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It was just another same old, same old day.

David lay in the shade of the old beech tree as the sun climbed past its high point and beat down on the surface of the waterhole. The calm water was being disturbed by Bear with his dipping paws, trying to coax reluctant fish to the surface. On another day, David might have been down at the water's edge himself, competing with his dog with a pole and a string and a worm for the big lazy fish, but not today. Today was a laze under the tree day. It was just too damn hot to do anything else.

"You crazy dog, Bear," David called out. Hearing his name, Bear lifted his head and sniffed. He paddled deeper into the water, his thick fur crinkling and curling.

"You're too woolly to mess about in this heat. Either go swimming or come and join me under the tree."

But Bear ignored David's suggestions and continued to probe the waterhole for fish, concentration in his big brown eyes as he scoured the muddy bottom. David sighed and reached for his book. If he was playing hooky for the day, and he got caught, maybe he'd receive less punishment if he was caught reading. Well, it was like being at school, wasn't it? But David knew that his schoolmaster, the pompous Englishman Mr WeatherHogg – the Hogg to all the children in his clapboard school – would not approve of his choice of reading material. At the moment, he was up to chapter three in *The Argosy's* serialisation of HG Wells' *First Men in The Moon*.

He loved these writers – HG Wells, Jules Verne, Edgar Rice Burroughs – and he read as many of them as he could. Scientifiction they called their work – illiterate trash according to the Hogg, who favoured the works of Dickens or Shakespeare. David pestered the drug store trader every week when the deliveries came in from the east, searching the bundled piles of magazines and books for his favourites.

So David lost himself in the rockets and fantasies of HG Wells and forgot all about the Hogg, and the schoolday ticking away without him, and the time he was expected home. So when he fell asleep in the cool shade and awoke to Bear's rough wet tongue lapping his face, he looked up the sky and saw the hot sun dipping down over the trees on Ruby Ridge, to the west of the town.

"Aw heck!" he shouted, jumping up. Bear barked and ran in a circle. "I'm late for supper! Again!"

With Bear at his heels, David raced along the old dirt track, away from the waterhole, back toward the farm, and a surefire telling off.

*Again!*

On the other side of the town, in the wooded hills to the west where the sun was setting, Joe Thunderhead sighed and sat down heavily at the side of the campfire that his grandfather was building. They were planning to spend the night out on the mountain. They would need the fire, as soon the temperature would drop and it would become very cold. It was also to keep away the wolves and the bears whose home they would share tonight. Joe was not happy about these cold nights out on the mountain, but it was all part of his education. His grandfather was the tribe's shaman – a medicine man, a kind of doctor and a kind of wizard – and he was very old. Joe had been picked to replace him.

But Joe didn't want to become a medicine man. He thought the old ways, the ways that his grandfather was trying so desperately to preserve, were stupid and pointless. He could never tell his grandfather this, but what he wanted most of all was to be a steam locomotive driver. He would sit for hours by the dusty track down in the valley, waiting for the iron monsters from the city to come thundering along, bellowing their horns and breathing fire like legendary

creatures. That was what Joe Thunderhead wanted to do. Not learn how to make rain or cure sick animals.

“Tonight I will show you how to make fire, Joe,” said Joe’s grandfather, sitting crosslegged on the other side of the pile of twigs and deadfall they had collected. “Fire is what sets us apart from the animals. Fire will warm us and protect us. But it can also be turned against us. We must be very careful what we do with our fire.”

Joe nodded. He loved his grandfather, the old man was wise and kind, but he wished he had chosen someone else to be his replacement. Joe didn’t think he would be very good at it anyway, even if he could remember all the countless things that his grandfather told him.

The fire sputtered into life as Joe’s grandfather rubbed sticks against one another and made flame, and they roasted meat and vegetables over it. Joe felt a warm glow as his grandfather laid out their bedrolls.

“The fire will protect us,” he said, as he tucked Joe into the brightly patterned blanket. He patted Joe’s head. “Sleep well, little warrior. Travel far and wide in your dreams.”

Joe slept, but his dreams were not those of shaman’s teachings or warrior hunts, but of steel monsters rampaging over the desert, bellowing steam with Joe riding on their backs, controlling and commanding. But when he woke the next morning, he didn’t mention this to his grandfather. Instead, they packed up their things, carefully extinguished the fire, and moved deeper into the woods. To listen. And to learn.



