



BY LARRY C. KAY

“...AND SHE SCREAMED so loud it woke up people across the river. And I’ve heard she’s screaming still—in the crazy house up in Chichester.”

Dylan smirked at the satisfied glee on Gary’s face. Dylan had heard the story before. He called it “The Hook Horror” when he told it, but he appreciated Gary’s twist about the girl being in the local loony bin, just over the state line in Chichester. It made the story more familiar, more real. He wanted to top Gary’s tale, and he knew just the one, one of his dad’s.


His dad wrote scary stories, and other ones about spaceships and magic. Normally, that would be awesome, but it also meant

moving a lot, since paying the bills was tough when the stories did not sell.

This was their second move in a year, but Dylan understood the rules of being accepted into a new neighborhood. A quick game of catch or “showing brave” by ignoring Mom’s call for dinner was hardly enough. Only the scary stories clinched the deal. Then he would be in.

He had to wow the other three kids with his knockout punch: “The Zombie Wedding.” With flashlights held beneath their chins, the boys stood around a manhole cover near an empty lot at the end of the street. Late summer darkness nibbled at the sky.

Illustrated by Kelly Murphy

I LOVE SCARY STORIES. HAVE YOU HEARD THE ONE ABOUT THE INCHWORM OF DOOM? ... 



I KNOW ONE ABOUT A GHOSTLY BOOKWORM WHO MOVES YOUR BOOKMARK WHEN YOU’RE NOT LOOKING. (SHIVER!)

Jacob, a scruffy mop-haired kid, was next. He tried to retell an episode from an old, scary TV show, but he missed all the parts that made the story strange and spooky. Then Manuel, who had big eyes he'd roll around just for fun, told the Bloody Mary story, about a dead witch who stole children and appeared in mirrors. He was good with voices, so his sounded best so far.

Then Dylan began, ready to make the other boys squirm. "The zombies all—"

"Nuh-uh," Gary said, shaking his head. He turned off his flashlight. The other boys turned theirs off, too.

"Next time you get to tell a story," said Gary. "This time . . . you gotta pass the test."

Dylan reluctantly turned off his flashlight, and Manuel and Jacob grinned at him. He just knew they were going to make him eat a cricket. He hated doing that, but he could.

Gary pointed at the manhole cover. "You gotta go down The Hole," he said, "and crawl to the end of the pipe at the creek. If you do that, then you're one of us."

All four boys looked across the abandoned lot toward the dark forest beyond. Dylan heard a stream gurgling faintly in the distance. Did it sound hungry? Both the brook and the woods roared with adventure during the day. But at night . . . ?

"And no flashlight," said Gary.

Dylan looked at Gary, full of authority and challenge, and then at the other two: sneering Jacob, sympathetic Manuel. Their

faces flashed in the flickering fluorescent light of the dying street lamp.

Dylan did not want to scamper around in a smelly pipe. Couldn't you pass out from sewer gas? But it might be weeks before he would get another shot at entering their group.

Mom would already be mad at him for being late; being soaked and stinking like a sewer would send him straight to his room without dinner, or worse. His stomach burbled at the prospect. Jacob giggled, and Manuel rolled his eyes.

That did it. No one was going to think Dylan was a wimp.

"OK," said Dylan. "I'll do it."

It took all four of them, grunting and groaning, to remove the heavy manhole cover. Then they all gathered around the great

EAT A
CRICKET?
YIPE! (HE'S
JOKING,
RIGHT?)



LET'S HOPE
SO, BUT BE
READY TO
RUN, JUST
IN CASE.



MEWY
MEW!



blackness of the hole, standing quietly, like soldiers before a battle.

Dylan waited for the unreliable street lamp to flicker and buzz more strongly for a moment, revealing the depth of the drop he would have to make. When it flashed, a horrible, pale face stared up at him from the shadows of the pipe!

Dylan jumped in alarm and nearly bit his tongue. It took him one heartbeat to realize that the face gaping back at him was his own reflection from a small puddle of stagnant water at the bottom of the pipe. He had scared himself. Jacob snickered, and Dylan wanted to punch him.

Dylan rubbed his hands together and sat down at the edge of The Hole. He estimated the drop to be deeper than he was tall, but no worse than jumping down from the limb of the big oak at his old house.

He sucked in a breath, and stretched his legs out over the void. Another, deeper breath, and he turned and dangled from the lip. A final grunt and—*whoosh!*—Dylan dropped, hitting the solid concrete base with a splashing thud that hurt his feet and snapped his jaw shut.

The pipe stank like a dumpster behind a fast-food restaurant. Dylan peered into the long darkness. The pipe was big; he wouldn't have to crawl. He wanted to look up, but he was afraid the boys would see his face full of fear.

