
A SOUND IN THE NIGHT

W *here is Cai?* Joni Jones thought for the millionth-zillionth time as he sat on his brother's bed, holding his scarf. Joni was eleven years old and looked a bit like his older brother. He had the same brown hair, though with a middle parting, and brown eyes but no freckles. He liked to wear his brother's clothes. They made him feel closer to him somehow. Today he was wearing Cai's old yellow raincoat. Joni loved that raincoat. He loved it more, though, when his brother was wearing it.

On the bedside table lay his brother's watch. The police had taken it initially for fingerprinting, but they found nothing on it. The hands on the watch read 12.06. Had it stopped working just after twelve midnight or twelve in the afternoon? It seemed peculiar that it had stopped at that time because, for the past year, Joni would often wake up from his dreams, and when he would check his clock, it would always be

six minutes past midnight. The watch was stopped at 12.06 when the search party found it on November first—the day after Halloween.

Joni looked around his brother's room. His grandparents had left it untouched, ready if Cai ever returned. The model Spitfire and Hurricane planes were still hanging from the ceiling. Cai's bed was still made with its dinosaur covers. *He'd hate dinosaurs now*, Joni thought. Osian Bosherton, Joni's best friend, had his head put down the toilet in school for having dinosaur bedcovers.

The desk still had his favourite book on it, *World of Unknown Ghosts*. Apparently, it had been their father's favourite book. That and *The History of Geology*, but Cai and Joni had never really known their parents.

Joni wondered what Cai had done with his diary. It was something that had puzzled the police when they searched the house. His grandparents knew that Cai would often jot down his daily musings in his diary. The police thought it might hold vital clues as to what happened to him. But they were never able to find it, even after going through all his things.

A voice called from downstairs. 'Jonathan? Jaaawneee!' Then feet approached heavily. The bedroom door creaked open a little, welcoming in a shaft of autumn sunlight. In the doorway, sad faced, stood Joni's grandparents, Dilwyn and Edith Jones. Dilwyn Jones was a thin man with a little pot belly and a grey caterpillar moustache. He wore an oldy-worldly cardigan with a hole in it and brown slippers. He had

worked in the building trade and had a slight hunch because of the heavy things he had carried over the years.

Edith Jones had long black hair streaked with grey, like a badger, and bushy eyebrows. She didn't make a fuss of her appearance like she used to. She was thin like a broom and wore a dressing gown with a hankie poking out of its sleeve. She sometimes spent entire days in her dressing gown since Cai vanished. She didn't eat much these days, and her once warm smile had turned upside down to become a frown.

Joni had noticed that his grandparents had been a little more on edge than usual this week with Halloween approaching again. It was said that they had never been the same after Catrin and Daniel Jones had disappeared on that night over a decade ago. Joni's grandparents had to give up their own lives and move in with Cai and Joni to look after them. For their daughter and son-in-law to disappear off the face of the earth was very concerning. For the same thing to happen to their eldest grandchild ten years later? Well, that was just downright disturbing. The villagers would tut and frown whenever the Joneses went out in public. Most didn't bother with them at all.

Joni's grandmother sighed. 'Why are you in here again?'

'Makes me feel better.'

'Do you have to wear his raincoat?' she asked.

'Sorry,' Joni replied.

‘Are you going out to play today, lad?’ Joni’s grandfather asked.

‘I don’t know, Gramps.’ It was a touchy subject. Joni’s grandparents didn’t really like him going anywhere that wasn’t within sight of the house. They were seriously overprotective since Cai went missing, and they watched Joni like a pair of hawks. He missed out on a lot of after-school things purely because his grandparents worried so much.

‘No going down the path in the woods, and no going near the lake, OK?’ Nan said. Joni nodded. He and his friend Osh always used the path in the woods as a short cut back and forth from school. His grandparents would go mad if they found out. He felt awful about it, but there was *something* about that path. As if it was always calling to him.

‘Just don’t go touching anything in this room, there’s a good lad,’ said Gramps. ‘When your brother comes back, we want it exactly as he left it.’

‘Do you want a cup of tea, love?’ Joni’s grandmother asked.

‘I’m OK. Thanks, Nan.’

They shuffled off downstairs to the comfort of a cup of tea. Joni realised that whenever people were sad, they always seemed to drink tea. His grandparents drank a great deal of it.

Joni walked across to the window. *Squeak!* He and his brother would often get up to mischief at night and get away with all sorts, but it was always the squeaky floorboard that would wake up his grandparents and

land them in trouble. Gramps had planned to fix it. Joni approached the telescope that was facing the window. Through it he could see the path in the woods a little over half a mile away from the house. You had to walk down the street and cross a big field to get to it. Joni couldn't see much of it—just a gap where the leaves had turned orange and yellow.