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David received a severe telling off from his mother for staying out late, but two days later he found himself dozing by the waterhole again, book perched over his face. He was lucky that a letter had not come from the school asking about his absence. The old Hogg must be slipping, thought David. Why not take another afternoon off? So he did.

It was another hot day. Soon David was asleep, dreaming of great cannon firing him to the Moon, and the dragons and monsters he would fight there, and then Bear was barking, and what was Bear doing with him on the Moon? He hadn’t brought Bear along. And then he was awake, and it was getting dark, and there were two Indians standing over him.

There were two Indians standing over him!

David froze with fear. The Indians on the mountain kept themselves to themselves, mostly, but occasionally something would happen in the town, like a cow going missing or someone's house would be robbed, and the men would blame the Indians, and sometimes even go up the mountain with flaming torches and rifles. But that hadn't happened for a long time now. Still, David hadn't ever been this close to an Indian before. One of them was just a boy, no older than himself. The other was a very old man. What was he scared of? This is silly, David thought.

"What do you want?" David asked, his voice a bit too high, betraying how scared he was.

"Nothing," said the old man. "We want nothing from you. We saw you under the tree. We thought you had been hurt."

"I was just asleep," David said.

Bear had stopped barking and was sniffing around the Indian boy's bare feet. The boy knelt and ruffled his hands through Bear's thick coat.

"My name is Joe," said Joe, "Joe Thunderhead. And this is my grandfather. What's your name?"

"His name is Bear," said David. "And I'm David. Bear seems to like you."

Joe's grandfather put a hand on his shoulder.

"We have to be going," he said. "The boy is fine. There is no need of our skills here."

Skills, thought David. What does he mean?

Joe stood up and gave Bear a final stroke.

"We have to be going," said Joe, letting his grandfather lead him away. "Goodbye, David."

"Goodbye." And they were gone, back into the woods, as swiftly and silently as they had arrived.

David looked at the sky. It was almost completely dark. Oh no! Bear barked at him.

"I know, Bear, I know. In trouble again."

There was a nasty surprise waiting for David when he arrived back home to the farm he shared with his mother. He should have known from the dark horse and black painted wagon waiting outside the door, but he ignored it in his hurry and rushed inside, where Mr Charles WeatherHogg, formally of London, England, and now headmaster of Ruby Ridge Community School, was taking tea with David's mother. David stood in the doorway in stunned silence. Bear slipped past David's legs and assumed his usual position in front of the fire. Mr WeatherHogg placed down his tea cup and cleared his throat. David swallowed hard. He had his copy of *The Argosy* in his hands, and he rolled it tight, nervously clenching his fists, hoping that the Hogg would not see it. But the Hogg saw everything.

"I see the works of Mr Wells are of more interest to you than your schooling," the Hogg commented, indicating David's tightly-rolled copy of *The Argosy*. The Hogg was tall and always dressed in black and white, dark suit and white shirt. His skin was pale, his head bald and his nose hooked. David automatically hid the book behind his back. The Hogg held out his hand.

"Give Mr WeatherHogg your book, David," said David's mother sternly, rising from her seat on the other side of the table. She wore her apron, as she always did, and her face was creased with worry. David didn't like to see her like this. He didn't want to be a worry to her. After his father had died in an accident two years earlier, they only had each other, and the last thing in the world he would want to do was hurt her. He reluctantly handed the Hogg his treasured copy of the magazine. The Hogg snatched it from his grip.

"Hmm, just as I suspected." He paced the stone floor of the farmhouse, examining the magazine and casting a sinister figure, a black ghost in the glow of the fireplace. Even Bear whimpered and lowered his ears.

"You know, you really must keep a closer rein on this boy, Mrs McArdle. I want to see him back in my school tomorrow. And no more of this, this –" He looked at the book in his hands, then cast it on to the fire, a move which brought a gasp from David.

“- nonsense. I want no more of it. Goodnight to you, Mrs McArdle. And you, David. I'll be expecting you at school tomorrow.” And with that, he strode from the farmhouse and vanished into the night, black horse, wagon and all.

David's mother put her arm around his shoulder and led him to the kitchen table. She poured him coffee and cut bread from a huge loaf in the centre of the table.

