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The first thing you need to know about me is that I am afraid of the dark. Dark rooms, dark hallways, dark stairs . . . I'm just afraid of the dark, period.

I think a lot of people are afraid of the dark, but they just don't admit it.

But I have a reason to be afraid! You would have a reason, too, if you knew what I went through last summer.

My name is Corrine. Corrine MacArthur.

But everybody calls me Corky. In fact, not many people even know my real name. Everybody – even my school teachers – call me Corky. Actually, I kind of like the nickname.

Corky.

I haven't always been afraid of the dark. Up until last summer, I don't think I was afraid of the dark at all.

But something happened last summer that changed all that.

It was the middle of June, and school had just gotten out. It was the beginning of summer. I love summer! The days are longer and warmer, and there's so much to do. We live in Gaylord, which is a small city in the middle of northern lower Michigan. Gaylord is called 'The Alpine Village'. A lot of buildings in town are built to look like the buildings in Switzerland, and every summer there's a big festival called 'Alpenfest'. Thousands of people come from all over to celebrate. It's pretty cool.

In the summertime, I get to stay out late. Well, later than we get to stay out during the school year. All of my friends on the block get together and play yard games like 'kick the can' and 'ghost in the graveyard.' We play till long after dark.

On this particular night, there was about ten of us playing outside. It had just gotten dark, and the streetlight was on. We had just finished playing a game, and my friend Ashley and I were sitting on the curb, watching giant June bugs swarm around the street light. June bugs are noisy . . . they sound like little airplanes flying through the sky. Their wings clap like playing cards clipped between bicycle spokes.

"Well, I'd better get home," Ashley said. "I'm supposed to be home by ten."

"See ya later," I said, standing up. A lock of my black hair fell in front of my face, and I brushed it away. I started walking across our yard, then I stopped and turned back around. "You want to go to the park with us tomorrow?" I asked Ashley. We don't live too far from the park. There's a creek there, and a big field. I like to wade in the creek and catch crayfish. Ashley thinks they're gross. But we always have a lot of fun.

She stopped and turned.

"Yeah, sure," she replied. "See you at the park in the morning." And with that, she turned and began walking home. She lives only a few houses down from us.

The night was unusually dark. There was no

moon, and the day had been cloudy. The sky above had no stars. But the street light lit up everything in the yard.

I was almost to our porch when all of a sudden, everything went black!

The lights . . . all of them . . . went out! The street lights, the porch light, all of the lights in our house . . . even the lights in the other houses on the street . . . went out!

I was in total darkness!

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Now remember . . . at this time, I wasn't afraid of the dark. It sure was strange that all of the lights went off like that. But it's happened before. In Gaylord, we can get some pretty fierce snowstorms in the winter. Once in a while, the power will go out. It's kind of fun, really. Dad will light a fire in the fireplace, and sometimes we even cook hot dogs and marshmallows. It makes me wish we had snowstorms more often.

But this was the middle of summer. It was

strange that the power just went off like that.

And it was *dark!* It was darker than I had ever seen before. I couldn't see the porch ten feet in front of me. I couldn't see any trees. I couldn't see anything.

I stopped dead in my tracks. I didn't want to accidentally smack into the porch or into a tree.

I turned, looking down the street . . . or, where I *thought* the street should be. It was far too dark to see the street or any street signs.

I wondered what caused all of the lights to go off. Maybe there was a problem at the power plant. Maybe the whole city was out of power!

All of a sudden, I heard Ashley's voice calling out.

"Corky?!?!" she shouted. "Are you still outside?!?!" Her voice echoed down the street.

"Yes!" I shouted back.

"It sure is dark!" she hollered.

"Like 'duh'!" I replied loudly. "It's a power failure. I don't see any lights on anywhere."

"I can't even see my own house!" she shouted.

"Me neither!" I shouted back. "And I'm only ten feet away from it!"

"Too bad it isn't Halloween," she laughed.

Ashley has this really funny giggle, and it sounded even funnier, echoing down the street. It was like there were two or three Ashley's laughing. It sure was strange, standing here in the dark and talking to her without being able to see her.

"Well, I'm going to try and make it to my house," she said. "But it's so dark, I can't even see my nose!"

"Be careful of Mr. Hansel's house," I said loudly. "I hear that he eats kids!"

"Knock it off!" she shouted back to me. "That's just a story!"

Mr. Hansel is a strange man that lives in the house next to Ashley's. We hardly ever see him, and he only leaves his house at night. Someone made up a story that he eats children, but I've never believed it.

What's even weirder is that Mr. Hansel has a fenced in back yard. But it's not just a fence . . . it's a wooden fence. It's almost eight feet tall, and you can't even see through it. There's no telling what he has in his back yard. Some people say that there's an old graveyard back there. Other people say that they hear strange noises coming from behind the fence, but they don't know what they are. One of my friends at school swears that he saw Mr. Hansel

actually climb over the fence! That would be almost impossible! I mean . . . Mr. Hansel is old . . . and the fence is taller than he is!

