow him. At the top, Nate stopped at the circle of trees and looked around, panting. No one was in sight, as usual. *Good.* Slipping through the branches, he sank down on the thick padding of leaves and leaned against his favorite golden birch with a sigh. Now that the snow had finally melted, he came up here almost every day. He could stay here all afternoon and no one would bother him. Inside the circle, he didn't have to think about Mom and Dad fighting every time they talked on the phone. He could forget about school, where he didn't fit in and didn't want to. He could forget about not having friends like he did back in Boston . . . not that he wanted to be friends with any of these country kids anyway. He could even stop thinking about being stuck out here in this little hick town in the middle of nowhere in a huge falling down dump of an old house. Mom had promised it was only going to be for a little while, but it had been months now. Every time he asked when they were going back to Boston, she wouldn't talk about it, even when he shouted. Up here, at the top of the hill, with no one around, he could lean against this big, old tree and look up through the branches at the sky. He didn't have to talk to anyone or think about any of that.

He had stopped panting and was watching a big bank of clouds sail into view, wondering if that meant another rainstorm was coming. Then, without warning, the branches across the circle pulled apart and a girl popped through. He hadn't heard anyone coming. No one else ever came up here. No one could have walked up the hill with all the leaves and branches without making a sound. But there she was. *Beeezarre!* Nate was so surprised, he was speechless. She looked like she was his age, maybe even as old as twelve. He'd never seen her at school or around town, which added to the weirdness. This was a small town. Too small as far as he was concerned, but that was the point. There weren't that many kids around, so he should have seen her somewhere before. The weirdest thing was the water. She was totally soaked. Water poured off her like she was standing under a waterfall, but it wasn't coming from anywhere. Water streamed down her face. It kept dripping from her pigtails, but Nate couldn't see

where it was coming from. The girl didn't seem to notice the constant river she was standing in. She didn't even try to brush it out of her eyes. She just walked over to a tree across from him and sat down, leaned against it, and stared at him like he was a slightly interesting rock or bug.

Nate finally found his voice. "Who . . . who *are* you?" The girl leapt up and screamed, then disappeared. Gone! Not ran away. No, she disappeared! And it wasn't a nice kind of disappearing, either. Not like poof and a trail of smoke. No, it was worse. Much, much worse. First, her mouth stretched into a scream. Then, her flesh peeled back from that scream like something had grabbed her by the back of the head and yanked the skin off like you could pull the skin off a piece of chicken, leaving a gooey, meat-covered skull that was still looking at him and screaming. But, as fast as the oozing meat under her skin was exposed, it dried, cracked, and crumbled away, revealing the bone of her skull with her eyes still staring at him. Then, the bone turned to dust with a gross cracking, snapping sound, and the dust fell to the ground. She was gone. One second, she was standing there, the next, a little pile of dust mixed with the leaves. It happened so fast, Nate would have missed it if he hadn't been looking. But he had been looking and he saw the whole thing. He wished more than anything he ever wished for that he hadn't seen it or that he could forget it, but the sight of her dissolving in front of him was burned into his brain. His own scream ripped from his throat and hurtled up to the sky as he pushed up and back with both hands, trying to get away. Unfortunately, he straightened up so fast, his head smacked into the trunk of the huge golden birch he had been leaning against. His scream of terror turned into a yelp of pain as he fell forward, crashing facedown into the leaves. Stunned from what he had seen and the major blow to his head, Nate lay there for a minute, trying to make sense out of it all. He decided that the most important thing was to get out of there as quickly as possible. He could figure it all out later, but for now, getting home was most important. He started to push himself up when a big drop of water hit him on the head. Then another. Then another . . . a whole stream of water poured down on him.

That thing was standing over him! Dripping on him. Was she going to drown him or rip him apart?

A giggle broke the quiet. "You might as well get on up. I ain't gonna eat you or nothin'. You jest surprised me is all."

Nate looked up toward the voice, afraid she might be half-formed, all gooey and raw meat and bone looming above him. But no, she looked like the first time he saw her. Standing with her hands on her hips, she grinned down at him. He had to admit that she didn't look very scary, at least, not right now.

She cocked her head and squinted at him with one eye. "You kin see me? Right?"

Nate backed away, wanting to put some distance between them. She might not look scary in this instant, but this thing had just melted in a very unpleasant way right in front of his eyes. "Wha . . . what are you?"