“You know, you really have to stop playing hooky from school,” David's mother said to him gently. “Your father and I had such big plans for you, David. Maybe go to the city, become a lawyer or a doctor. But you won't be able to do any of those things if you don't go to school. Is there anything you'd like to tell me about?”

David shook his head. He ate his bread and drank his coffee. He didn't want to become a lawyer or a doctor, he just wanted to stay here and read his book. *His book!* The Hogg had burned his book! When David's mother turned her back to wash the dishes, he cried a little for his lost book, but wiped the tears away when she turned to him. He didn't like her to see him cry.



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Wanting to read his book and laze in the sun were not the only reasons that David needed to stay away from school. There were two boys in his class, twins called Jack and John who were the youngest sons of a large family that had recently arrived in town, taking over a big run down farm not far from where David lived. The boys were wild, disrupting the Hogg's class at every opportunity, and proving more than a match for the Hogg's steely-eyed stare and evil cane. Normally, David would have found all this highly amusing, a break from the monotony of the classroom, but for some reason the twins had taken an instant dislike to David, and had begun to make a fool of him in class, calling him names and throwing pencils and rulers at him, for which David would often take the blame. Standing outside the schoolhouse in the blazing heat while he counted to one hundred – the Hogg's favourite method punishment for breaking one of his many petty rules in the classroom – David would often catch a

glimpse of the sun glinting off the waterhole outside the town, and he would be off, leaving the classroom and the Hogg and the evil twins behind him. It was so easy to run away. Far easier than to finish counting and go back inside to face the music.

So it was on the day of David's return to school that the taunts of Jack and John resulted in a thrown inkwell splashing its black contents on the floor of the classroom. As David bent to pick it up, the Hogg turned from the sums he was chalking on the blackboard, and David was sent out. It was nearly time to go home anyway, so David counted to fifty and made for the waterhole, picking up faithful Bear on the way, who waited patiently for him outside school every day. Later, he thought, later he would face the wrath of the Hogg. But for now....but this was to be no ordinary day. Jack and John would see to that.

David had been at the waterhole no more than half an hour when he heard Jack and John approach, fighting with each other as they bowled along up the dusty road. Their faces lit up as they saw David sat beside his favourite tree, book in hand.

"Thought you'd get away, hey!" Jack called as he and John circled David, kicking stones and dust up with their bare feet. Bear barked at them and Jack stamped his feet, daring Bear to attack.

"Gonna be in big trouble, McArdle," said John. "The Hogg's gonna tan your hide when you get back to school."

"If he gets back to school," sneered Jack, picking up a large stone.

Now David didn't like fighting. His father had always told him it was wrong, that he should walk away from fights if he could, but sometimes there was no choice. He looked at the big rock in Jack's hand, and thought that this was one of those times. His hands made fists.

Suddenly an ear-splitting howl sounded through the wood. Bear's ears pricked up and he gave an answering bark. He scuttled behind David's legs for protection or comfort. Jack and John froze, frightened by the noise.

"What was that?"

"Wolves," said David, thinking quickly. "A wolf pack lives around these parts. Vicious it is, too. Haven't you heard them before?"

Jack and John exchanged worried glances. Jack gripped his stone tighter, but its intended target had changed now. He better keep hold of it, in case he had to throw it at a wolf. Slowly, the twins moved away, throwing only insults.

"Big trouble, McArdle! You're in big trouble!"

And they were gone. David breathed a big sigh of relief. The bushes rustled behind him and the Indian boy he had met the day before emerged.

"I thought you needed some help," said Joe Thunderhead, a little embarrassed. Bear ran up to him and he ruffled his ears.

"It's a neat trick, but I've lived here too long to be fooled by it," said David. "Where'd you learn it, anyway?"

"My grandfather," said Joe. "He's the tribe's shaman. I am learning to be one, too."

"Is your grandfather with you today?"

Joe stared at the ground. "Uh, no. He should be. I mean, I lost him. In the woods. On purpose."

David looked alarmed. "Why would you want to do a thing like that?"

"Because I don't want to be a shaman. I want to be a locomotive driver."

David tried not to laugh, but the thought of this fearsome looking Indian wanting to drive steam engines was very funny. He covered his mouth, and Joe was upset.

"You're making fun of me," he said. "You can deal with the bullies on your own next time." And he turned to leave.

