

# COLD YESTERDAY

by Greg Stolze

Gaspard St. John died years before the Habery family even moved to Elm Crest Court. Many decades earlier, over a century, he was hanged from an elm tree on the crest of a hill, left to swing until the crows and flies ate him all away. Gaspard St. John had been a highwayman, a wicked one, but the only Habery who'd heard of him even once was Uncle Frank Habery, who lived three towns over and was interested in history.

Frank was Duane Habery's uncle. Duane was a standard kid, which is to say, he was strange and interesting and bright in a lot of unique ways that weren't immediately apparent if you just met him at school or waiting for the bus. He was good at math and drawing and had an older brother who did more after-school activities. It wasn't that Duane didn't want to do activities after school, but he was just too young, so on Thursdays he walked from the bus stop to his house by himself. This was not a big deal—the bus stop was at the end of the cul-de-sac, so he didn't even have to cross a street, just walk a block and knock. His dad, who worked from home, either left the door unlocked or answered when his sons rang the bell.

Duane's dad Albert was a standard adult, meaning he was a bundle of contradictions and offbeat associations with a rich inner life that you'd never guess if you met him over casual drinks. He edited technical journals and liked books about biology, as long as they were written for the non-expert.

Duane had asked his mother where babies came from when he was in third grade, and she'd gotten a book called "It's Not the Stork" and gone into some detail about assorted confusing conjunctions of mommies and daddies. Floating out of the lecture, like bubbles to the top of boiling soup, were questions ("Do you understand?" which Duane often answered "Not really") and vaguely offputting statements ("This will make more sense later on," or "It will seem nicer when you're older").

The book and talk had given Duane a lot to think about—more than he'd wanted or was really ready for. (He'd have accepted, "They grow in a mommy's belly until they're done, then they come out" without requesting more details.) But that night, between the end of video-game time and the beginning of bed time, his father Albert sat at the table where Duane was drawing, holding a closed book and a tiny glass of amber liquid.

"You know what I like about you, Duane?" Albert asked.

“Hm?”

“I can see a lot of your mother in you,” he said. “You’re a hard worker, like she is. And you’ve got grandma Fran’s hazel eyes, I can see those too. When you were born, I actually thought you looked like my dad crossed with your mom’s brother Jake.” He smiled. “I like seeing the ways you’re like me, too. I think you got a lot of the good stuff. Hopefully, not too much of the... less good.” He took a little sip from his little glass.

“What about me is like you?” Duane asked.

Albert shrugged. “There’s a way of looking at the world like no one ever told you anything about it,” he said. “I think you got that from me. That’s why you draw well. You accept how things look, instead of drawing how they’re supposed to.”

“Ms. Hollis taught me that,” Duane said. She’d been the art teacher at his summer enrichment program, and he’d liked her a lot.

Albert smiled. “Maybe she brought it out of you,” he said. “But there’s a lot else in there.”

“Like what?”

“All kinds of things, they’ll come out in time and we’ll see. You like me and your mom, right?”

“Yeah!”

“Good. You’re made of the two of us. Grandpa Brian and Grandma Fran and a long net of ancestors, too—a whole ton of great stuff in there. It’s up to you to dig for it, is all.”

With that, he finished his drink and got up, and somehow the idea of that family net worked for Duane a lot more than the rough biology his mother had briskly covered earlier. Uncle Frank had an elaborate family tree framed on his office wall (he was a dentist) and thinking about it, Duane decided it really did look more like a net, one in which he was glad to be caught.

# # #

Duane was doing well in school and wishing the weather wasn’t turning cold when the neighbors put out the Halloween decorations. Duane was OK with a lot of Halloween stuff—he quite liked blocking out a jack-o-lantern face for his dad to cut and was willing to scoop out some pumpkin guts to get it. But while he loved candy, he didn’t like *really* scary stuff. Superheroes and princesses and

LEGO figures were all great. But a neighboring teen got the fifty-dollar mask that looked like a bleeding, shredded werewolf face with skull poking through, and that was too much. The previous year, it had gotten so bad that Duane had stayed home rather than go out on the cul-de-sac where (it must be admitted) one of his more excitable friends was probably waiting with a devil costume, to jump out and scream at him. But the conflict, the enduring problem, was that he loved the candy.

No sugary sweet, however, could convince him to like the Dead Thing, which was what his brother named the freakiest decoration of all. It was a hooded skull in a gloomy hood with tattered, mold-patterned rags hanging from it, shifting and swirling in the wind. Stiffened with wire, it had the shape of vague shoulders and terminated in claw-boned skeleton hands.

(When Duane asked his mother about claws and bones, she explained that they weren't attached and that animals with claws—she used the cuddly tapir as an example—grew them like fingernails or even just hair.)

(It didn't help.)

The Dead Thing hung there, and grinned, and in the ever-more-insistent October winds it moved. It didn't look alive, it looked like a Dead Thing. It just *moved* as if it was alive, casually but never entirely still.

Walking to the bus in the morning with his dad and brother wasn't so bad, but coming home he ran. Coming home on Thursdays, all by himself, he crossed the street first, *then* ran.

So when he saw the Dead Thing in his room at night, he quite naturally sat up and screamed until his throat hurt.

