

THE FIRESIDE BOOK OF GHOST STORIES

By Jackie Vivelo

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THE PACKAGE WAS WRAPPED in red and white foil with a pair of candy canes stuck on like crossed swords. I'd saved it for near the end because I expected something special; but, when the wrapping fell away, I felt a stab of disappointment. Uncle Jonathan had finally slipped.

Did you ever notice how each year your favorite present seems to come from the same person? In my case it's my Uncle Jonathan. I hardly ever see him, but at Christmas and on my birthday each year his presents arrive. All my life he has seemed to know what I wanted before I knew myself. The toy dalmatian he sent when I was four was the stuffed toy I dragged around all day and took to bed with me at night. Then the year my mother said "no guns," Uncle Jonathan sent me a space gun. He gave me a set of knights in armor and a toy sword. He had even sent some good books: *Captain Blood*, *Kim*, *Tom Sawyer*. But the book inside the package with the candy canes was a thick, old, tan volume that looked as though it had been dropped in a mud puddle.

The lower half of the book was swollen from having been wet. The cover was mildewed, and the pages had water stains running halfway up. The spine was torn. It didn't look like the kind of thing I'd have given to anybody, especially not a favorite nephew at Christmas. Maybe he'd decided I wasn't worth it anymore. Or maybe he'd gotten out of touch with people my age.

I was into electronics that year. Everything I had asked for was high-tech, new, shiny, and complicated. A book of stories—an old, beat-up book—was the last thing I wanted.

I put the book aside without even reading its title, which was practically worn off anyway.

Later that afternoon Uncle Jonathan called to wish us Merry Christmas. When it was my turn to speak to him, he said, "Nathan! What did you think of the book?" Then without giving me a chance to answer, he went on, "I got it when I was twelve, so I figured you'd be about the right age. That was always one of my favorites. Treat it well."

I mumbled and stumbled over thanking him. Treat it well? It didn't look as though he'd treated it very well himself. As soon as I was off the phone I headed back to the tree, scabbled among the paper and pulled out the book. I might not want it, but it had been embarrassing not even to know the title of the book he'd sent. And he'd said it was one of his favorites, so he had meant well.

As I opened it, a sheet of paper fell out. I retrieved the fallen paper with one hand while I read the title: *The Fireside Book of Ghost Stories*. Ghost stories?

I unfolded the sheet of paper that had fallen from the book and found that it was a letter from my uncle:

Dear Nathan,

I was about your age when I got this book. (Incidentally, it wasn't new then. You'll notice it was published in the 1940s.) I hadn't believed in ghosts for several years by that time. This book changed my mind. You see, it isn't just about hauntings; it is haunted.

I know how that sounds, but you'll see what I mean. Or, maybe you won't. Either way you'll have some good, classic ghost stories to read.

I say the book is haunted because of a story that used to be there and then suddenly wasn't there any longer. Besides the disappearing story, it always seemed to me that I couldn't choose what I would read from this book. I've only been able to read what the book would let me find.

At six hundred pages, it's too long to read at one sitting, even if you could take that much horror at once. Also, there are more than forty stories listed in the table of contents. I know people would say with so many stories, it was perfectly natural that sometimes a kid wouldn't be able to find a particular one. Let them say what they will; I know what I know.

Don't take my word for it. Read it for yourself.

Best,

Uncle Jon

After that letter, nothing could have kept me from reading a little of *The Fireside Book of Ghost Stories* that very afternoon. I can't say I noticed anything strange about the book, apart from its graveyard smell of mildew, but the two stories I read were spine-chillers.

The first one was called “The Room in the Tower,” a scary story where the horror kept building each time you read the words “Jack will show you to your room. I have given you the room in the tower.” The words are from a nightmare, and the reader knows that someday the narrator is going to hear them in reality. That was a good story.

The only other one I read on Christmas day was called “Murder Will Out,” a really old story from *The Canterbury Tales*. I just read it because it was short, not expecting to like it much. But things like “thou art” and “revealest” didn’t bother me. That one was pretty good too.

Uncle Jonathan was right about one thing. Nobody would read forty or so stories like that all at once. So I put the book on my shelf and over the months I’d pick it up and read a story once in a while. I wouldn’t have admitted it at the time but I never read that book in bed at night. I read the ghost stories on Saturdays or when I got home in the afternoons. They just weren’t the kind of thing you want to have in mind when you’re trying to fall asleep in the dark.

I guess it would be true to say I came to like that book. It hadn’t made much of a first impression with its stained pages and moldy smell. But I was still reading the book when I had forgotten about most of the other presents from that Christmas.