"No! Don't go. I wasn't making fun of you, honest. Thank you for scaring the twins off. I'm really grateful. I want you to have this."

He held out the magazine. It was another copy of *The Argosy*, a replacement for the one that the Hogg had burned. It had cost him his last few cents that morning on the way to school, but he had already read it three times over. It seemed the right thing to do to give it to Joe.

After all, had he not scared the twins away with his howling, they would probably have stolen or destroyed it anyway. Joe accepted it with two outstretched hands, as if he was being presented with a sacred weapon.

"What is it?" he asked.

David smiled. "It's a book. Of stories. You'll like them."

"I can't read."

"Then look at the pictures."

Joe thumbed through the pages, wonder on his face.

"I have never had a book," he said. He turned, suddenly distracted. "I hear my grandfather calling. I must go." And he left, back in to the bushes, as quickly as he had arrived.

David had heard nothing. Pleased at meeting a new friend – and such an *unusual* new friend – he made his way home with Bear, in trouble once again.

David's mother sent him straight to bed with no supper. Even Bear was sent out to sleep in the woodshed, denied his favourite spot by the fire. But she softened after an hour or so, and brought David up some bread and soup. Bear padded silently up the stairs and crept beneath David's bed.

David's mother stroked his hair as he eat his soup, propped up in bed. She never could stay angry with him for too long. Now that David's father was gone, he was all she had in the world. Secretly, she didn't want him to grow up and leave the small town and go and become a doctor or lawyer in the big city, but she knew that she couldn't keep him here forever. He had an enquiring mind and an active imagination, and she knew this would eventually take him far from her side. When he had finished eating, she kissed him goodnight, tucked him in, and went downstairs. She didn't even notice Bear beneath the bed, much to David's delight. As soon as his mother was out of sight he whispered to Bear, who wasted no time jumping on the bed, and soon both of them were fast asleep.

Bear snored like a twister wind. David nudged him awake several times during the night, and Bear shifted position, only to start snoring again as soon as he drifted off to sleep. It was strange that when Bear's snoring stopped, David woke up straight away and sat bolt upright in bed. Something was wrong. Bear was not on the bed. The room was too dark. There was a smell of damp grass and earth. A shadow moved in front of his window, letting a shaft of moonlight in. David's breath caught in his throat.

"It's alright," whispered a voice. "It's me. Joe Thunderhead."

David's heart began beating again, but twice as fast. The sound of it pounding was deafening in his ears.

"How – how did you get in here? Without Bear barking at you?"

Bear was on the floor, at Joe's feet. Joe knelt and stroked the dog, letting the light from the moon flood the room.

"Some of my grandfather's skills can be useful," said Joe. "We have a special relationship with animals. They are our friends."

"What – what do you want, Joe?"

Joe moved forward and blocked out the light. He pushed something under David's nose. From the musty smell he could tell it was the copy of *The Argosy* that he had given Joe earlier that day.

"I have seen pictures of amazing things," Joe whispered, flicking through the pages of the magazine. "Iron horses, iron birds, worlds in the sky. They remind me of stories my grandfather tells me of the time before our time. I want to know more. I want to know the words."

David was amazed. "You want me to read to you? Now?"

"Yes."

"I can't. We'll wake my mom. She'll have a fit if she finds you here."

"Then we must go somewhere, where you can read to me."

David's mind raced. This was crazy! He couldn't just take off into the night with an Indian boy he barely knew – could he?

"No," he said firmly. Then he said something he would regret all the next day. "Come back tomorrow night. I'll be dressed and ready. We can go and read then."

Joe seemed satisfied with this. He nodded. "Tomorrow night then. I will call the call of the wolf from your yard. Don't worry, Bear will not bark. We are good friends now."

And he was gone again, out of the window and down the side of the house. David jumped out of bed and rushed to the window, followed by Bear, who put his paws up on the ledge to look out. They saw a shadow cross the yard, not even disturbing the chickens in their coop.

“David? David, are you alright?” His mother, calling from her bed, woken by the noise of David leaving his. But Joe Thunderhead had got in and out of the house by the first storey window and never made a sound!

“I’m fine, mom, just getting a drink of water.”

David climbed back into bed, but it took him a long time to get to sleep, thinking about Joe and the promise he had made. Bear stayed at the window for a long time, staring out into the moonlit night, before he returned to David’s bed, and started his snoring again.