The girl shook her head. "Boys sure ain't got any smarter over the years. They was dumb in my time, and they're still dumber than most rocks. What do I look like?"

"It's not what you look like. It's what you just did."

She shrugged. "You scared me is all."

"Me! I scared you?!"

She grinned. "I guess I scared you right back. Sorry. It's one of the drawbacks . . ."

"Drawbacks?"

"Of bein' a ghost. Most folks can't see me, so I forgit that it can be a bit disquietin' when I shatter."

"Shatter?"

She nodded. "Yup. See, we ain't really all that all together. I mean, this body's not bound up so tight. So when I lose focus—like when I git scared—well . . . you saw what happened."

Nate stood and backed up, trying to put as much distance between him and the girl as he could. "You mean you're really a—"

"Ghost," she finished. "You hard o' hearin' *and* not so bright? I jest told you I was." She looked a bit proud and nodded down the hill. "I drowned right down there in Yokum Brook in the big flood of 1922. Been hangin' round these parts ever since."

"But . . . but . . . there's no such things as ghosts. Everybody knows that."

She shook her head. "I don't give a cup of warm spit what everybody knows. I'm here, ain't I?"

Nate continued to back away. "This is way too strange. I've got to get out of here."

The girl grinned and stepped back so he could see she wasn't planning to chase him. "I ain't stoppin' you."

"You mean you aren't going to eat my brain or something?"

She stared at him, then started to giggle again. Pretty soon, she was laughing so hard, she fell down.

"What are you laughing at?"

She looked up with a big grin on her face. "I'm jest trying to figure how to find such a teensy-tiny thing as your brain rattling around in your head. It shore wouldn't be worth the trouble."

"Hey!"

She sat up and glared at him. "Hey what? You're the one talkin' about me eatin' brains. I don't eat nothing and if I did, I'd go for something more interesting than the brain of some stupid boy."

Nate didn't know whether to be scared or insulted. This was not making any sense.

Suddenly, the girl stopped laughing and held up her hand to keep him quiet. She was listening closely, and while Nate didn't hear anything, she obviously did. She scrambled to her feet, a look of fear on her face. "You gotta go now," she whispered.

"I already said that."

"I mean right now. Hurry. Git back down to your house and don't look back. Hurry. He don't know you kin see me yet."

"Who?"

She didn't answer, just turned him toward the trees. Nate felt an icy chill shoot through where her hands had touched his jacket. Then, she pushed him. "Go on now. Run! I'll see you again, soon enough."

"What are you afraid of?"

Her voice changed. It sounded like a rusty nail scraping across glass but squeezed down into a low whisper. Nate felt a tingle from his belly up his spine. This was not movie scary, this was 'something big and mean is about to eat you scary'. "Stop yappin', will ya? Shut up and move! He's almost here."

Then, she pushed him hard. Nate popped out of the circle of trees and the force of her push sent him nearly rolling down the hill. He had to really pump his legs to keep from falling and couldn't stop all the way down until he was at his back door.

He pulled open the door and as he stepped onto the porch, he heard a high-pitched scream, like an animal being torn apart, rising to the sky, then sliced off.

Nate shuddered. He sometimes heard coyotes at night, howling as they hunted and then the shriek of their prey when they attacked. But nothing he had ever heard made such an awful, terrifying sound like what he heard from up on the hill near that golden birch tree.

Chapter 2: She Rips Half Her Face Off

After school the next day, Nate took his usual shortcut through the woods to avoid the rest of the kids, though he steered clear of the circle of trees. He wasn't sure if the whole thing had been a dream, a trick someone was pulling on him, or if it had really happened. Whatever the explanation was, it was way too weird and he figured the best move was to keep his distance for a while. Nothing strange happened on the way up the hill or along the ridge, so after a while, he stopped worrying. It must have been some kind of trick. He started trying to figure out different ways to make it look like he was pulling the skin off his face. If he could work it out, then he'd have the perfect costume for Halloween. He'd walk in looking kind of normal, then reach up and . . . "I bet someone will barf if I get it right." He laughed to himself.

He was thinking about trying a mixture of some of his mom's face goop with some makeup or food coloring to make it look like skin, plus flour, to make it thicker. He was on autopilot, not paying attention. He was almost home after all.