There are other stories, too. Some people say that Mr. Hansel is a troll that can turn into any kind of animal that he wants.

But those are just stories. Nobody can do stuff like that. When I was little, I used to believe the stories. I thought that they were real.

I've only seen Mr. Hansel a few times. He's got messy gray hair, and he stoops forward when he walks. And he's always got a mean look on his face.

At least, whenever I've seen him, he's got a mean look on his face! Mr. Hansel doesn't look like a nice man. In fact, he looks scary. Scary and mean.

"I'll see you later," Ashley shouted one final time from a few houses down.

"Later," I shouted back, and I began walking carefully through the darkness to the porch.

In the next instant, a shrill scream pierced the dark night! It was a long, painful wail that echoed up and down the street!

Ashley!

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Ashley's scream rang down the block, echoing like the Grand Canyon.

"Ashley!" I screamed. *"What's wrong?!?"*

But she didn't answer me. She just screamed and screamed and screamed.

Suddenly, her screaming stopped. Her voice was cut short, like someone . . . or something . . . had stopped her.

What could I do? It was too dark to see anything.

But I had to help Ashley. Something had happened, and I was sure that she needed help.

"Ashley?" I called out, taking a few brave steps in her direction. I strained my eyes to see her, but it was no use. It was just too dark.

"Ashley?" I called out again.

No answer. What had happened to her?

I began walking faster, hoping that I wouldn't trip or smack into something in the dark.

I walked across our driveway, and then felt my sneakers sink back into the squishy grass. I took a few steps, then stopped.

I could hear moaning coming from the next yard. It was muffled and soft, and it was hard to hear, but I knew who it was.

Ashley.

She was hurt!

Without thinking, I took off running blindly through the dark.

"Ashley!" I shouted. "Where are you?!? Where are you?!?!"

More moaning.

I took off running again, but I didn't get far. I had only taken about four steps when my foot caught on something and I stumbled, falling forward. I raised my hands out in front of me as I

fell, and I hit the ground with a heavy thud.

"Oooof!" I said, as the wind was knocked out of me.

"Ouch!" Ashley groaned.

I had tripped over her!

"Are you okay?" I said, getting to my knees.

"Yeah, I think so," she said. Her voice was tight and I could tell she was hurting. "But it didn't help when you ran into me."

"Well, how was I supposed to know that you were on the grass?" I snapped. "It's so dark, I can't see a thing."

All of a sudden a loud 'pop!' filled the air, and all of the lights came back on! The streetlight in front of our house shined brightly in the night, and windows from houses glowed a creamy yellow.

And for the first time, I realized we were in Mr. Hansel's yard.

I stood up and walked over to Ashley.

There was blood on her leg! Just above her knee, she had a nasty scrape.

"Yuuuuck," I said. "Does it hurt bad?"

"It did for a minute," she answered. "For a minute, it really hurt bad."

"Hold on a second," I said, peering at the wound on her leg. "Look. It almost looks like

you've been bitten by something."

Ashley knelt forward, looking at the scrape on her leg. There appeared to be two deep gashes — bite marks — that had punctured the skin.

"That's gross," she said. "It's gross and it hurts."

"What did you scrape it on?" I asked, turning.

"That," Ashley pointed. "Right there."

I turned and looked at the shadowy form she was pointing to. I hadn't seen it earlier. Actually, I didn't remember ever seeing it there before. In fact, I was *certain* that I hadn't seen it before.

I walked closer to the object. It was about half my height, and about as big around as a beach ball.

What in the world, I thought.

But when I got closer, I knew what it was.

A gargoyle.



I drew a sudden, quick breath, and covered my mouth with my hand.

A gargoyle.

Not a real gargoyle, of course . . . but one of those stone ones that you see in gardens. They're just statues, but some of them sure look real.

And this one looked *very* real, that's for sure.

It was all gray, made out of cement. It had a fat face with a pudgy nose. Sharp, piercing eyes glared back at me. In its mouth were four angry

fangs . . . two on the top and two on the bottom. Two thick wings grew from its back. The gargoyle was in a hunched position, as if it was about to fly.

"What is it?" Ashley asked, finally getting to her feet. She held one hand near her wound as she limped toward me.

"A cement gargoyle," I replied, still staring at the statue. I knew it wasn't real, but it just looked so weird. It looked so real, even though it was only made out of cement. I kept staring at it. I had never seen it in the yard before.

"Eeeeww, that's gross," Ashley said as she stopped at my side. "What would Mr. Hansel be doing with a gargoyle in his yard?"