The next day the twins were on fine form, stealing things from David’s satchel and making life hell for him in class. This time, the Hogg spotted Jack in the act, and he was sent out, his face like thunder, punching David quickly in the shoulder as he passed his desk. It was, sadly, only a taste of things to come.

At lunch break, Jack and John cornered David by the outhouse near the stream, and John held him while Jack gave him a black eye. David was upset and did not want to go back inside when the break was over, but the Hogg came to break the fight up and David had no choice but to sit through an afternoon of lessons in the hot, stuffy schoolhouse with Jack and John sniggering at him from behind their books. David’s face grew redder and redder, and he became angrier and angrier. When the schoolday was over he ran straight home with ever-faithful Bear, so that he would not have more trouble with the terrible twins. He began to think about ways he could get his own back on them.

“How on earth did you get that?” his mother demanded, examining his swollen eye.

“I hit my head on the door on the way into school,” David lied, his fingers crossed tightly behind his back.

“Have you been fighting?”

“No, Mom, honest. It was a door.”

“Are you sure? All I need to do is ask Mister WeatherHogg next time I see him....”

He decided to chance that she wouldn’t, and stuck to his story. All through his supper, he tried to work out how he was going to get out of there that night, as quietly and softly as his new friend, Joe Thunderhead.

David hoped his mother would not come in to tuck him in tonight. Under the thick blankets on his bed he was wearing a plaid shirt and a pair of old jeans. His boots stood at the foot of his bed, waiting patiently for his feet. He held his breath as his mother came up the stairs, blowing out the candles on the way, and paused by his door for a moment. His plan held by a thread. Then she passed by, and went to bed. Twenty minutes later, he heard a soft padding on the stairs, and a moist nose against his hand. Bear jumped up and assumed his usual position.

David dozed for the next few hours. He was half asleep when the wolf call made him sit bolt upright. Bear jumped from the bed and landed heavily on the floor, and for a second David was sure that the noise would wake his mother. He heard nothing from her room, and just like Joe Thunderhead promised, Bear never barked. Instead, he waited patiently by the bed, ears alert. David quietly pulled on his boots and moved to the window.

Joe Thunderhead was stood in the farmyard, silvered by the moonlight. He stood perfectly still, hands on his hips, right next to the chicken coop. There was no noise from the sensitive chickens. He saw David looking from the window, and waved. David waved back.

“Let’s go, Bear,” David whispered, and he followed Bear out of his bedroom, tiptoeing down the stairs, cringing at every creaking step, out into the moonlight.

Joe Thunderhead was waiting, the copy of *The Argosy* that David had given him held tightly in his hands.

“Follow me,” he said. “I know just the place we can go.”

Ruby Ridge was a town cut in half. The railroad split the town from east to west with the majority of the townsfolk living to the south, along with the school, the stores, and many of the farms. To the north, it was mainly abandoned, an old town left to dry up and be reclaimed by the desert, the original houses built by those who had first come here prospecting for gold. Some said that the old town was haunted by the ghosts of prospectors who had died here, penniless, when the gold had run out. When Joe Thunderhead suggested it as a place where they could go and read, David point blank refused.

"You don't have to be frightened of spirits," Joe laughed. "The spirit world is everywhere. Why be frightened just because you can't see them all the time?"

So David had agreed, reluctantly, and they crossed the tracks, over to the bad side of town.

Moonlight provided the only light for them to see by. The derelict buildings were dark and full of menace, big old houses with boarded up windows and doors hanging off their hinges. Joe Thunderhead chose one that looked like an old saloon and went inside. David and Bear remained outside, cautious. Joe came back out, smiling.

"It's alright," he said. "It's safe. I will build us a small fire."

David reluctantly went inside, but Bear refused to. He dropped down in the doorway, covering his muzzle with his paws, and stayed there.

Inside, the air smelled of dust and damp. There was lots of broken furniture, and using the techniques his grandfather had taught him, Joe built a fire in a brass spittoon. The light of the fire cast giant shadows, black versions of David and Joe, into every corner of the room. Joe produced the magazine and held it out to David, a gleam in his eye.

"Now," he said, "tell me the stories."

