

The Ghostly Double

by
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Adam was late. Mr. Swartz had kept him in detention an extra hour for passing a note, and it wasn't even his note. He'd been between the twins, Zoe and Zia, doing a favour. He punched the air. Cranky old Swartz.

He'd have to explain to his mom why he was late, and she'd ground him for the weekend. The seventh grade was turning out to be his worst ever school year. What he needed was a twin of his own to share the misery.

Pulling his scarf across the bridge of his nose, he tugged his cap down.

He was nearing the house that gave him the creeps, so he picked up his pace and tucked his chin down. As he came to the padlocked gate, he glanced through the iron bars. The thick woody stems of wisteria snaked around the four porch columns and winter weeds grew tall and spiky. He shivered. And that's when he looked up and into a face peering down at him from a high window.

As Adam stared the face vanished. The person didn't step back. He didn't walk away. He faded like smoke fades when wind stirs the air.

Adam focused on the window, but the only movement came from late afternoon shadows rippling across the glass.

Last month he'd made a mistake and told his mom about the weird place he passed everyday, and she'd said, "There's a painting of that house in the old days. It's in the museum." Then one Sunday when he had lots of better things to do, she'd dragged him across town to the *Murchinson Cove Gallery*. At the end of a long room, the picture titled *York House* hung under dim lights. In the painting the house glistened white surrounded by oak trees and gardens that led all the way to the river.

Now Adam glanced around him. Along with all its past owners, the trees and gardens were gone. They'd been replaced by rows of solid brick houses and alleys where people left garbage cans and rats gnawed bones at night. This dreary backside of Murchinson's Cove was the shortest route home, or Adam would have gone another way.

Should he keep going and forget the face in the window? Maybe someone had moved in.

"Hey!" he called, his voice sharp, cutting into the silence. And it was then he realized how silent it was. There were no car sounds like there should have been this time of day. There were no airplanes overhead, no voices from the brick houses. He looked over his shoulder and stumbled backward, his mouth open.

The street, along with everything else he passed everyday, had vanished. Instead there was a wide dirt path winding through broad-branching trees. Open countryside stretched as far as he could see.

When he faced the house again, the fence had disappeared. The four columns along the front of the house gleamed white. Their scrolling caps and solid bases supported a spotless porch. Chairs faced the garden where a fountain splashed over arched backs of stone dolphins. The museum picture had sprung to life. He shook his head, trying to re-boot his brain, but that didn't help.



The face was at the window again, and this time Adam was sure it was boy about his age.

Adam clenched his hands. For a moment he thought about running, but since nothing was familiar, he didn't know which way to go. There was something about the way the boy looked at him... something.... Before he realized it, he'd walked the length of the path. With one foot on the bottom step he waited, his breath coming in short gasps. He climbed onto the porch and tried the door. It swung open.

Inside the house there were thick carpets and gold-framed mirrors. A staircase swept down

from the second floor, its banister a sleek curve.

"Come upstairs," a voice called.

Adam stopped and backed against the closed door.

"Please. Nothing here will harm you."

His mom's words whirred inside his head, "No more trouble. Do you hear me, young man?" Then he remembered Swartz's most frequent question. "Is trouble your middle name?" Now he was breaking into a house. This was trouble with a capital T. But who was the boy? What did he want?

Slowly, he climbed to the second floor.

“Come to my room.” It was the boy’s voice again.

Adam looked down the long corridor to the end.

“Yes,” the voice said. “That’s my door.”

Was the boy watching him? Adam glanced left and right without moving his head. Suddenly he was being pulled down the hall as if someone had hold of his arm. He reached the door and stood with his hands clammy and shaking.

“Please,” the voice pleaded.

Adam turned the knob. The door opened into a dark room.

“I hoped you’d come today.” The boy stood in the centre of the room, his face in the shadows. “My name is Caleb. I am pleased to finally meet you, Adam.”

“I’m... dreaming, right?”

“I haven’t much time, and I have a great favour to ask.”

Adam closed his eyes. When he’d open them, he was sure he’d be back on the sidewalk on his way home. He wouldn’t see the boy. The street and the houses wouldn’t be gone. This had to be Swartz’s fault or his mom’s. They were always ragging on him about his grades, about his attitude. It was enough to make him crazy.

“You are troubled.” Caleb’s voice cut into Adam’s thoughts.

Adam nodded. He’d been *troubled* since his dad left, since his mom became the witch woman, since he’d gotten Swartz for seventh grade math.

“I sense your distress when you pass each day.” Caleb’s hand touched Adam’s shoulder, leaving a cold place against Adam’s skin.

“You’ve been watching me?” Adam shivered. The attic air became icy in that moment when Caleb’s hand was on his jacket. It was a different cold than any he’d ever felt. “I gotta go.” He grabbed the doorknob.