# # #

Duane hadn't been a good sleeper, even as a baby. Alberty was also an insomniac, and sometimes this had resulted in bad scenes. Usually, Duane could ask for a snack or bathroom help or help with messy sheets and it was just fine. But a couple times, it escalated until Albert was screaming and cursing and pounding on the floor in desperation.

This did not help.

It un-helped at the immediate moment, because nothing keeps a young boy awake like a man three times his size shouting insults and crashing around. But his father had apologized (and cried, which was definitely strange) and then the next morning was the same as always.

What Duane learned from this, though he wouldn't have put it into words, was that night was different. People who were patient and loving during the day could turn into madmen when the sun was down. (He did not connect the few daylight incidents where his father had blown it and shouted, because at those times either he or his brother had pushed very hard, for a very long time. He did not realize that calling his parents out of bed several times was a push.)

Neither of his parents were angry when he woke screaming, of course. They were scared and asked if he was hurt, and hugged him and told him he was all right and when he could finally speak they asked what was wrong and he didn't tell them. His mom sat beside him on his bed and stroked his hair until he slept again.

Earlier that day, he'd told his mom about the Dead Thing, admitting that he did not like it but unwilling to go so far as to say he was scared.

"Well honey, you know it's just a piece of plastic," she said, and Duane replied that, sure, yeah, everyone knew that.

"Even a skull, or a skeleton," she said, "There's nothing scary about *that*, there's one inside you and one in me."

This was not consoling.

"You know when Uncle Frank took those x-rays of your teeth? How cool that was, to see the bones inside? That's all a skull is. It's just... like an overgrown tooth."

Duane immediately thought of being chewed on by teeth the size of his own head, teeth that somehow had eye holes and facial expressions. Again: Not consoling.

"So you don't need to be... bothered," his mom said, catching herself before she could say 'scared.' "Even a *real* skeleton is an ordinary thing, and that's just a fake one. It can't hurt you." She smiled, and no matter what she said, her smile could always help Duane feel better. "It wouldn't even face up to a stiff wind."

That's why, at night, he didn't tell her. Even though night was different, it wasn't so different that he was willing to say he'd been scared by a fake. He knew dreams weren't real, the same way he knew the Dead Thing wasn't real. The Dead Thing turning into a man with crow-pecked eyes and rotting clothing on a thicker rope, up on a hill with no houses, that wasn't real. None of it was.

But in his dream he'd been so lonely, and he knew that no matter what anyone might tell you, being lonely is real. When you're lonesome, it's the most real thing there is.

# # #

The next night, he didn't wake up screaming and that was even worse. In his dream, he got a visit from the ghost of Gaspard St. John and it was the Dead Thing, hanging from the tree as the old highwayman had and it didn't speak to him. What it had for him was deeper than words. It just *knew*, knew so certainly that the knowledge floated into Duane, like a bad smell crawling in his nose.

What the Gaspard St. John knew was that he was alone, and Duane was alone, and in the end it's always dark, and while they were alone together he could make it as dark as the end.

He—and in the dream, it was difficult to say if 'he' was the cruel dead man or the scared living boy—he also knew that if Duane had the knack of seeing things as they really were, then he also had the knack of making things more the way they were.

Duane didn't cry out, but he was quiet the next day and easily upset. In art class, he drew a picture of the Dead Thing that was so horrific, the teacher praised it highly and chuckled and said how much she loved Halloween, all the while getting a sweater off her cart and pulling it over her suddenly-goosebumped arms.

# # #

"I don't want to go to bed!" he told his father that night, chin defiant.

"Yeah, me either," Albert said calmly, "And yet, here we are. C'mon, jammy up."

"You and mom stay up," Duane said. "How come I can't?"

"Kids need more sleep," Albert replied. "Put your jammies on."

"If you *really* wanted to go to bed, you'd..."

"*Duane*. Jammies. On!"

The boy relented, but only to retrench over tooth-brushing and bedtime reading.

"I'm not sleepy," he insisted, while his dad pointed firmly at his pillow. "When's mom getting home?"

"Late," Albert said, with a small grimace. "Now Duane, for real. You don't have to sleep. But you do have to lie still and not call out."

This didn't seem fair, but Duane wasn't going to push it.

"Dad," he said, and his tone made Albert lean in with a furrowed brow. "I can't make my brain turn off."

Albert gave a sad little laugh. "Oh son," he said, "You've got a lot of me in there." He gave Duane a little tap in the center of his chest. "I have that exact same thing."

"So what do I do?"

"Just breathe, I guess. Try not to think. If you figure it out, let me know." Albert leaned in to kiss his son on the forehead and give one last hug. "I love you, you know?"

# # #

That night, in the dark with the dead, Duane knew a few things too. Things he knew too much to put in words. But words were how he remembered them, later, when Uncle Frank was impressed by how much he knew about Gaspard St. John. He didn't tell Uncle Frank about the highwayman in his nightmare, but to himself he thought, "I'm not alone. Mom and dad and the net of ancestors are with me.

"I have an army in my heart."

# # #

On Halloween night, someone in a fifty-dollar werewolf mask picked up a jack-o-lantern and threw it straight through the Dead Thing. It was a great shot, right on the plastic skull, smashing it flat beneath a sagging orange mess.