*So it was at first, and then, sudden, swift, and amazing, came the lunar day.*

*The sunlight had crept down the cliff, it touched the drifted masses at its base and incontinently came striding with seven-leagued boots towards us. The distant cliff seemed to shift and quiver, and at the touch of the dawn a reek of gray vapour poured upward from the crater floor, whirls and puffs and drifting wraiths of gray, thicker and broader and denser, until at last the whole westward plain was steaming like a wet handkerchief held before the fire, and the westward cliffs were no more than refracted glare beyond.*

"Which moon?" Joe interrupted.

"Which moon?" David was puzzled. "There is only one moon." He pointed up to the sky. "That one."

"Oh no," said Joe. "There are many moons. When it is cold, it is the time of the Moon of the Flying Ants. When the weather warms, we see the Moon of the Big Leaves, then we are visited by the Moon of the Season When the Leaves are Green, the Moon of the Horse and the Time of Ripeness. Then, when the air cools again, we see the Moon of the Time When The Corn Is Taken In."

David mullied this over. "There are indeed many moons," he said, and carried on reading:

*"It is air," said Cavor. "It must be air - or it - would not rise like this - at the mere touch of a sun-beam. And at this pace. ..."*

*He peered upwards. "Look! " he said.*

*"What? " I asked.*

*"In the sky. Already. On the blackness - a little touch of blue. See! The stars seem larger. And the little ones and all those dim nebulosities we saw in empty space - they are hidden! "*

*Swiftly, steadily, the day approached us. Gray summit after gray summit was overtaken by the blaze, and turned to a smoking white intensity. At last there was nothing to the west of us but a bank of surging fog, the tumultuous advance and ascent of cloudy haze. The distant cliff had receded farther and farther, had loomed and changed through the whirl, and foundered and vanished at last in its confusion.*

*Nearer came that steaming advance, nearer and nearer, coming as fast as the shadow of a cloud before the south-west wind. About us rose a thin anticipatory haze.*

*Cavor gripped my arm. " What? " I said.*

*"Look! The sunrise! The sun!"*

"But how?" Joe puzzled. "How can they travel to the moon? The moons are spirits, travelling to the dream world every night and returning every morning. If travellers were to go there they would be trapped in the dream world, unable to return."

David gave this some thought. "It's just a story, Joe. I don't think it's meant to be true."

Joe shook his head. "Stories are a way of teaching and learning. Even the most incredible stories can be true."

David leaned forward, and was about to speak when there was a sudden flapping in his face and a loud squawk. He jumped up, knocking over the spittoon, which spilled its fire across the floor. Embers and burning wood scattered, throwing up a cloud of hot smoke.

A bat careered around the room, bouncing off walls in its panic, trapped and frightened. David ducked and covered his head, and even Joe hunkered down, afraid of the bite of the bat, which was said to be worse than that of a snake. Finally, the bat escaped through the saloon doors. Bear barked as it flew over his head.

"What was that?" David wondered aloud, venturing outside the saloon. Bear had stood up and was looking across to the other side of the dark street, ears pricked, tail stiff. Across the street, hidden in the shadows of a doorway, was a little boy. A little boy in a dark suit, a white shirt and a smartly-tied bow tie, dressed as if he was going to church. David gasped. Joe Thunderhead placed his hand on his shoulder.

"The boy is bad," said Joe quietly. "He is a *manitou*."

"A what?" David was frozen. The boy *was* scary, just standing there.....

"A creature of the night. Come, we must go, leave here."

*"Don't go."*

The boy's voice was strange. David swore he had not *heard* it, but *thought* it, if that made any sense? But the boy was too far away to see if his lips had moved.

"He will be tempting us," Joe insisted, gripping David's shoulder tighter and tighter. He was scared too. "His talk will make us do things we don't want to do. He has that power."

David wasn't sure about what Joe was saying, even if he was still scared. "How do you know all this, Joe? He just looks like a little boy to me. What harm could he possibly do us?"

Joe drew back as the boy emerged from the shadows. He was half their height, and very thin. He looked as if he was about seven years old, but there was something about his quick, bird-like movements, and the set of his shoulders, that made him seem older. Much, much older.

"My name is Vincent," said the little boy. There, that voice again, that voice that was not a voice at all.

"Cover your ears," Joe said, following his own advice. "If we cannot hear him, he has no power over us."

The little boy laughed. Even with his hands over his ears, David could still hear him. Was this some sort of trick, like the travelling hucksters played on gullible farmers?

