

## SOURDOUGH'S PLACE

MARTHA MOLDT

I don't guess it's every kid that gets to spend a night at Old Dead Sourdough's place. I'm really pretty lucky, I guess. I mean, most kids' parents are very restrictive—real uptight about letting their experience if he's going to be a world famous writer someday. Some kids's parents are very restrictive—real uptight about letting their little darling go someplace where he might get a hair on his dear head bent out of round or something.

Like Bert's mom, for instance. Bert Littlefield. He's my best friend. My mom laughs because Bert's so short and skinny—he'd be fatter I guess except that he runs around all the time like somebody wound up his mainspring too tight. He talks all the time, too. Sometimes I just have to turn him off. You know—go read a book or something. It doesn't bother Bert, though. He keeps burbling on and on, just like somebody was listening all the time. I've got to admit, most of the time he has good ideas. I get a lot of my plots out of Bert. If you can stand the jabber long enough, you find out that Bert is really a very creative guy. But his mother . . . *she's* about as sensitive as a dead rat! My mom laughs at us because Bert and I are such a crazy combination. I guess she has got a point—I'm tall and sort of fat (Mom says to say "stocky"), and I'd rather have my nose in a book than almost anything, but Bert and me—we do ok. I get into some really good experiences with Bert.

In my family, see, you got to be creative. Mom sculpts, and Dad's an architect. Even my rotten little sister is an "artist"—*she* thinks so, anyway. Me—I am going to be a famous writer, so I'm lucky to have parents that understand how I need some experience of life before I can really be good at writing. Right now, I just finished this book, *Turn of the Screw*, which is this really neat spook story. Boy, it is great! Old Henry James can really pour on the atomospere! I never read such neat atomosphere! I like to write ghost stories. I make them up and then sneak into my dumb sister's room at night and tell her the stories. Boy, it really scares the heck out of her! She won't tell Mom on me, though, because if she does—no more stories. The creepy kid *likes* being scared. She even believes all that stuff!

My ghost stories have a lot of blood and guts in them, but I never thought about atmosphere before. That's the way to do a ghost story, boy! Psych 'em all up with atmosphere first, see, and *then* slap 'em with the blood and guts!

Anyway, to do it right, I need to soak a while in some atmosphere myself which is why, under the circumstances, Mom said I could spend overnight at Old Sourdough's, only she further stipulated that someone like Bert had to do it with me, so now I got a real problem.

See, Bert's mom isn't creative or anything, and she doesn't understand why Bert and me just *have* to do this overnight thing. She says no dice: Bert can't go, he's too young. Jeez, we're both twelve, already, and we've been out in the *wilds*, for pete's sake, for days at a time! I mean, a five day campout isn't just nothing! Bert's old lady says well, that was with the Boy Scouts, and we were with an adult leader. Well cripe, Mr. Jennings does a good job in his basement, but he's a complete zilch in the woods..... Last time we took a hike, he lost the only map we had and guess who had to find the way home after we got completely lost? WE do all the work on those campouts anyway, but Bert's mom still says no.

So now what I guess I have got to do is tell a lie to Mom. Well cripe, a writer has got to get his experiences, and actually....when you get right down to it....a lie can be a pretty creative thing.

Bert and me have this blood-pact. I mean, one of us will never, *never* snitch on the other and we will help the other out *no matter what*. So I can depend on Bert to leave the phone off the hook in case my nosy mother calls his house tonight, because I am going to tell her that Bert can go with me, even if he can't, so I can get to Old Sourdough's place myself.

As a matter of fact, Bert's going to sneak out and join me after his parents go to bed. He said he would bring his alarm clock so's he can know when to get back home before his dad gets up in the morning.

The thing about Sourdough's house, see—it has got *atmosphere*! Boy, it is really neat! I mean, it is completely spooky!

First off, it sits out in this deserted field all by itself. There are a couple of big old dark pine trees around the front door, but the rest of the field is all overgrown grass and vines and stuff and this old house just sort of *looms*—up out of the grass, like, and then when you come up to the front door.....see, you come in off the back road by this old driveway that used to make a loop up to the house only

it's all grown up with thistles and briars now, and you have to be real careful—there's just enough gravel left on it to make a little path to follow. Anyway, you come up by the front door, and there's this place sort of crouching under these five or six humungous pine trees that lean over the front doorway and the second story roof.

The only thing that is taller than the trees is a big old tower stuck onto the front of the house with this round window right in the middle of its roof. Bert says it's some kind of a French roof to have a window in it like that, and it goes up for a while just like a regular roof would, but all of a sudden it goes flat on top.....like somebody chopped off its head or something. Anyhow, this window sits in the tower roof above the pine trees and looks out over the driveway like the evil eye. It's not too bad in the daytime except for when the sun hits the glass.....it makes the tower look like it's squinting at you.....but at night, it makes this bottomless hole, like the tower is blind—only you still feel like it can *see* you, if you know what I mean.

