

R.L. STINE

Goosebumps

It's a field
of screams!

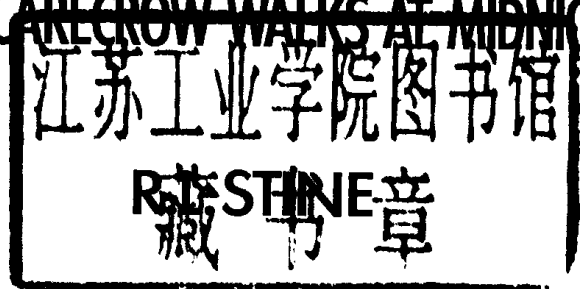
THE SCARECROW WALKS AT MIDNIGHT

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THE SCARECROW WALKS AT MIDNIGHT



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“Hey, Jodie — wait up!”

I turned and squinted into the bright sunlight. My brother, Mark, was still on the concrete train platform. The train had clattered off. I could see it snaking its way through the low, green meadows in the distance.

I turned to Stanley. Stanley is the hired man on my grandparents' farm. He stood beside me, carrying both suitcases. “Look in the dictionary for the word ‘slowpoke,’ ” I said, “and you’ll see Mark’s picture.”

Stanley smiled at me. “I like the dictionary, Jodie,” he said. “Sometimes I read it for hours.”

“Hey, Mark — get a move on!” I cried. But he was taking his good time, walking slowly, in a daze as usual.

I tossed my blond hair behind my shoulders and turned back to Stanley. Mark and I hadn’t visited the farm for a year. But Stanley still looked the same.

He's so skinny. "Like a noodle," my grandma always says. His denim overalls always look five sizes too big on him.

Stanley is about forty or forty-five, I think. He wears his dark hair in a crewcut, shaved close to his head. His ears are huge. They stick way out and are always bright red. And he has big, round, brown eyes that remind me of puppy eyes.

Stanley isn't very smart. Grandpa Kurt always says that Stanley isn't working with a full one hundred watts.

But Mark and I really like him. He has a quiet sense of humor. And he is kind and gentle and friendly, and always has lots of amazing things to show us whenever we visit the farm.

"You look nice, Jodie," Stanley said, his cheeks turning as red as his ears. "How old are you now?"

"Twelve," I told him. "And Mark is eleven."

He thought about it. "That makes twenty-three," he joked.

We both laughed. You never know *what* Stanley is going to say!

"I think I stepped in something gross," Mark complained, catching up to us.

I *always* know what Mark is going to say. My brother only knows three words — *cool*, *weird*, and *gross*. Really. That's his whole vocabulary.

As a joke, I gave him a dictionary for his last birthday. "You're *weird*," Mark said when I handed it to him. "What a *gross* gift."

He scraped his white high-tops on the ground as we followed Stanley to the beat-up, red pickup truck. "Carry my backpack for me," Mark said, trying to shove the bulging backpack at me.

"No way," I told him. "Carry it yourself."

The backpack contained his Walkman, about thirty tapes, comic books, his Game Boy, and at least fifty game cartridges. I knew he planned to spend the whole month lying on the hammock on the screened-in back porch of the farmhouse, listening to music and playing video games.

Well . . . no way!

Mom and Dad said it was *my* job to make sure Mark got outside and enjoyed the farm. We were so cooped up in the city all year. That's why they sent us to visit Grandpa Kurt and Grandma Miriam for a month each summer — to enjoy the great outdoors.

We stopped beside the truck while Stanley searched his overall pockets for the key. "It's going to get pretty hot today," Stanley said, "unless it cools down."

A typical Stanley weather report.

I gazed out at the wide, grassy field beyond the small train station parking lot. Thousands of tiny white puffballs floated up against the clear blue sky.

It was so beautiful!

Naturally, I sneezed.

I love visiting my grandparents' farm. My only

problem is, I'm allergic to just about everything on it.

So Mom packs several bottles of my allergy medicine for me — and lots of tissues.

"*Gesundheit*," Stanley said. He tossed our two suitcases in the back of the pickup. Mark slid his backpack in, too. "Can I ride in back?" he asked.

He loves to lie flat in the back, staring up at the sky, and bumping up and down really hard.

Stanley is a terrible driver. He can't seem to concentrate on steering and driving at the right speed at the same time. So there are always lots of quick turns and heavy bumps.

Mark lifted himself into the back of the pickup and stretched out next to the suitcases. I climbed beside Stanley in the front.

A short while later, we were bouncing along the narrow, twisting road that led to the farm. I stared out the dusty window at the passing meadows and farmhouses. Everything looked so green and alive.