"Why would I want power over you? I want to be your friend. That's why I followed you here."

Joe took his head from his hands.

"You followed us?"

"Yes. All the way from the railroad track. That's as far as I go, usually. Mama says not to go any further. Or the wind might take me and I'd end up who knows where."

The wind might.....? Who had ever heard of a wind that swept up small boys? Did he mean a twister?

"Where do you live, Vincent?" asked David, regaining his composure. What was there to be scared of? It was just a little boy. The bat, it seemed, was long gone.

"Over there." He pointed down the street. David and Joe turned to look. Even Bear shuffled around in the dust to see.

The big orange desert moon was heading toward the horizon, round and shining. On a hill at the end of the street, perfectly silhouetted against the lunar landscape, was a huge old house, all turrets and spires, that looked as if it could have been hundreds of years old. *But that's stupid*, thought David. Hundreds of years ago, there were no Indians here. No houses, no railroad, no Europeans. And definitely no old houses that looked like fairy-tale castles. He clutched his copy of *The Argosy* tightly in his hands. Suddenly he felt as if he had fallen into one of the fantastical stories he had been reading to Joe.

*He lives on the moon*, he thought to himself.

"You like books?" Vincent asked, noticing the magazine in David's hands. "I have lots of books. Would you like to come and see them?"

*No*, thought David.

"Yes," said Joe, mesmerised. Had he fallen under the little boy's spell? Yet he seemed so scared at first. What had he called the boy? A *manitou*. What did that mean?

"Come on, let's go," said Vincent. "I'll lead the way."

David glanced away for a split second, and Vincent was gone. *Vanished*. Instead, the bat had reappeared and swooped down on them with its leathery wings, bouncing off their heads before flying off in the direction of the old house.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" said Joe. "Let's follow him."

And Joe began to walk toward the scary old house, taking shuffling steps like a zombie. Bear followed happily, not even looking back for David. David sighed heavily and began the long walk up the hill, to the house on the moon.

The house creaked and sighed in the wind, as if it were some huge living creature, weary and tired from a long journey across the desert. It was so dark, it seemed to suck the moonlight from the sky, deepening shadows into bottomless black pools. Vincent entered first, swallowed whole by the yawning black hole that was the entrance door. Bear padded confidently after him, followed by Joe. Only David paused uneasily on the threshold, looking up at the dark spires towering above him. Flapping things fluttered among the grotesque sculptures on the ramparts of this incredible place. Swallowing hard and against his better judgement, David stepped inside.

The air was damp and smelled of wet earth, like a field after a good spring rainstorm. David stood in the entrance hall of the house, staring up at the high, curved ceiling, at crazy flights of steps and suits of armour lining corridors that led away at odd angles. The helmets on the suits of armour appeared to all be looking straight at him, the dim light from dozens of flickering, fiery torches gleaming off the polished metal.

"Boo," said Vincent, appearing at David's side as if by magic. David flinched and Vincent laughed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"Then don't creep up on me like that. Where is Joe? And Bear?"

“Exploring. Come on, let’s find them.”

Vincent took his hand and led him down one of the corridors. The floor rose and fell and the walls appeared to flex as they walked. The heads of the suits of armour turned to watch them.

David felt as if he was dreaming. How could this place exist, here in his home town? It looked as if it were five hundred years old. Nothing like it could exist in America. In Europe, maybe, but not here. As he let Vincent lead him through the house, he felt an increasing sense of unease. This just wasn’t *right*.

Eventually they emerged into a large chamber, as dimly lit as the rest of the house. David had the feeling he was deep underground, but he wasn’t sure why. He saw Joe and Bear, standing next to three boxes laid on wooden trestles. The boxes were long and thin, half filled with earth, and their lids were propped next to them.

David’s breath caught in his throat. The boxes were coffins!

Vincent appeared to read David’s thoughts, or at least the expression on his face.

“Didn’t you realise? I’m a vampire.”

“A manitou. A shape shifter,” said Joe, looking up from the coffin. Earth was running through the fingers of his outstretched hands. “This is your grave-earth. You are the bat. But aren’t you supposed to be an evil spirit? I don’t think that you are very evil.”

Vincent sighed heavily. “I think I’m supposed to be. Mama and Papa are very disappointed in me. I try to do as they say, I really do, but I guess.... I guess..... I guess I just don’t like hurting people.”