People say that the tower is where Old Man Sourdough't ghost is. He's supposed to wail around the tower and yell "Go awa-a-ay! Go awa-a-ay!" at people. Janie Schaeffer says she saw him once, but Janie—well, *you* know. First off, she's a dumb *girl*, so she goes into hysterics at any old thing, and second off, she's herself, which means anything you say, old dumb Schaeffer has just *got* to top it. She's a real creep!

You got to be scientific about things. Everything has an explanation. After all, this is the twentieth century and nobody but stupid broads like Jane believes in ghosts anymore anyway. Right? Right!

Bert and me, we figure the wailing is because of the wind. There's lots of lose shingles up on that tower roof and probably a few holes too, and the wind just whistles right through.....It does sound pretty spooky. Bert and me, however, just don't happen to believe in spooks ourselves.

You can cut through the field by the cement factory and come up kind of on the back of the house, but the field is full of pricker-bushes and wild grape vines that hang onto your shoes, and there's an old well somewhere that isn't covered over. Some kid fell in it about ten years ago and drowned before anybody even missed him, so Bert and me, we don't go by that way very often. People say that the drowned kid's spook hangs out around the well-hole, but of course, Bert and I don't believe that kind of scunge. It's just that cutting

through the field is a lot harder than following the driveway. Takes more time, too—it really does.

Anyway, the poor old house looks so sick and miserable all by itself from the back. You can't see the trees especially, and that darn tower has an eye—I mean, *you* know.....another round window—on the back of its roof, too.....and that field is all open—no trees, no nuthin'.....Not that it bothers me and Bert any naturally, but some kids (I won't mention names) *so.nt* kids feel like there's no place to hide.

The spook story that goes with the house is this: see, Old Man Sourdough was a prospector back more than a hundred years ago. I guess he got in on the California gold run, first of all, but he didn't do too well at it. So then he disappeared for about five years or so and nobody knows what happened, but he comes home, see, (this was his home town—his dad was some big deal here—president of the bank, or mayor, or something) and what do you know but he's rich as a pig!

People say most likely he prospected in Alaska and struck it rich, but Bert and I think different in view of later developments and events. I think he joined a band of train-and-bank robbers, like the James Brothers, and he robbed himself rich. Then, naturally, he holed up with a friendly tribe of Indians or something until the heat was off. Bert says no, *he* bets the old guy joined in on some of the smuggling that was going on off the California coast and then skipped out to Mexico until it got safe to come home. At any rate, nobody really knows because Sourdough never said how he got rich to anyone.

Anyway he was sure rolling in money when he came home again. He was real proud of himself and expecting to marry this girl he'd been dating before he left to prospect, only she had up and married this other guy in the meantime. Well it wouldn't have bothered me any—what's one old girl more or less? But Sourdough was sort of broken up about it—although you'd think a guy who had done neat things like panning for gold in the Old West, and robbing trains and neat stuff like that wouldn't get all that sloppy so as to fall apart over one crummy girl. Well he had this house built for him and his girl, but since she wasn't his girl any more, he moved in by himself and became a sort of hermit.

The really neat part is that one night, somebody came to the house and croaked Old Sourdough off because of his gold, which he kept somewhere in his house. They slit his throat and stabbed him in

the gut and ransacked his house, only the didn't find all the gold because they came back again six months later after Old Sourdough was buried and everything. Bert and me, we figure the murderers were from Sourdough's old robbing or smuggling gang out for revenge and the gold.

The house was all empty after Sourdough died. See, Sourdough didn't have a will or anything, so the house just stood there with nobody in it, and the weeds grew up and the vines began to creep around the lawn, and the windows got broken and the paint began to peel. One night (it was dark and windy and rainy), the two murderers came back to get more gold, and they jimmed open the front door, which creaked upon its hinges. And they sneaked up the creaking stairs, and crept down the hall, which had these floorboards that squeaked at every step they took! All of a sudden they stopped! They could hear a creaking behind them like somebody else was in the house—you know? So they quick ran up into the tower to hide, but the creak came right up after them, like this—cr-r-re-e-eak! cr-r-re-e-eak! And it went *RIGHT THROUGH THE DOOR!* Without even stopping!

So the next morning they found one guy smashed dead on the front lawn where he had landed after he jumped out of the eye in the tower, and the other guy was huddled in a corner of the tower-room, and *he* was off his nut.....jabbering away about blood and guts and spooks. And so now people say the first guy haunts the tower too, along with Old Dead Sourdough.

They say you can see lights flashing and flickering in the tower window and it sounds like a fight is going on and then a ball of cool green fire comes falling and howling out of the window. It floats down through the pine trees and explodes when it touches the ground.

Me and Bert discussed that story this morning. Bert says he bets what happened was that the first murderer pushed the second guy out the tower window so he would have Sourdough's gold all to himself. *Then* the Creak came and scared the other guy off his nut.

"Oh come off it," I said to Bert scornfully, "you don't think there was a real Creak do you? I thought you didn't believe in spooks," I said scornfully.

Well Bert looked kind of thoughtful for a while and he said that spooks were one *thing* and for himself, no he didn't believe in *spooks and* that kind of junk, but you know, Creaks are something else.

*Everybody's* heard a Creak or two and how do you know what's making the Creak, especially in Old Dead Sourdough's house?