Then waddling into view came a podgy boy with a scruffy appearance. Osian Bosherton, or Osh as his friends called him, was making his way down the path. He was of Jamaican heritage and had black hair and brown eyes. His pockets were often hanging out of his trousers, and his shoelaces were always undone.

Osh walked everywhere with his head down in a book, pushing his glasses up his nose as he read. Today he had a skip to his walk. Probably getting excited about reading something science related, Joni thought.

Earlier in the year Osh had detention for “misapplying” science in Mr Brooks’s class. Mr Brooks always picked on Joni, so Osh decided to teach him a lesson.

When you pop a certain brand of mints into cola, they create carbon dioxide bubbles, and the rising bubbles react with the carbon dioxide to cause an eruption. Osh had sneakily slipped mints into Mr Brooks’ cola bottle just before he was about to take a sip. Like a volcano, the cola exploded from the bottle and went all over the teacher’s brown corduroy jacket and trousers. He didn’t see the funny side, but it had the class in stitches. Osh could always put a smile on Joni’s face, even in the darkest of times.

The bedroom door creaked open, and Joni jumped. In walked Osh, book in hand: *How to Make Stink Bombs*. Joni shook his head in disbelief—he must have been daydreaming the whole fifteen minutes it had taken for his friend to walk from the path to his house. Where had his mind been for that time?

‘Hey, Joni. Am I OK to come in?’ Osh asked. ‘Your grandparents let me come up.’

‘Sure, just don’t touch anything. Did you run here?’

‘No way, José! When have I ever run for anything?’ he replied, grabbing one of the Spitfires dangling overhead. ‘Didn’t this used to be your room?’

‘Yeah, but we switched rooms about six months before Cai went missing. I never liked the sun waking me up.’ Joni glanced again at the book under Osh’s arm. ‘So how do you make stink bombs?’

‘It’s easy-peasy. It’s just eggs, milk, and vinegar for simple ones. You can make them smell like proper wet egg farts, too, if you get it right. I’m going to set one off in Ellie Hopwood’s bag. She gave me a dead arm in maths, so she deserves it.’ Osh wandered over to Cai’s desk, stepping on the squeaky floorboard.

Creak.

‘You want to get that fixed,’ he said, picking up the ghost book. ‘Coolio. *World of Unknown Ghosts*. There’s a one-eyed dog ghost in this that’s really sick. It can eat you up whole and spew your guts out like spaghetti.’ He turned to the telescope.

‘Coolio—an Orion StarBlast 4.5 Astro reflector scope. What’s it pointing at?’

‘The path to school,’ Joni answered. ‘There’s a gap where you can just see through a few of the trees. I just watched you skipping along it.’

‘I was not skipping,’ Osh said, offended. ‘I was walking at a pace. Why is it pointing at the path and not the sky?’

‘Dunno. It’s locked in that position. It’s not been moved since Cai went missing.’

‘The police didn’t move it?’ Osh asked, pressing against the eye piece.

‘No, it’s locked in position. I just told you.’

‘Why was you brother looking at that path? Isn’t that where they found his scarf?’

‘Coincidence, I guess. I could only see you for a few seconds. There’d be no real point in looking there with a telescope.’

‘Didn’t Cai go missing on Halloween?’

‘Yes. Nearly a year ago.’ Joni didn’t need reminding.

‘This is pointing at that tiny gap in the trees, and they’re deciduous.’

‘They’re what?’

Osh liked learning long words and showing off about it.

‘Deciduous. It means they lose their leaves every autumn. And it’s almost exactly a year since— What I’m saying is, the trees look the same way as they did this time last year, and this telescope is pointing at the only gap in them.’

Joni had trouble working out what was going on in

Osh's brain at the best of times. Had Cai been looking at something on the path in the woods?

Osh spotted the dinosaur duvet. 'Oh, jeepers, Ellie Hopwood flushed my head down the toilet for having that duvet! Did you know dinosaurs lived on earth for one hundred and sixty-five million years, but humans have only been on earth for two and a bit million years?'

'I do now.' Joni lay back on his bed. 'Got any more useless facts?'

'Most people fart about fourteen to twenty-two times a day,' Osh replied with great pride. 'It's all here in *How to Make Stink Bombs*.'

'Why did you let a girl flush your head down the toilet?'

'I didn't let her, did I? I was a bit ill that day, so I didn't have much strength. I swear she only picks on me because she's lonely and has no friends.'

Joni rolled his eyes and jumped up. 'C'mon, let's get out of here.'

As they both headed for the bedroom door, Joni took one last glance at the telescope. *What was Cai looking at in those woods?* he wondered.