"Boo," came a quiet voice right in front of him.

Nate looked up and shouted in surprise. Leaning against a tree, grinning and dripping, was the girl from yesterday. Nate looked around for a direction to run. If he could just get into his house . . .

She shook her head and poked him in the chest. "Don't try it. I coulda beat you when I was alive and I run lots faster now," she said.

Nate held up his fingers like a cross. "Get away from me. I don't want to be a vampire or anything."

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Goodie fer you. What is all this hee-haw about vampires? Used to be, when folks saw me, they yammered on about zombies. 'fore that, it was space aliens. Why do you need to keep inventing new things to git afearred of? Seems like a good old-fashioned ghost should do the trick."

"Go away, whatever you are."

"Why? You got chores or a friend comin' over? From what I seen, you spend most of your time alone."

"Have you been spying on me?"

"Naw. I jest have a lot of time and I notice things . . . unlike you, I might add. And what I've noticed about you is that since you moved here last fall, I ain't seen a single friend come a callin'. When you're on the playground, you don't mess around with the other kids. You sit and read, or jest walk around by your own self. When you're home and go outside, you mostly jest go poking around in the woods." She cocked her head to one side and looked him up and down. "What's amatter with you? Fergit to take a bath? Fart too much? Why ain't you got any friends?"

"I have friends. Plenty of friends. They're just back in Boston, where I live."

She smirked. "Seems to me like you live here."

"No, I don't. My mom made me come here, but we aren't staying."

The girl shrugged as if she wasn't interested in arguing. "Well, no matter. You got time on your hands and I need some help. You're the first kid in a lotta years who kin see me and my time's runnin' out. I got something for you to do."

"No way. I don't know you and from what I've seen, I don't want to. I've got better things to do." He started to walk around her. She grabbed his shoulders, which turned icy in her grip, and shot him a dangerous look.

"You hear me *ask* if you wanted to? I *told* you I got a project for you and that's that. We kin do this nice 'n easy, or we kin do it mean. I don't rightly care, to be honest. I got a deadline and once it's over, so am I. You're the only one who kin help me and I ain't givin' up without a fight. I got a whole lotta ways to convince you and I don't think you're gonna like 'em. You think shattering was scary? Take a gander at this." She reached up, grabbed one of her dripping pigtails, and yanked. With a wet, sucking sound, a gooey mess of hair, skin, and meat pulled free. Still holding the pigtail—with her ear and a bit of her face hanging from it—she shook the mess in his face. The faded pink ribbon at the end of her braided

hair looked so normal topping the hunk of oozing flesh. Nate couldn't take his eyes off that ear, trailing bits of skin and yuck, jiggling as she wiggled it at him.

"Hey, boy." Nate's eye tore up to look at what was left of her face. It grinned at him and she winked. "How'd you like to wake up 'n see me lookin' down at you like this?"

Nate backed away, trying not to hurl.

She swung the mess up and stuck it back onto her head and pointed at him. "I got plenty more ways to convince you, so I'm gonna say it agin. I got somethin' for you to do. I need to find something right quick. And you *are* gonna help me. So, put your eyes back in your head and let's get to it."

She looked much more normal with her face back in the right place, so the urge to hurl began to fade. In spite of himself, Nate was curious. "What could you want to find? You're dead. You don't need anything. You don't have any problems."

She shook her head. "There's more about being dead that you don't know than you do. It ain't so easy. Plenty of things end when you die, but a lot of 'em don't . . . particularly things you wish would end."

"Like what?"

She looked grim. "Pain—at least, some kinds of it. Pain from being sick ends, but there's plenty of other things that can hurt, and hurt more than anything you felt when you was livin'."

"What else?"

She blinked. She might have been crying, but the dripping water made it hard to tell. Still, she looked really sad. "Loneliness. That don't go away." She shook her head like she was trying to shoo away an irritating fly, then glared at Nate. "All this talk ain't any help. We got things to do and time's a wastin'. Are you in or do you need some more encouragement?" She grabbed her other pigtail.

Nate waved his hands frantically to stop her. "No! Stop! I'll give it a try, but you have to promise to stop pulling off your skin and doing other gooey, slimy stuff."

She held out her hand to shake his. He hesitated, then shook it. A cold chill passed from her hand through his body and he shivered.

"So, what are we looking for?" he asked.

