



Me, holding a garden hose.

Funeral

ON OUR LAST MORNING in Marshfield the doorbell rang at nine o'clock. When I opened it I saw Andy, Steve, and Larry standing together. I was surprised to see them.

"C'mon, we're taking you to the woods," Larry said.

Dad came downstairs carrying two suitcases.

"Can I go into the woods?" I asked Dad.

He shook his head. "We're leaving in less than an hour."

"Please, Dad," I pleaded. "Just one last time?"

"All right, but we're leaving at ten o'clock sharp," he said. "When you hear me beep the horn, you come right away, okay?"

"Okay," I promised, and followed my friends outside. They were walking in a funny way, the way you do when you're hiding a secret.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"We're having a funeral," Andy replied with a solemn face.

"For who?"

"You," Steve explained.

"A funeral!" I laughed. "Hey, I'm moving. I'm not dead!"

"You'll be dead to us," Larry pointed out.

We entered Ale's Woods on a path I'd run down thousands of times. I knew every rock and mushroom and pine tree by heart. In the middle of the woods my friends stopped.

"There!" Steve said, pointing to a small indentation in the forest floor. "Lie down, dead man!"

I lay down. The ground was thick with pine needles, and soft. My friends picked up big clumps of pine needles and started sprinkling them over my body.

"Hey!" I protested.

"Be quiet," Larry ordered. "You're dead, remember? Keep your eyes closed."

"Just don't get it on my face," I muttered. They kept sprinkling the pine needles on me until my limbs and body were covered, and I could feel them, like a lightweight blanket.

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot—," Steve sang.

"You don't sing that at a funeral," Larry interrupted. "You sing that on New Year's Eve!"

Andy loudly cleared his throat. "Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye," he announced. "We have gathered here to lay to rest the soul of our departed friend, Ralph Fletcher. Would anyone like to speak?"

"I would," Steve said. "Ralph Fletcher was a good friend. Last year I had to do summer school. He came by every day to walk me home."

"He was a good friend," Larry agreed. "About a

RALPH FLETCHER

month ago, John Berkowitz tried to beat me up, and Ralph told John, 'You'll have to beat me up first.' So, John Berkowitz punched him instead. He was a brave friend. Stupid, but brave!"

Everyone laughed, including me.

"He was a good friend," Andy began, then stopped. I lay on the pine needles, eyes shut, smelling the mix of the piney smell and the good, rotting earth underneath. I waited for Andy to continue, but he didn't say anything. Then he whispered:

"He was the brother I never had."

"He was a member of the Four Stooges," Larry said in a husky whisper. Then they all said together:

"We'll never forget him."

My eyes started to water. I tilted my head so they wouldn't notice, and stayed quiet. Nobody spoke. I thought of all the things I'd done with these guys. Staying up late listening to the radio while the DJ counted down the top ten. Blowing off M-80s in Mr. Oxner's cornfield. Eating raw

MARSHFIELD DREAMS

sweet corn. Going to the Marshfield Fair every summer. Arguing about which girl in our class was cuter—Lisa Kennedy, Pam Coyne, or Beth Byers. Fishing for crappies and sunfish. Trading baseball cards, card tricks, dirty jokes, scars, stories, snacks, swears.

For a long moment it stayed quiet. Finally I opened my eyes.

They were gone.

Usually I hated it when my friends ditched me, but this time it felt different. In a strange way I was glad they were gone. For a while I just laid there, looking up at the trees. I heard a car horn beeping.

"Ralph!" It was Jimmy, calling. "C'mon, we gotta go!"

"Coming!" I yelled back. I sat up and brushed off the pine needles. Bits of light danced in the deep forest shadows around me. I knew I'd never forget that place. Then I stood up and stepped into my new life, whatever that might be.

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