THAT NIGHT JONI lay awake in bed. He hadn't been sleeping properly for a while and suffered from bad dreams, especially one reoccurring nightmare. In it he would often hear the word *Azrael*. He had no idea what

it meant. Sometimes he would wake up in a sweat and find himself saying it: *Azrael*. In the nightmare he was just a baby, being pulled away from his mother's arms by someone in a dark cloak. Hundreds of angry faces surrounded them. Some of the faces were so gaunt, he could see the skulls beneath the skin.

But not all were scary. One young man with long blonde hair would try to help him, and a larger, muscular man too. But the dream would always end in the same way: a bright flash of light, and he would wake up. Bizarrely, he would always wake up just after midnight, which is why he didn't really like going to sleep before that time anymore.

The chimes of the grandfather clock downstairs had just told him it was indeed midnight. A trickle of moonlight was peeping through the curtains. It lit up his clothes he'd dumped on the chair, making them look like a bent-over old man staring at him. His socks were the old man's eyebrows. The ridges in his jeans were the wrinkled old face. The inside-out jumper made it look like the old man had only one arm and was leaning on a stick. There was something familiar about the face. Joni quickly threw a pillow to dislodge the bundle. All of a sudden, the old man was a pile of clothes again.

Osh had once told Joni that your brain naturally wanted to see faces in things. He had a long word for it: *pareidolia*. It was the same reason people saw a man in the moon. Joni looked at the moon through the tiny gap in the curtain. It was nearly full. All sorts of odd

things could happen on a full moon, according to Osh. The window was open, and the curtain flickered a bit in the wind.

That's strange, Joni thought. Hadn't he closed the window before going to bed? Then for a split second, the water in the glass on his bedside table seemed to vibrate. *What on earth?* he thought. But he saw another ripple. And that was when he heard *it* for the first time.

Toot, toot. Toot, toot.

'What on earth was that?' Joni muttered.

Toot, toot. Toot, toot.

There it was again. It was distant but seemed to be getting closer.

Toot, toot. Toot, toot. Chucka, chucka, chucka, chucka, chucka, toot, toot.

It sounded like a steam train, but there was no railway in Nant-Y-Glo. Until now, it had been an eerily quiet night. With the wind coming from the right direction, he supposed the sound could have carried from a long way away.

Toot, toot. Chucka, chucka, chucka, chucka.

No. This was getting closer. He looked at the water in the glass again. The ripples were getting bigger. Joni jumped from his bed and opened the curtains. The man in the moon looked as confused as he was. He lifted the wooden sash window as far as it could go and stuck his head out into the crisp autumnal night. He could still hear the train sound, but it was slowing down.

Chucka, chucka ... Chucka, chucka ... Chucka, chucka.

Joni grabbed his walkie-talkie next to his bed. He pressed the button, and it crackled.

Crrrcchhhhh.

‘Osh. Osh, are you awake? Over.’

Osh lived directly across the street. The walkie-talkies had a good range. Joni’s grandparents had bought them for him so he could have company when he was feeling lonely, unaware that he and Osh used them for secret messaging at night.

‘Osh, are you awake? Over.’

‘No,’ came a sleepy reply.

‘Yes, you are! You just said no. Over.’

‘No. This is um This is Osh’s secretary speaking. He is asleep. Please call tomorrow.’

‘Listen, Osh. Open your window and tell me what you can hear.’

‘I can hear you waking me up at ... Joni, it’s 12.06 in the middle of the night!’

‘Listen!’

The piercing shrill of a whistle came from the distance. Just like a referee’s whistle.

Chuff, chuff, chuff, chuff, chucka, chucka, chucka, chucka, toot, toot.

There it was again. Joni heard Osh shuffle himself out of bed and open his window.

‘Sounds like a train leaving a station.’ Osh yawned.

‘You can hear it too? I’m not going mad, then. Can you tell where it’s coming from?’

‘Sounds like it’s coming from the east. It’s getting fainter now, though.’

‘Where’s east?’ Joni asked.

‘Where the sun comes up. It’s the direction your brother’s—’ Osh’s gasp sputtered over the walkie-talkie.

‘What? What is it, Osh?’

‘The telescope!’ Osh barked. ‘Quick, go look through the telescope!’

Joni stormed out of his door and skidded into his brother’s bedroom. He hurdled the squeaky floorboard, dashed for the window, and squinted his eye against the telescope still trained on the gap in the woods. A puff of steam rose from amongst the trees. The smoke quickly trailed from left to right, and after another quick puff, it vanished into thin air. Joni checked his watch. 12.07 a.m.

In the room next door, the walkie-talkie crackled away on the floor.

Chrrrrcchhhh.

‘Hello? Joni? Are you still there?’

What had they just heard? What had Joni just seen in the woods? What was going on?

He needed to find out.