

WHISTLE  
IN THE  
DARK

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SUSAN HILL LONG

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Summary: In a small Missouri town during the 1920s, Clem is torn between family responsibility and the life he wishes to lead when he must begin working in the lead mine on his thirteenth birthday to help pay for his sister's medical care.

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*For my dad, Ronald W. Hill*



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# 1

## THE LAST DAY

IT WAS JUNE, the middle of the day Clem was to quit being a boy.

They were all in rows watching Miss Bedelia Pipe chalk out on the board a problem Clem wasn't going to bother with. Normally he would, but not today. Clem stared out the window at the sky, clear and blue until it bumped against the rocky knob of Goggin Mountain.

The classroom windows opened onto the redbuds that marked the edges of the dry playground, but there was no breeze coming in. Clem sighed deeply, and picked up the scent of the lone bull pine that towered over the school yard's western boundary, a tree foreign to these parts, its seed dropped by a tornado some years back. He smelled, too, the dusty heat of packed dirt, and the lead of the pencil, and also a whiff of something different, maybe some rain on the way, and he filled his chest with all of it, as if he might never smell those normal kinds of things again.

He heard the small sound of someone standing beside him, and opened his eyes on Miss Pipe, framed by

the window. One hand held papers against her dress; the other hand she reached out to Clem as if to say *Come along*, or maybe *Stay put*. His heart took a little jump under his shirt buttons. She was a slim person who seemed big to Clem, with yellow hair and smooth, pink skin. A small line gathered between her eyes, and her mouth went up at the corners like a smile, but thin.

“Yes, Miss Pipe?”

Her mouth opened as if she was going to say something. But she only riffled the papers, nodded, handed back Clem’s paper, and went on down the row.

The assignment had been to write two hundred fifty words on the topic “I believe . . .” Clem had tried to remember the things Miss Pipe lectured about. Use metaphor and simile, choose descriptive words and action words, avoid the run-on sentence. Across the top margin of his paper was written an *A* and one comment in Miss Pipe’s firm lettering: *Good Luck*.

“Clemson Harding, because this is your last day, I’ve chosen you to read your paper aloud,” Miss Pipe said now.

Bad luck, Clem thought. Awkwardly, he pushed himself sideways to clear the desktop with his knees, stood, and walked to the front of the room. He turned to face the class, clutching the paper in his hands. Only three students were really looking at him. Mickey Olsen waggled his eyebrows to try and make him laugh. His sister, Esther, smiled, waiting, her hands clasped in front of her. The third person looking at him, from behind a curtain of thick black hair, was Linda Jean, the girl everybody poked fun at because she wore dirty clothes and repeated the first grade and, worse, because of a scar that sealed the skin of half her face. Behind her back

they called her Frankenstein, or just Frank. He wondered, not for the first time, what on earth had happened to tear open her cheek—there were tales of a chimney fire, a jagged hunting knife, an explosion. He gripped the sides of his paper in front of him and began to read out loud.

“I’m awake but I don’t know it yet.” Clem glanced up over the top of the paper at Miss Pipe, then down again. “I hear the tang, tang, tang of the woodhen knocking on the chimney cap, and the rattle of beak on tin snaps my eyelids up like roller shades, and I’m out of bed and out of the house and I’m feeling the damp on my skin and I’m feeling the sun red hot on my eyelids. The small gritty bits of earth under the soles of my bare feet don’t trouble me at all. I run flying toward the creek in the woods. I run there so much I’ve worn out a path in the ground getting to the water. In the trees I run slow and light, because the ground is springy with fallen things and growing things. I’m dodging trees and panting like a dog, which is something I believe I want more than anything in the world. I get to the creek and I drop to my knees in the spongy place along the bank and I lower my head and reach my hands into the creek like a cup. I see myself, but the water is nothing like a mirror. I can’t make my face out to be anything but a shadow. Now I splash creek water on my face and it’s so cold and sharp it almost hurts. It takes my breath clean away.”