“Not yet.” Caleb’s voice was urgent. “Hear me out.”

Adam pulled on the door, but it wouldn’t open. He whirled to face Caleb. “Let me go.”

“Without your help, I am doomed.” When Caleb said the word ‘doomed,’ the air inside the room grew musty.

Adam slid to the floor with his back against the sealed door. “What... do you want?”

“I must find a letter.” He paused. “Today.” He paused again. “To find it I must leave this house.”

Adam started to ask why, when Caleb said, “Today is the two hundredth anniversary of my death.”

“Your... death.” This guy was a nutcase. Adam tried to swallow, but his mouth was dry. “So what do you want from me?”

“A brief loan,” Caleb answered.

“You’re asking the wrong guy. My mom took away my allowance and I don’t have a cent.”

“Not money.” Caleb crept close, not like a person, but like ink seeping into paper. “I need to borrow your body.”

Adam wanted to scream for help, but his voice had disappeared and he was shaking so hard his teeth chattered.

“I can’t leave this room without your help. If you allow me to share your body, I can search for the letter.”

Caleb’s coldness went through Adam’s clothes and made his chest ache. He tried to lean away but his back was already pressed against the door.

“You may say no, but please don’t, or—” Caleb’s voice became faint.

“Or what?”

“I will be locked inside this room for another hundred years.”

“How long—” Adam swallowed. “—do you need... me?”

“Only until I find the letter and destroy it.”

“What’s so important—?”

"If you agree, you will know all that I know. I will not have to explain."

The biggest loan Adam had ever made was his dictionary to Zoe during study hall. Now someone wanted to borrow his body. He crossed his fingers like he did when he needed luck. "If I say yes—"

Before he could finish, his tongue, his brain, his stomach turned to ice. Caleb wasn't sitting hunched in front of him anymore. Little by little Adam's body warmed, but his head filled with images he'd never seen before. It was as if he'd had brain surgery and his memories had been pieced together with someone else's.

"This is very nice." Caleb's voice came from inside his head. "It has been so long since I have heard my heart."

"Whoa! Let's get two things straight. First, it's my heart, okay?" Adam waited. "Caleb?"

"Of course."

"And second, I didn't agree to this."

"But you said yes."

"That's not what I meant—"

"I would like to go outside. It has also been so long." Caleb's voice whispered inside Adam's head.

"Let's get a few more things straight—" Before Adam could finish, Caleb had made him push open the door and walk down the steps and across to the wide-sweeping staircase. Adam paused with his hand on the banister.

"I used to slide down when my mother was not watching." Caleb said, and before Adam knew it, he was zipping down the S-shaped banister and landing on the first floor.

It didn't seem to matter what Adam wanted. Caleb was in charge. Adam soon found himself outside, his arms outstretched and his face turned to the cold November sky. Adam felt the joy of Caleb's freedom, the joy of feeling fresh air touch his skin.

As their thoughts knit together, the importance of destroying the letter became clear to Adam. He knew its secret. He knew about the curse.

"Why?" Adam asked. He didn't explain his question. Caleb understood.

"I was the one who—"

"But it was an accident." Adam saw that day, a new memory in his brain. A child named Stephen stood at the top of the stairs. Visitors sat in the parlor.

Please, Caleb. My mother will never know, Stephen whispered.

Caleb hesitated. *Your mother told me to watch you.*

Stephen tugged on Caleb's arm.

Only once. Agreed? Caleb set Stephen on the banister. *Hold tight.* Caleb let go.

Memories came in a rush. A scream and a dull thud. Women clustering over the small body. The words of Stephen's frantic mother. *"May you not live to see another day, Caleb York. May your spirit be captured here forever."*

"Her curse held. The next day a runaway carriage charged across the lawn and I fell under the horses. I've been trapped since One November 1807." Caleb's sadness flooded through Adam. "Stephen visits me. He holds no grievance. It was he who told me of the letter. Only he does not know where his mother placed it."

How were they going to find a letter written two hundred years ago? It could be anywhere—hidden in a safe, buried in a... grave. Adam shuddered. "The way I see it, we gotta start at Stephen's house." He began down a path Caleb remembered.

"Okeh." Caleb said, the word sounding strange to Adam's ear because of the way Caleb said it. "I like this word. What does it mean?"

"It means... okay." Adam laughed and Caleb did too.

In five minutes they arrived at the house. The windows were boarded, the garden bare.

"This is not how I last saw this place," Caleb said.

Adam walked to the door and jiggled the handle. The door opened.

When he entered, the cold was the same Adam had experienced when Caleb and he came together.

"There are unhappy ghosts here," Caleb whispered.