Stanley drove with both hands wrapped tightly around the top of the steering wheel. He sat forward stiffly, leaning over the wheel, staring straight ahead through the windshield without blinking.

"Mr. Mortimer doesn't farm his place anymore," he said, lifting one hand from the wheel to point to a big, white farmhouse on top of a sloping, green hill.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because he died," Stanley replied solemnly.

See what I mean? You never know what Stanley is going to say.

We bounced over a deep rut in the road. I was sure Mark was having a great time in back.

The road leads through the small town, so small that it doesn't even have a name. The farmers have always called it Town.

It has a feed store, a combination gas station and grocery store, a white-steepled church, a hardware store, and a mailbox.

There were two trucks parked in front of the feed store. I didn't see anyone as we barreled past.

My grandparents' farm is about two miles from town. I recognized the cornfields as we approached.

"The corn is so high already!" I exclaimed, staring through the bouncing window. "Have you eaten any yet?"

"Just at dinner," Stanley replied.

Suddenly, he slowed the truck and turned his eyes to me. "The scarecrow walks at midnight," he uttered in a low voice.

"Huh?" I wasn't sure I'd heard correctly.

"The scarecrow walks at midnight," he repeated, training his big puppy eyes on me. "I read it in the book."

I didn't know what to say, so I laughed. I thought maybe he was making a joke.

Days later, I realized it was no joke.

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Watching the farm spread out in front of us filled me with happiness. It's not a big farm or a fancy farm, but I like everything about it.

I like the barn with its sweet smells. I like the low mooing sounds of the cows way off in the far pasture. I like to watch the tall stalks of corn, all swaying together in the wind.

Corny, huh?

I also like the scary ghost stories Grandpa Kurt tells us at night in front of the fireplace.

And I have to include Grandma Miriam's chocolate chip pancakes. They're so good, I sometimes dream about them back home in the city.

I also like the happy expressions on my grandparents' faces when we come rushing up to greet them.

Of course I was the first one out of the truck. Mark was as slow as usual. I went running up to the screen porch in back of their big, old farm-

house. I couldn't *wait* to see my grandparents.

Grandma Miriam came waddling out, her arms outstretched. The screen door slammed behind her. But then I saw Grandpa Kurt push it open and he hurried out, too.

His limp was worse, I noticed right away. He leaned heavily on a white cane. He'd never needed one before.

I didn't have time to think about it as Mark and I were smothered in hugs. "So good to see you! It's been so long, so long!" Grandma Miriam cried happily.

There were the usual comments about how much taller we were and how grown up we looked.

"Jodie, where'd you get that blond hair? There aren't any blonds in *my* family," Grandpa Kurt would say, shaking his mane of white hair. "You must get that from your father's side.

"No, I know. I bet you got it from a store," he said, grinning. It was his little joke. He greeted me with it every summer. And his blue eyes would sparkle excitedly.

"You're right. It's a wig," I told him, laughing. He gave my long blond hair a playful tug.

"Did you get cable yet?" Mark asked, dragging his backpack along the ground.

"Cable TV?" Grandpa Kurt stared hard at Mark. "Not yet. But we still get three channels. How many more do we need?"

Mark rolled his eyes. "No MTV," he groaned.

Stanley made his way past us, carrying our suitcases into the house.

"Let's go in. I'll bet you're starving," Grandma Miriam said. "I made soup and sandwiches. We'll have chicken and corn tonight. The corn is very sweet this year. I know how you two love it."

I watched my grandparents as they led the way to the house. They both looked older to me. They moved more slowly than I remembered. Grandpa Kurt's limp was definitely worse. They both seemed tired.

Grandma Miriam is short and chubby. She has a round face surrounded by curly red hair. Bright red. There's no way to describe the color. I don't know what she uses to dye it that color. I've never seen it on anyone else!

She wears square-shaped eyeglasses that give her a really old-fashioned look. She likes big, roomy housedresses. I don't think I've ever seen her in jeans or pants.

Grandpa Kurt is tall and broad-shouldered. Mom says he was really handsome when he was young. "Like a movie star," she always tells me.

Now he has wavy, white hair, still very thick, that he wets and slicks down flat on his head. He has sparkling blue eyes that always make me smile. And a white stubble over his slender face. Grandpa Kurt doesn't like to shave.

Today he was wearing a long-sleeved, red-and-green-plaid shirt, buttoned to the collar despite the hot day, and baggy jeans, stained at one knee, held up by white suspenders.

Lunch was fun. We sat around the long kitchen table. Sunlight poured in through the big window. I could see the barn in back and the cornfields stretching behind it.

Mark and I told all our news — about school, about my basketball team going to the championships, about our new car, about Dad growing a mustache.