Clem glanced up again. Esther was looking right at him. She grinned and nodded encouragement. He did not return her smile.

“I believe that a person should get up as early as possible, especially in summer,” he went on. “I believe a person should be wide awake.”

Two hundred fifty words exactly, including the wooden thumping, if anybody wanted to count. Clem put his head down and hurried back to his seat. People clapped because that is what they do when some poor kid has to get up and read in front of everybody like that.

And that was how it ended, Clem's last day of school. He felt in a way pleased, everybody clapping as if he'd done something special. But he knew he hadn't done anything except what he was told to do. And now he was still doing what he was told, following in Pap's footsteps.

He packed up his pencils and his papers and his dinner pail, and he and Esther walked right out the door as easy as if it didn't mean a thing. Clem half thought someone would stop him. He walked by Miss Pipe and she put her arm out straight. He took her hand and pumped it once, up-down, as he'd been taught, and then let go.

"Stop by and visit when you can," she said, squinting into the sun and shading her eyes with her hand. "You're a good student, Clem. I don't know if I've known a boy so in love with books and words."

Clem blushed a little from that stuff about being in love.

"I will," he said.

"Wait a moment, I've got something for you," Miss Pipe said. She disappeared into the schoolhouse, returned a moment later, and handed him a book.

"*Peter Pan*," she said.

Clem took the book and narrowed his eyes at the cover illustration. "Fairies?"

"One fairy," she said, laughing lightly the way Clem thought a fairy might, "and a horrible pirate called Captain

Hook, and a crocodile, and a very clever boy.” She smiled at Clem. “You read it, and tell me what you think.”

Clem looked down at her, he’d got that tall, and he nodded. “Thank you, Miss Pipe.” He tucked the book into his dinner pail, then he walked away and stood at the edge of the school yard.

Clem folded his essay paper longwise and beat the hard crease of it against his thigh, watching Mickey and Junie and the other kids scatter the way they did every day after school. Tomorrow, Mickey and Junie and the rest—Esther, too, if she was up to it—and Miss Pipe in one of her clean, pale dresses, they’d all be back here again. Not Clem.

The insides of Clem’s eyelids stung and he blinked them hard.

“What’s all that stuff about being awake?”

It was Mickey. Mickey was small, with the pale white skin of someone mostly kept inside. He wore a new white shirt, pressed in the morning but damp and wrinkled now. The shirttails had pulled out in places from his neat short pants, and his mother would get after him later, Clem knew, tell him he looked like a roughneck.

Clem tapped his paper against his leg again and shrugged. Then he crushed the assignment into a ball and pitched it away into the bushes at the edge of the school yard.

“Well, you’re a lucky stiff, that’s what I know,” Mickey said.

“You reckon?” Clem figured Mickey was the lucky one, for more reasons than he could count, but chief among them being that he had a dog, a big dumb yellow one, all for himself.

“Doing real work, earning real money.” Mickey hitched his book strap over his shoulder and dug the toe of his Buster Brown into the dirt.

Clem’s eyelids began to smart again. He rubbed one eye with the heel of his hand. “It’s hard work, I guess,” he said. He pushed at Mickey’s books. “You’ll get strong, too,” he said, and punched him in the arm.

“Right.” Mickey smiled with half his mouth and rubbed his shoulder. “There goes old Frankenstein,” he said, jutting his chin to where Linda Jean made her measured, unhurried way across the playing field. A small band of classmates trailed her, lurching stiff-legged with arms outstretched, their faces twisted into ugly masks. If Linda Jean was aware of her tormenters, she didn’t let on: she didn’t glance over her shoulder, she didn’t hurry.

“What’s that she’s whistling?” Mickey wondered aloud.

Clem hummed along, trying to place the tune. Then he smiled. “It’s ‘Hail, Hail, the Gang’s All Here,’” he said, turning to Mickey.

Mickey grinned, and together they sang the chorus. “What the heck do we care, what the heck do we care!”