"Who knows?" I replied. "Nothing that Mr. Hansel does makes any sense, anyway."

I couldn't stop staring at the statue. Something in its mouth caught my attention. Suddenly, I knew what it was.

"Ashley . . . look at that," I said quietly. "Look in its mouth."

Ashley leaned closer. "What?" she asked.

"Look in its mouth," I repeated. "Look at its teeth!"

She bent closer.

"That's even MORE gross!" she said loudly,

shivering.

On one of the teeth, a tiny blood stain remained.

Ashley's blood.

"That must be where I ran into him," Ashley said, glancing down at the wound on her leg.

"Yeah," I replied. "Either that . . . or he BIT YOU!" As I said the words '*bit you*', I suddenly grabbed Ashley with both hands around her waist. She shrieked and doubled over. We both laughed and laughed.

"I gotta go," she finally said. She bent her head down, inspecting the wound on her leg. "I've got to get this cleaned before it gets infected."

"And before you get bit again," I laughed. Ashley laughed, too. "See you tomorrow," I said, and I watched her as she walked across the darkened yard toward her house. When I saw her shadow reach her porch, I hollered out.

"Bye!" I shouted.

"See you tomorrow!" she said. I heard the front door of her house open, and light streamed out. The door closed with a thud.

The night was quiet. Singing crickets filled the air, and the sound of cars traveling on nearby Otsego street were the only things I could hear.

And so, as I stood in the dim light of the street lamp, the sound of fluttering wings close by caused me to nearly jump out of my skin.

I spun, and what I saw almost made me faint.

The cement gargoyle that had been sitting in the yard had taken flight!

It was enormous! Its wings beat the air like a giant owl, and it spun through the sky with the speed of a bat!

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The gargoyle swung out of sight in the shadows, then suddenly came back into view as it dipped beneath the street light in front of our house. Then it wheeled back around, its wings outstretched, swooping through the sky. I could only see its shadow, but I didn't need to see any more. It was flying faster, zipping through the night sky like a mad hornet. I could hear its wings pounding the air like a drum.

Wha-whoosh . . . wha-whoosh

Closer

Wha-whoosh . . . wha-whoosh

Closer

Wha-whoosh . . . wha-whoosh

Closer still!

Oh no! It was coming for me!

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The gargoyle was only a few feet from me when I dove to the grass, face first. I held out my arms in front of me to break my fall, then I rolled sideways. I could hear the huge beast swoop over me and pass by.

Whew! That had been close.

But there was still danger! The gargoyle was still in the sky . . . and he was coming after me!

I couldn't see the creature, but I could still hear the thundering of wings as the gargoyle spun

in the air above me. I started rolling on the grass, hoping that if I kept moving, the awful creature wouldn't be able to get me. The grass was dew-covered and it soaked my skin and my clothes. I kept rolling, frantically twisting and turning, rolling to who knows where. I just wanted to keep moving—away from the gargoyle!

This was crazy! There is no such thing as gargoyles! Not *real* ones, anyway. Gargoyles are just make-believe, like fairy tails and cartoons and elves. They aren't supposed to be real!

Are they?

I kept rolling, but I could still hear the thunder of wings above me. I knew that the gargoyle was only a few feet overhead.

I hit something, and it stopped my roll.

A tree! I had rolled into a tree!

I leapt to my feet, clenching my fists, anxiously scanning the sky, searching for the gargoyle.

This was impossible. Worse! It was unbelievable! A stone gargoyle had come to life—and was flying around! I thought this stuff only happened in the movies!

It certainly wasn't supposed to happen in Gaylord!

I saw the gargoyle fly by again, and I ducked behind the tree. I could hear a loud flapping of wings as the beast circled the tree, over and over again, around and around and around.

Then, as quickly as it had attacked, I heard it flying away. I saw its shadow as it flew toward the street light, then it flew off and up into the night. Soon, the only sounds I heard were crickets and the gentle hum of cars from downtown.

Was the gargoyle gone? If he was, where did he go?

I backed out from beneath the tree, my head upturned, searching the dark sky for the gargoyle. Thankfully, I didn't see it.

I walked over to the spot where the gargoyle had been perched on the lawn. The grass was matted and all crushed down like you would expect. It looked like two big feet had pressed down into the grass.

Again, I looked up, my eyes searching the night sky.

No gargoyle.

Had this really happened? How did a cement gargoyle come to life and fly away? Was it really cement, after all?

I looked back at Mr. Hansel's house. It was

all dark except for one small window that glowed from a light inside. I hope he hadn't heard me. If Mr. Hansel caught me in his yard, I would be a dead duck!

I guess I'd better go home, I thought. I can figure this out in the morning, when there's more light.

I was about to turn and walk home when, out of nowhere, two claws suddenly grasped my shoulders from behind!

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