David eyed Vincent warily. “So you aren’t going to drink our blood then?”

“Not unless you would like me to,” Vincent replied brightly.

“And then we’d become vampires, right?”

“That’s right! You could keep me company!”

David shook his head. “Uh huh. Oh no. I don’t think it’s for me.”

Vincent sat down heavily on the stone steps on front of the coffins. He propped his chin on his hands. “I don’t think I’ll ever get the hang of this. It’s so hard to have friends when you can only go out at night. And when you’re supposed to drink their blood. It scares them off.”

“Where are your mother and father, Vincent?” asked Joe, looking into the larger coffins.

“They’re out. Doing what I’m supposed to be doing. I suppose.”

An idea flickered across David’s mind. He felt sorry for Vincent, and wanted to be his friend. But there was also something that their new friend could do for them. He outlined his plan to Vincent, with Joe listening intently. When David had finished, Vincent clapped his hands with delight.

“I will be glad to help you out! Tomorrow night it is!”

The following night was cloudy and moonless. Joe Thunderhead once again roused David and Bear from their beds without waking David’s mother, and together they waited by the railroad track for Vincent to appear. They were not waiting long before a familiar flapping of wings startled them, and Vincent walked out from behind a large tree.

“Please, tell me again what you would like me to do. I don’t want to make a mistake.”

“All you have to do is act scary,” said David, as they took the darkened road back to town. “John and Jack are cowards. In the dark they’ll be so scared they’ll wet their beds, I’ll bet. We just want them to leave us alone.”

“Scary,” repeated Vincent, as his features warped and morphed and his body shrunk to the size of a bat. “Scary. I think I can do that.”

John and Jack shared a bed tucked in the corner of a large room where their four older brothers also slept, in bunks on the opposite wall. It was the early hours of the morning and all were asleep, snoring loudly. In the next room their mother and their father – the town’s new postmaster – were also sound asleep. No one heard the bat flutter in through the open window downstairs, and make its way silently to the upstairs rooms. Vincent shape-shifted on the



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landing, and tiptoed to the twins' bedside. So quiet were his footsteps, by comparison Joe Thunderhead's stealthy feet would have sounded like a herd of stampeding buffalo.

Vincent nudged the twins awake. As they knuckled sleep from their eyes, he levitated twelve inches off the floor, and hovered above their bed, his fangs flashing, draping his arms out like a scarecrow. The twins huddled in silent terror, sure they were about to die.

"If you know what's good for you," Vincent droned in his deepest voice, "you will behave yourselves at school. You will not bully. You will not fight. You will not mistreat other children. Especially David McArdle. Otherwise...." He left the threat hanging in mid-air, just as he was, and made a slow, dramatic metamorphosis into a bat once again, purely for the twins' benefit. Then he fluttered briefly in their faces, causing them to scream, waking their brothers and parents, who came running to find the twins gripping each other in shock. One of them – each would, the next

day, blame the other – had wet the bed, just as David had predicted. The hideous vampire that they described in great detail was long gone.

David and Joe visited Vincent many times after that night. They had no more problems with the twins, indeed three months later their father took a job back in the big city, and the family left Ruby Ridge. David reached an understanding with the Hogg and no more books were burned, and David's mother didn't need to worry about him anymore. David began to write stories in the style of his favourite authors, often writing by candlelight in his room, and sending them to the magazines that had inspired him.

Joe Thunderhead's grandfather died before he could pass on all of his knowledge. A partly-qualified medicine man was no good to the tribe, so they began to use the services of a younger man from a neighbouring village. Joe missed his grandfather, but the pressure on him had been lifted. Helped by his contact with David, he began to learn to read and write, and his dream of becoming a locomotive driver took one step nearer.

A few months later, David received a letter and a cheque from *Scientific Adventurer* magazine for his story *The Vampires of the Moon*, which had won first prize in a writing competition.

Joe Thunderhead hitched a ride on a locomotive out of Ruby Ridge, and the engine driver let him stoke the boiler all the way to Widow's Peak and back.

And Vincent? Well, Vincent got a taste for his true calling after putting the frighteners on Jack and John. A *real* taste, and his Mama and Papa became very proud of him.

*Sleep tight.*

The End

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THE BAD SIDE OF TOWN