I also found that I would pick the book up intending to reread one story and end up reading something entirely different. Unlike my uncle, I didn’t attribute that to any sort of magic. Some of the stories’ names weren’t very memorable. I’d try out two or three possibilities and then, not finding the one I was looking for, settle in to read something else. It wasn’t supernatural. I mean the book wasn’t hiding the story I was looking for or forcing me to read another one.

For instance, one tale was about a room haunted by the spirit of a wicked old woman whose heirs had turned her mansion into a boarding house. At first, the heirs, who reminded me of the brother and sisters in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, were unaware of the evil in the house. Then they found that none of the boarders would stay in one particular room. The sister who did the cleaning began to get scared to go into the room.

Finally, the sister who did the cooking said she’d move into the room herself. I liked that story because things turned out fine for the sisters and their brother but what happened in between was as scary as anything I’ve ever read.

Somehow, I could never quite remember the name of that one, so I'd end up looking up anything that had "room" in the title. Naturally, I could never find it when I was deliberately looking for it because the word "room" isn't in the title at all. I figured I had discovered the secret of Uncle Jonathan's "haunted book": Stories didn't disappear; they were hard to find because of their forgettable titles.

I read that book off and on for more than a year. Then midway through my thirteenth year, I put it away and forgot it.

When Uncle Jonathan came to visit us soon after I turned fifteen, I remembered the book again. I asked him what his "disappearing" story had been about.

He glanced at me sharply. Then he grinned and shook his head.

"I'll tell you about it someday. Not now."

That was all I could get out of him. But once again I got out *The Fireside Book of Ghost Stories* and began to read it.

My best friend is Tom McHenry, who's on the swim team with me. That summer we were finally old enough to qualify as counselors at a local camp. I know how popular ghost stories are at camp, so I packed up Uncle Jonathan's book to take along with me.

Sure enough we fell into the habit of telling ghost stories, mostly silly but still scary ones with lots of dramatic effects, to the kids around the campfire. The stories we were telling were nothing like the ones in my book, but they prompted me and Tom to discuss ghost stories in general. We discovered we'd both read quite a few. I offered to let Tom read some of *The Fireside Book of Ghost Stories*.

"Have you ever read this one, the one called 'Friends?'" he asked one day.

I didn't remember the title, so I took the book to read the beginning of the story. I didn't recognize it, but it caught my interest, and I read the whole thing through.

The story was about two friends called Nicholas and Arthur, who lived in Victorian England. The story took place around Christmastime. Although there was ice covering the river behind Arthur's house, the boys had been forbidden to skate on it because it was still thin in spots.

Not long before Christmas, the two went out with a wooden sled to cut holly. When the sled was loaded, they agreed to put on their skates (which they just happened to have brought with them) and skated home along the frozen river pulling the sled.

About halfway home, they skated over a thin patch of ice that broke when the heavy sled was pulled over it. The sled went through the ice, pulling Nicholas down with it. But Arthur managed to escape. He scrambled out into the nearest bank and looked about for an old fence rail, the limb of a tree, anything he could safely extend to his friend. While he searched, Nicholas disappeared beneath the water. Certain that he no longer had a hope of saving Nicholas, Arthur removed his skates and hid them. He then went home and told his father about the accident, claiming that Nicholas had insisted on pulling the sled along the river but that he, Arthur, had refused to go out onto the ice and had followed along on the bank. The grief-stricken families, his own and Nicholas's, believed his story and praised him for doing the right thing.

Then, on Christmas morning, Arthur was found dead in his bed, his body encased in ice.

"Not the sort of story we can tell our campers," Tom said, laughing, when he saw I had finished reading. "The kids would rather have escaped lunatics and hatchet murders."

It seemed odd that I had never seen the story before, but I figured there must be half a dozen or more stories in the book that I had never read. Still, the gruesome tale drew me, and I read it several times over the next few weeks.

I read it too often. That story got into my dreams. Like a refrain, the same words would show up in dream after dream: "It wasn't my fault. It's too late to save him." Like those nightmare words about Jack showing the way to the tower, those sentences were enough to start me trembling. In my dreams, instead of Arthur and Nicholas, Tom and I were the main characters. There were dark, swirling waters and Tom would slip out of sight each time I tried to reach him.

I'd wake up scared half to death and have to lie there telling myself that Tom is as good a swimmer as I am.

By daylight I'd think the dreams were stupid, but at night I'd break into a sweat of fear.

One night while I was once again dreaming of trying to rescue Tom from murky waters, I seemed to feel my sweat turning to specks of ice all over me. I woke up terrified.

I looked carefully around the cabin where ten boys were also sleeping, counted them to make sure everyone was safe and then checked Tom's bunk. He was there, sleeping peacefully.