When Clem glanced again across the playing field, Linda Jean was disappearing into the woods on the other side, the ragged hem of her dress a flash of red among the gray maples, and the Frankensteins were drifting around the edge of the school yard like water skeeters going to bump into some other trouble.

“Well, see ya, Clem. Stay awake, whatever that means.”

“See ya, Mickey.”

Mickey straggled away across the playground, kicking up clouds of dust; Mickey’s mother would wipe his shoes

clean later and buff them to a shine. Clem couldn't remember when he'd last got a pair of new boots. He called across the school yard to his sister. When Esther turned, her flowered dress swung around her knees, and her hair, as fair as Clem's was dark, floated for a moment, then settled on her shoulders. At nine, Ettie was taller and wispier than other girls her age, and she had pale skin and small, fine features, except for her clear blue eyes, large and set wide as if she was always catching sight of something new. She walked to Clem when he called her a second time, and put out her hand to hold his.

Clem turned his shoulder and didn't take her hand. If not for Esther, he wouldn't be in this spot, he thought. It was the same thought he'd had many times since he'd been told he had to go down the mines. If not for her he could stay put in school and play outfield instead of Mickey, who would only drop the ball every time, they'd see.

A train sounded from east of town. The train went through twice a day, but nobody ever got off in Leadanna, Missouri, and nobody ever boarded. Only the ore moved on. People on their way to St. Louis, or Chicago, or even New York City, they probably didn't even look out the window. The whistle sounded again, starting low and rising, then gone.

"Come on," Clem said, and Ettie fell in beside him. He took big steps so she'd have a hard time keeping up. The two of them walked away down Main, then turned left on First Street toward home. At one end of town was the Charles A. Snow school, and at the other end was the St. James Lead Company's American B mine and the mill, and in between, First Street, Second Street, Third, Miller, all

struggled to stay in neat lines as they rolled up and over the ridges of limestone buried in great shelves below. The residential streets were lined with mostly one-story houses, each with one or two front steps and a saggy porch and bare or peeling or painted clapboard siding, all the same, and some of them, down along Miller Street, Company owned. On Main Street, closer to the mine, huddled a little gathering of businesses: Miller's Store and the Tunnel Tavern, and Travers' All-Day Breakfast. From here, Clem could see the giant chat dump looming over the other edge of town. Beyond that squatted the lead mine, where at this time of day Pap was still on his shift, and where their grandfather, Pap's daddy, had worked till the miners' consumption made him sick enough he couldn't go down anymore.

Clem stopped and stared at the great mound of the chat dump. It looked solid, permanent, as honest a mountain as old Taum Sauk. But it was really just grains of sand, piled there by miners like Pap and Grampy turning the earth inside out. One good puff of God could blow it all away.

"You okay?" Esther asked. Clem looked at her. She looked like Mickey's big yellow dog, her head cocked to one side, hoping for a sign he wasn't mad. He shifted his dinner pail to the other hand. He wasn't mad, not really. It wasn't her fault.

"Sure," he said. "I'm fine."

"Liar."

She laughed and grabbed his hand in her small ones. At first he roughly curled his fingers under so she couldn't see. He knew she wanted to count the white spots on his fingernails and see how many lies he told. But Ettie's fin-

gers pried at his; sorry for acting mean to her, he fanned his fingers out.

She counted under her breath. “Six!” she said. She dropped his hand and counted on her own fingers. “A gift, a ghost, a friend, a foe, a letter to come.” That was five fingers, one hand. Then the thumb on the other hand, stuck up skyward as if to say *Okay!* She looked up at her big brother. “A journey to go. That’s for six,” she said. “Your fortune.”

Clem nodded. “Okay, Ettie,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Tomorrow would be Clem’s birthday. He knew to the minute what time he was born because his mother remembered those moments, particulars that might be taken for signs. She had often told him how she used to watch to see if her children smiled in their sleep, an omen that meant they were talking to the angels and planning to leave her.

June 2, 1924. He would turn thirteen years old at exactly eleven in the morning, and he would be completely in the dark.