Adam's skin drew tight across his forehead. The part of him that was Adam wanted to get away fast. The other part that was Caleb felt hopeful. This was the strangest mix of feelings he'd ever had. Stranger than his first rollercoaster ride when his stomach gave up two hot dogs and a Coke. Was Murchinson's Cove full of unhappy ghosts?

"How about we look somewhere else?" No sooner had Adam spoken than white streaks wound through the room, condensed, and became a figure of a woman with thin lips pressed together in a single line.

"There is no forgiveness here, Caleb York." The woman's hollow voice filled the room.

"The letter, Mrs. Smith. I've come to break the curse. Stephen sent me." The words came from Adam's mouth, but the voice wasn't his.

"My son sent you?" She glided toward him, but Caleb wouldn't let Adam retreat.

"You've seen Stephen?"

Adam found himself nodding.

"Ohhhh," the woman moaned. "Why does he not come to me? I've waited here so long."

Caleb was ready with an answer, but Adam had an idea and spoke first. "Maybe he'll come to you if you forgive... me. Maybe he's waiting for you to change in your heart." His mom had told him once that holding bad thoughts in your heart kept people at a distance. Ghosts were people... once anyway.

She gazed into Adam's eyes, her figure wavering like a hologram. "You are right,"

she sighed. "I do forgive you, Caleb. Look in the library. The letter is there."

What library? Caleb didn't remember a library in this house. Adam stared into the dim hallway mirror, searching the face that was his and still not his for an answer. Then it came to him.

"Caleb, I know where there's a library, but we have to go to my century to find it."

Caleb agreed, and they walked down the steps of the Smith house into the winter of 2008. Adam crossed at a busy intersection, sensing Caleb's astonishment. "Don't worry, okay?"

"O... keh," Caleb answered.

Adam crossed the park, ran up the library steps, and pushed open the heavy door.

The librarian looked up from her desk. "We are closing in a few minutes."

"This is important, ma'am."

She looked at Adam over her glasses.

"I have to find a letter written in 1806. Do you have files of old letters from Murchinson's Cove in that year?"

"There are several books of local history. And I know there are letters, but there are so many. I don't have the time—"

"It's a matter of life and death." Adam had never said that before, but now he said it with such feeling that the librarian paused.

"Let's see what we can find." She walked from behind her desk and down the aisle. "I'll catch up on paperwork, but you'll have to leave by six." She glanced at the clock. "One hour."

Adam searched the records, trying not to miss anything yet trying to get through each book. He turned the pages pasted with news articles, photos, scribbled notes. At six o'clock he sat back in his chair and rubbed his eyes.

"It is not here." Caleb's voice was sad.

"There's one more book." Adam glanced at the librarian. She held up ten fingers and mouthed, *ten minutes*. Adam lifted the last vol-

ume onto the desk and opened the leather cover. Page one. Page two. Page... *Let this curse remain as long as the paper it is written upon. May Caleb York's soul be sealed away one century following another, forever separate from kin and friends.*
Margaret Lyons Smith

"Yahoo!"

The librarian looked up.

"Sorry." Adam removed the letter, making sure she didn't see him. Tucking it inside his jacket, he closed the book and dashed out-

side. He jogged all the way to Caleb's house where he climbed the fence and made his way through the ruined gardens.

Once inside Caleb's house, he laid the letter in the fireplace and after striking several old matches set fire to it. The smoke rose in a thin spiral up the chimney.

"Thank you," Caleb said.

"That's okay. Now, I gotta get home. I'm in all kinds of trouble, and since it's after six my mom's gonna go ballistic."



"You have some very interesting words. I would like so much—" Caleb's voice trailed into silence.

"Caleb?"

"I am thinking."

"You're leaving, right?" What if Caleb didn't leave?

"Just a few heartbeats more... Okeh?"

Caleb was holding on to the life he'd borrowed. Adam clenched his eyes, thinking about his mom and all the trouble he gave her, thinking about not passing Swartz's class, thinking that he had a chance to set things right and Caleb didn't.

And suddenly Caleb stood in front of him. For the first time Adam could see him clearly. Caleb was dressed in knee-length pants laced at the sides. His shirt hung loose to his waist and lay open at his neck. His hair was tied back and brushed his collar.

Adam's legs shook as he stared into the face he knew so well, and yet had never seen from this view.

"I knew you would be surprised," Caleb said.

Adam didn't know what he felt. Surprised, yes. Relieved to have his body back to himself, yet — "It's gonna be lonely without you, Caleb."

"And the same for me as well."

"So why today? And why me?" Adam asked.

"Stephen said I needed someone from my family on the anniversary of my death, exactly one century to the day. It was how his mother worded the curse, '*one century following another.*' No one from my family came in 1907."

"Family? Me?" Adam said.

Caleb smiled. "Do you not see our resemblance? We could be twins."

Adam sighed. "My luck. I get a twin and he's a ghost." 🐉



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