The following day I wrote to Uncle Jonathan and asked him again if he'd tell me the story of his own strange experience with *The Fireside Book of Ghost Stories*. It seemed to me that the story "Friends" was haunting my dreams, and I hoped my uncle would say something that would help. I addressed and stamped the letter and dropped it into the mailbox where the campers posted their letters to parents. But, as soon as the letter was through the slot, I was sorry I'd sent it. Uncle Jonathan would think I was some sort of idiot not to have known he was joking. I shrugged and hoped he wouldn't take my letter seriously.

Night after night the dreams continued and I continued to wake up and check the people in my cabin. About a week later I woke up in the middle of an especially hot night. Out of habit, I checked the cabin. The first thing I saw was that Tom was gone, probably outside cooling off. As usual, I checked each bed and saw the boys sleeping—more restlessly than peacefully but at least sleeping. And then I saw that one camper's bunk was empty.

I slipped soundlessly out of bed and out of the cabin. In the moonlight, I saw no one but thought I heard noises from down the hillside.

I plowed straight down the cliff for a few yards. Then I cut through a narrow crevice, clambered over tumbled rocks at the foot of the hill and looked out over a natural pool with a foot-bruising rocky edge. This pond was off-limits for campers who had the use of a chlorinated, olympic-sized pool at the campsite, as well as a lake higher up in the hills.

"Tom!" I called as I saw him pulling himself up onto the rocks from the water.

"Let's go," he said as soon as he was out of the water. "We have to get back before anyone misses us. Just forget we ever came out."

"What are you talking about? What happened? Do you know that one of the campers is missing? That kid Mitchell is not in the cabin."

"I know. He's in there." Tom gestured with a dripping hand toward the pool. "I trailed him down here and saw him dive in. He must have hit his head. It's pretty shallow

and there're rocks everywhere. Anyway, he didn't come up. I've dived and dived, but I can't find him. It wasn't my fault. It's too late to save him."

His words knocked the wind out of me like a fist into my solar plexus. The nightmare feeling closed around me.

I seemed to be about three feet above the scene, watching with frozen disinterest. Tom was still talking. But I couldn't hear him. I wasn't thinking. I just acted. My body arced into the air, and I didn't give a thought to the rocks just below the surface. In a shallow dive I cut into the water that was as cold as a river in winter.

When I plunged under the surface, body and awareness merged. Just as I'd done over and over in my dreams, I went searching beneath black waters. I stayed under, feeling among the rocks in a world where sight was useless, until I thought my lungs would burst.

I would have to go up for air.

Just as I was ready to push for the surface, my foot touched something that was not rock. I'd found Mitchell.

I grabbed, pulled, lifted, took a secure hold and struck out for the rocky shoreline.

At the water's edge, Tom met me and between us we lifted Mitchell over the rocks to a leaf-covered patch of ground where we fell to work reviving him. Long seconds passed and stretched into minutes. Tom, ashamed at having quit too soon, pushed me aside and took over. Driven by nightmare-horror on my part and shame on his, neither was going to quit too soon this time. On and on, we tried. And then, Mitchell coughed and at last began to breathe.

Two days later I got a three-page letter from Uncle Jonathan, who hadn't laughed at my request. When he was sixteen, he wrote, he had read and reread a story in *The Fireside Book of Ghost Stories* about a boy whose meetings with a ghost prepare him for his father's death. After summarizing the story, Uncle Jonathan said:

I seemed to get into that story and live it. And the story got into my dreams. I felt that I knew the characters. When the boy in the story finally learned to accept pain and death and go on living, I learned it too. I had read stories before that meant something to me. I'd even picked up a lesson or two from things I'd read, but this was the first time a story had so much impact that it changed me.

I remembered the name of the story as “Destiny” but in later years when I went back to find it, there was no story of that title listed. I figured I’d gotten the name wrong, so I eventually read through the whole book looking for the story. I never found it again. But that search was much later, long after my sixteenth year, after I no longer needed the story.

The months when I read and reread the story were the months just before my mother died. I think I accepted my own grief with more maturity because through that haunted book I had already known what it was like to lose a parent.

I folded the letter, put it back into its envelope, and went to find *The Fireside Book of Ghost Stories*. No such story as “Destiny” was listed. For curiosity’s sake, I went back to the beginning of the list of forty-one titles and looked for “Friends.”

I went through it once and then again. No story in the book was called “Friends.” One story was called “Playmates,” but it was about a lonely little girl who finds ghostly playmates to keep her company. Arthur and Nicholas and the sled loaded with holly weren’t any part of it.

I tried all the more likely titles without finding it. Then I asked Tom about the story since he’d been the one to read it first. But he shrugged and said he didn’t remember.

I’m still searching. It has to be there: *The Fireside Book of Ghost Stories* was the only book I had at camp.