She winked. "My body . . . and I'm almost out of time."

Chapter 3: Visit to the Graveyard

"Your what?!" Nate yelled.

"My body. I wasn't born a ghost, dummy. I used to have a body."

"Well, what did you do with it? How can you lose your body? Maybe it's in the cemetery. Go a quarter mile down that way and look up the hill," Nate offered. "You can't miss it. It's the place with all the tombstones."

"I'm dead, not stupid," she replied. "The cemetery is where I want to be. It's safer and there are more of my kinda folks. I also might like to go on to other places, but I can't do that if I don't start in a cemetery."

"Well, there's your answer. Go to the cemetery. Problem solved."

"I would if I could. Come on. I'll show you." She headed out to the road toward the cemetery. Nate watched her go, thinking that this might be a good time to make a run for it. She turned and her eyes started to glow a deep red. "Don't even think about it. I'm tired of messin' around and you know I kin make you regret it. Come on!" Then, she turned and continued toward the road. Nate sighed and followed.

"Say," he called after her, "do you have a name?"

"Course I got a name. What kinda question is that?"

"Well, want to tell me what it is? Or should I call you 'drippy'?"

She didn't even slow. "Mattie. You kin call me Mattie. Try callin' me drippy and see how many parts of you end up twisted in ways you never thought possible."

She walked fast and Nate had to nearly jog to keep up. "Aren't you worried about someone seeing you? You kind of stand out. I mean, people don't usually walk down the road dripping."

She shook her head. "Most folks don't see me. I kin go nearly anywhere I want, long as I stay around town." She stopped and looked at him. "Sometimes I wish folks could see me. Hard to make friends when people look right through you." She turned and continued down the road. "You're the first in a while. No one has been able to help. That's why I'm almost out of time."

They approached the short, steep driveway which led to the cemetery. Mattie didn't slow down a bit. If anything, she sped up while Nate huffed behind her. "Can't we go a little slower? What's your hurry? You afraid you're not going to still be dead when we get there?"

Mattie didn't slow or turn. "Got to hurry. Once the Major sees I'm here agin, the squawking starts."

"The Major?"

Nate had been to the cemetery a couple of times. It was small but tidy. The people in town took their graveyard seriously. There were regular cleanup days. The grass was kept mowed and the forest was kept trimmed back around the edges. Different garden clubs seemed to compete to have the nicest flower plantings. It was on a steep hill that overlooked the brook and was a quiet place he could be alone. Some gravestones dated back to the mid-1800s. He liked to wander between the stones, picking out the names, wondering about the lives of the people who were buried there. It was always empty, too, so he never had to worry about people trying to make friends because he and his mom were the new folks in town. However, today, the cemetery was full of people. Nate had only seen so many people in Becket on Town Fair day. There were clusters of people all over the place, most of them dressed up like they were going to church or something. Maybe there was a funeral going on.

"Mattie, don't," he called out. "Let's come back when there's nobody here. I can't talk to you with all these folks around. They'll think I'm nuts."

"Don't worry," she said, heading toward a group of ladies who looked like they were discussing the plantings near the front gates. Nate figured they were from the local garden club. He sighed. They were going to try every kind of way they could to find out about his mom and why she was back in her aunt's big, falling down house after so many years away.

One of the ladies looked up from the flowers and smiled at Mattie. She was short and round, with eyes that sparkled, surrounded by laugh lines. "Hello, dear. It's been a while since you came to visit." The lady looked past Mattie at Nate and gave a little squeak of pleasure and surprise. "Why, is that Nathaniel? All grown up?"

Nate, still puffing from the fast walk and the hill, looked suspiciously at the lady. "You know me?"

She smiled and nodded. "I most certainly do. Of course, it's been a few years . . . You were only five at the time and I couldn't see so well."

"That was the last time I was here. Mom brought me with her 'cause her aunt May was dying. I don't remember going anywhere. We just stayed in the house and we left a couple of days later because . . ."

She nodded. "Because I died."

Nate's mouth dropped open and he took a step back, looking around wildly. "You mean that you . . ."

She nodded and smiled brightly. "Of course, dear. Who else do you think you'd see in a cemetery?" She gestured to the other ladies. "We're all ghosts here."

Nate suddenly felt a pounding in his ears and the world started to spin. His eyes rolled back and he slumped to the ground.