For some reason, Stanley thought that was very funny. He was laughing so hard, he choked on his split-pea soup. And Grandpa Kurt had to reach over and slap him on the back.

It's hard to know what will crack Stanley up. As Mark would say, Stanley is definitely *weird*.

All through lunch, I kept staring at my grandparents. I couldn't get over how much they had changed in one year. They seemed so much quieter, so much slower.

That's what it means to get older, I told myself.

"Stanley will have to show you his scarecrows," Grandma Miriam said, passing the bowl of potato chips. "Won't you, Stanley?"

Grandpa Kurt cleared his throat loudly. I had the feeling he was telling Grandma Miriam to change the subject or something.

"I made them," Stanley said, grinning proudly. He turned his big eyes on me. "The book — it told me how."

"Are you still taking guitar lessons?" Grandpa Kurt asked Mark.

I could see that, for some reason, Grandpa Kurt didn't want to talk about Stanley's scarecrows.

"Yeah," Mark answered with a mouthful of potato chips. "But I sold my acoustic. I switched to electric."

"You mean you have to plug it in?" Stanley asked. He started to giggle, as if he had just cracked a funny joke.

"What a shame you didn't bring your guitar," Grandma Miriam said to Mark.

"No, it isn't," I teased. "The cows would start giving sour milk!"

"Shut up, Jodie!" Mark snapped. He has no sense of humor.

"They already *do* give sour milk," Grandpa Kurt muttered, lowering his eyes.

"Bad luck. When cows give sour milk, it means bad luck," Stanley declared, his eyes widening, his expression suddenly fearful.

"It's okay, Stanley," Grandma Miriam assured him quickly, placing a hand gently on his shoulder. "Grandpa Kurt was only teasing."

"If you kids are finished, why not go with Stanley," Grandpa Kurt said. "He'll give you a tour of the farm. You always enjoy that." He sighed. "I'd

go along, but my leg — it's been acting up again."

Grandma Miriam started to clear the dishes. Mark and I followed Stanley out the back door. The grass in the back yard had recently been mowed. The air was heavy with its sweet smell.

I saw a hummingbird fluttering over the flower garden beside the house. I pointed it out to Mark, but by the time he turned, it had hummed away.

At the back of the long, green yard stood the old barn. Its white walls were badly stained and peeling. It really needed a paint job. The doors were open, and I could see square bales of straw inside.

Far to the right of the barn, almost to the cornfields, stood the small guest house where Stanley lived with his teenage son, Sticks.

"Stanley — where's Sticks?" I asked. "Why wasn't he at lunch?"

"Went to town," Stanley answered quietly. "Went to town, riding on a pony."

Mark and I exchanged glances. We never can figure Stanley out.

Poking up from the cornfield stood several dark figures, the scarecrows Grandma Miriam had started to talk about. I stared out at them, shielding my eyes from the sun with one hand.

"So many scarecrows!" I exclaimed. "Stanley, last summer there was only one. Why are there so many now?"

He didn't reply. He didn't seem to hear me. He

had a black baseball cap pulled down low over his forehead. He was taking long strides, leaning forward with that storklike walk of his, his hands shoved into the pockets of his baggy denim overalls.

"We've seen the farm a hundred times," Mark complained, whispering to me. "Why do we have to take the grand tour again?"

"Mark — cool your jets," I told him. "*We always* take a tour of the farm. It's a tradition."

Mark grumbled to himself. He really is lazy. He never wants to do anything.

Stanley led the way past the barn into the cornfields. The stalks were way over my head. Their golden tassels gleamed in the bright sunlight.

Stanley reached up and pulled an ear off the stalk. "Let's see if it's ready," he said, grinning at Mark and me.

He held the ear in his left hand and started to shuck it with his right.

After a few seconds, he pulled the husk away, revealing the ear of corn inside.

I stared at it — and let out a horrified cry.

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“Ohhhh — it’s *disgusting!*” I shrieked.

“Gross!” I heard Mark groan.

The corn was a disgusting brown color. And it was *moving* on the cob. Wriggling. Squirming.

Stanley raised the corn to his face to examine it. And I realized it was covered with worms. Hundreds of wriggling, brown worms.

“No!” Stanley cried in horror. He let the ear of corn drop to the ground at his feet. “That’s bad luck! The book says so. That’s very bad luck!”

I stared down at the ear of corn. The worms were wriggling off the cob, onto the dirt.

“It’s okay, Stanley,” I told him. “I only screamed because I was surprised. This happens sometimes. Sometimes worms get into the corn. Grandpa told me.”

“No. It’s bad,” Stanley insisted in a trembling voice. His red ears were aflame. His big eyes revealed his fear. “The book — it says so.”

“What book?” Mark demanded. He kicked the