

Ghosts are not the only things that haunt a person's soul.

GHOST WALK

By Mark A. Garland

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“I HATE COMING HERE,” Arin said, looking around with nervous eyes. “It’s too scary.”

Marianne frowned. “You always say that, but it’s not. Not really. I’ve been here many times.”

“But what if he actually comes tonight?”

Arin’s mother grinned like a Halloween pumpkin. “*That* is what we’re counting on,” she said.

Arin let her shoulders sag. There was no getting out of it; her mother had kept after her until she finally agreed to visit the little church and the big graveyard that spread out behind it. She looked the place over more closely now, the tall steeple, the long wooden side boards turned blotchy gray where most of the paint had long ago fallen off.

A red and white FOR SALE sign was planted in the tall grass in the front yard. The new church had been built last year, a half mile up the road.

Marianne walked past the front steps, around to the big yard, and Arin followed. Kids had thrown rocks through some of the pretty stained-glass windows, probably the Rayner boys over on Ledge Street. They were always wrecking everything; or maybe it was that big kid Kenny Becker and the little fan club that followed him around all the time.

There weren’t any other kids around her tonight, though, and Arin didn’t think there would be. The wind had died, the storm had passed, but the ground was still soaked. The air had gotten cold, and thick dark clouds still filled the evening sky. Every

kid in town was home, dry and warm, watching the new fall TV shows. Almost every kid.

Just past the side walkway stood the first tombstones.

“I wanna go,” Arin said, trying to insist. “He’s gonna be here any minute, walking the graves. I’m just not ready to meet up with someone from the other side.”

“We have to stay, and you know it. Don’t back out now, Arin, please! He was your father after all. Not even death can change that.”

Arin kept walking, one step at a time. The tombstones near the church were the oldest, some from the Civil War, though in the fading light she couldn’t read any of them. Her father had shown the graves to her once, shown her how you could figure out the ages of the people from the dates. Nobody lived very long in the old days, it seemed. Sometimes that was still true.

Toward the other end of the graveyard the stones were newer, some only a few months old, or a couple of years.

Arin looked up and froze. “It’s him!” she said, then she faded behind Marianne and peeked out around her hips. He was as tall as Arin remembered, taller than Marianne, but he looked darker somehow, and much thinner. His eyes were set too deeply in his tired face, making them almost invisible in the near-darkness. She watched him moving slowly, evenly, across the grass, coming toward her.

“What if he can’t hear me?” Arin asked. “What if he doesn’t want us here at all? We shouldn’t have come!”

But Marianne went forward, leaving Arin no choice but to follow. They all reached the grave at the same time.

Her father turned and faced the gravestone. Arin couldn’t see his face well enough, but she could hear the sounds he began to make, a whimpering noise. *He’s crying*, Arin thought, which seemed so strange. She had never heard him cry in life.

“He doesn’t seem to know we’re here,” Arin said, but as she did, her father’s head turned and he looked over his shoulder, looked almost right at her. Then he looked away again.

“No,” Marianne whispered, “but I think he can hear us, more or less. Maybe not with his ears, but he hears us.”

The man who had been Arin's father looked up then gazed out across the yard, toward the church.

"Go ahead, tell him," Marianne prodded.

"I don't think I can," Arin replied.

Marianne glared at her. "I have tried my best, I've told him how I feel, but it's not enough. Now *you* have to try. You *have* to. He's bound to this place. That's why he comes here night after night. We need to set him free!"

"Okay," Arin agreed, because she knew it was true.

The man's head turned again. He was barely visible at all now, it had gotten so dark. Arin moved a step closer.

"You don't have to stay around here anymore," she told her father. "You did everything you could have, and more. You always did! I'm grateful for the time we had together, not sad because of what we might have had. We're all right, Daddy. And so are you."

She thought about the night the two men had robbed the little church. Arin had gone with her mother to help her father finish cleaning, which had been his part-time job. The robbers had come in just after that. She remembered screaming as her father tried to throw the men out, then two shots being fired by one man while the other used the butt of his rifle like a club.

The old church hadn't been used since that night.

"Daddy," Arin went on, "you were so brave. You only did what you thought was right, which was what you always did. Nobody can blame you for doing that."

Even as she spoke, the words seemed to have a strange effect on him. Her father turned slowly in a circle, only a dark shape in the night now, but Arin could sense the weight leaving his shoulders, could imagine his spirit glowing more brightly—free, or finally getting there. He was taking a last look, she thought. At least, she hoped he was.

"I love you guys," Arin's father said, speaking to the darkness, thinking out loud, perhaps. His voice was so quiet, Arin thought, as if it almost wasn't there at all.

"We love you, too," Arin and her mother said, both at the same time.

The clouds parted then. Stars appeared, spreading over half the sky, and the moon suddenly shone down on the church and the graveyard, providing enough light to read by. Marianne went to stand before the wide face of the tombstone, stood beside

her husband, reading the names. Arin stood for a moment, snuggled in between them, but then her father started to leave.

He walked silently between the other gravestones, slowly at first, then picked up speed, like a big ship heading out to sea. She heard him pull his keys out of his pocket as he neared his car in the parking lot.

“Do you think it worked?” Arin asked.

“Do you?”

Arin nodded. “I think so.”

Her mother smiled. Then both of them rose up slowly and drifted into the sky, toward the moon, toward the stars, fading as they went.