Well, I said dripping scorn from my voice like acid, what with Sourdough and the kid in the well and the guy who jumped out of the tower it probably gets pretty crowded over there around the dark of the moon, and maybe we wouldn't get much sleep. Besides.....

That's right, said Bert suddenly, it *is*! He looked sort of funny—like he wanted to throw up.

What *is*? I asked. Halloween?

N-no, said Bert. The dark of the moon. It's tonight!

Well, I said, I can see that you are turning chicken on me, and I will have to go by myself. Bert said no, wait a minute, actually he wasn't scared at all, but he was going to have to ask his mom's permission to go because you know how women are about that kind of thing.....And that's when Bert's mom said we were too young to go.

Bert sure looked relieved about being too young to go.....I bet that fink was *glad* his mother said he couldn't go! I bet he's *happy* he gets to stay home tonight.....Come to think—I even bet he won't sneak out late to come over tonight at all, and I'll be left alone..... I'll have to have my experience by myself!

Well, let him chicken out! He'll miss out on the atmosphere is all. I'll just go and stay.....all night.....by myself.....all alone.....just me and Old Sourdough and the drowned kid and the murderer—ha ha ha. That's a joke, really it is. I don't believe in all that stuff. Boy, I didn't think old yellow-belly Bert did either.....

'Course, *now* I'm really going to have to tell a whopper to Mom. I mean, before, it was only half a lie because Bert was really going to be there part of the night at least, now it's a lie the whole night long. Wow, if Mom finds out, I'm in big trouble! Some moms, like Mrs. Littlefield, oh they'll put on this big act—you know, like their little angel broke their heart and all like that. Gee, Bert's mom can really carry on—I mean, she has got her act down to a science. My mom isn't the heartbroken type though, she'll whack you one instead. Hard to. There isn't a one of 'em likes to be lied to.

Actually.....well, *actually*, I think maybe I'll just put this thing off for a while. I mean just postpone it a little, not drop it or anything.....I mean I'm not going to chicken out or anything like that but there's no point in getting myself in hot water, is there?.....I mean it's obvious old Bert isn't going to get up enough guts to come

tonight and while *I'm* not scared to go by myself—heck I don't believe in any old Creak—still, my mom packs a pretty good whallop when she gets mad. I'm not afraid of ghosts, see—just of corporal punishment ha ha (another joke).

Maybe I'll even tell old chicken-heart that I did go.....Hey, yeah, and I'll say I saw the Creak and everything! Heck, I can drum up some atmosphere. Who needs to stay in an old spook house anyway? I can whip up my own spooks! Yeah, I'll tell Bert I saw the murderer jump out the window.....no, I'll say the Creak *pushed him out!* Neat! That little crybaby'll turn *green!* He'll turn split-pea soup green!

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Well, jeeze, I saw old Bert in school today and I said, "Hey, where were you last night? I thought you were going to come out to Sourdough's place with me? Boy, did you miss a good show!

"Boy," I said, "was it spooky! I was bedded down in the tower, see, when right n the stroke of midnight—*RIGHT ON THE FIRST STROKE*, I heard footsteps coming up the stairs! Then there was this noise—like cr-re-ek, cr-r-re-ek! And this sort of moan started up and the footsteps ran up the tower stairs!

"Well," I told Bert, "I hid behind this big chair up there, and pretty soon this weird ball of light kind of squeezed right through the door! And all the time the Creak was moaning itself right up the stairs! And the light-ball started bouncing off the walls like it wanted to escape only it didn't know where to go!

"And *then*," I said slowly, "*then* I saw the Creak! It came right on through the door, just like the light-ball did but only this Creak was a real like spook!

"It was this man, see, and his hair was all green and moldy; and his eyeballs were hanging out halfway down his face—but they were still looking all around; and blood was dripping out his mouth and out of this big slit in his throat and onto his clothes which were all bloody and ripped up and kind of hanging off of his body in shreds; and there was another slit in his stomach, and his guts were all hanging out of it.

"And he had these big hairy hands," I said, "and they were dripping with blood and guts and stuff, and he stretchd them out toward the light-ball and the poor old light-ball sort of shrieked and

screeded but the Creak grabbed it and threw it out the tower's eyes and it gave this *awful* yell as it fell to the waiting earth below!"

Boy, I really poured it on! Old Bert's eyes got round and his mouth dropped open and he said, "What happened then?"

"Why," I said casually with a flick of my hand, "why the last stroke of midnight struck then and everything vanished and it was all dark and quiet again, so I just came out from behind the chair and rolled up in my sleeping bag and went right off to sleep.

"It's too bad you chickened out of coming," I added sarcastically; you sure missed a real show."

Bert just looked at me, kind of disgusted.

"I didn't chicken out," he said. "I got to Sourdough's just about eleven and I poked around for about half an hour, but I couldn't find you anyplace so I went up to the tower and stayed there until my alarm clock went off in the morning."

"Never heard a sound the whole night long," Bert said.

## PANTOMIME

EDWARD L. WILLIAMS

i remember when all the children laughed,  
and the laughs were ours;  
and she was cinderella  
and i was peter pan. . .  
and that was all there was to life.