The rank air made him sputter and cough. He put one hand beyond the cone of flickering, sour light, and felt the cool, damp concrete. Nothing ate his hand, so he pushed himself totally into the unlit vastness ahead. The hungry dark chilled his body.

RANK AIR
MEANS
STINKY,
SMELLY.



MEWY
PEWY!



Fully in the void now, Dylan glanced back into the safety of the light. He could barely see the bottoms of Gary's frayed jeans and dirty sneakers.

Dylan straightened his ball cap, clenched his fists, and stuck his forehead out like a bull. He shouldered his way, bent over, through the pipe. Bubbling water echoed through the culvert. His eyes began to adjust to the darkness. His heart pounded in his chest, but he could do this.

Then he heard a sound. Not a watery sound, an animal sound. He stopped and listened carefully, but could only detect the gurgle of the faraway creek. He could not smell anything over the sewer stench. A faint reflection showed him the edge of the stream running down the pipe. He decided to straddle the water to make less noise as he walked.

Dylan awkwardly shambled down the concrete pipe until a claw shot out of the darkness and seized his arm and leg, hoisting him aloft. Before he could scream, something sharp hit his ribs and a fuzzy feeling spread over him. As he faded away, his subconscious tossed up the image of his concerned but frustrated parents lecturing his skeleton about the dangers of crawling around in pipes.

GUHDIAK RETRACTED HIS stinger carefully without leaving a mark, but he lost his balance. The human boy was heavier than he thought, and Guhdiak collapsed backward to the wet concrete. He clucked to himself, stood up, and picked the boy back up, cradling him like he had seen human

mothers do with their babies. He pushed his hairy ear close to the boy's mouth and listened for breath. Guhdiak nodded in satisfaction.

He quickly undressed the boy, being careful not to accidentally brush the pink, fragile skin with the coarse spines on his hands and arms. Guhdiak spat out a huge glob of black gunk at the rounded ceiling of the pipe. Next, he carefully lifted and attached the boy to the slime. He spread the ooze about a bit, fussing around the edges to make sure the boy—except for his nose and mouth—was covered.

He stretched up on the tips of his claws and listened for Dylan's slow breath. The boy would be safe. Even if a storm came during the night and the pipe filled with muddy water, the boy should still be fine. Guhdiak would come back in the morning to free him and return his clothing. The boy would not remember his night in the cocoon except in dreams. Guhdiak knew killing one of the human children, even by accident, would make Papa really mad and get all of Guhdiak's new friends in trouble as well.

Guhdiak heard the other buggybears chuckling further down the pipe. They had dared him last week to steal a shoe from a human kid, and he had thought that would be enough. Now the oldest, Gurkleburn, the one with brown tipped spines all up and down his arms *and* his legs, had issued the final challenge. Guhdiak could not hang with them, the coolest of the buggybears, unless he did The Switch.





Guhdiak licked the blood from his stinger, curled it up, and visualized being a human child. He had watched this one human, Dylan, for a few days, and he knew he could change if he just concentrated. His hide tingled, and his spines quivered. Finally, his hair and spines receded into his head, back, and arms. His two smaller arms folded back too. Fangs retracted, and his limbs straightened.

Really, Guhdiak only had to concentrate on the head and the hands. The human child's clothing covered the rest. He dressed quickly. The human boys would be waiting, and the buggybears were watching.

His mom would probably lecture him for staying out all night, but it would be worth it. Guhdiak had not liked the old warren further up the river, and he hoped this new spot their dad had chosen would be better.

The human clothing felt weird and confining. One of his arms popped back out. Guhdiak tucked the arm in and breathed slowly, trying to relax.


He half scuttled, half walked to the end of the pipe and hopped out. His buggybear friends hid themselves in the dark water on the far side of the creek.

He could barely see the submerged, watchful head of Gurkleburn disguised as a mossy rock.

The uncomfortable scents of nearby dogs and car exhaust made his neck spines shake. Guhdiak patted himself where his tiny arms hid and put the boy's cap on with a final twist.

THE OTHER THREE human children ran across the field toward him. They said something incomprehensible, but they smelled relieved. Guhdiak pointed to Dylan's house and grunted a phrase he had practiced. It sort of sounded like English. It was tough to walk and talk like a human boy at the same time. The human boys smelled of acceptance and left without more questions. One of them, the tall one, patted Guhdiak on the back, and almost dislodged one of his concealed arms.

Guhdiak looked up at the human house, full of bright lights and strange odors. All he had to do to satisfy the other buggybears

was to stay one night. Just one night in the human house pretending to be Dylan, and he was *in*. 



YOU MEAN, SOMEBUGGY I KNOW COULD REALLY BE A SWITCHED BUGGYBEAR?



DON'T WORRY. WE DON'T HAVE BUGGYBEARS IN CRICKET COUNTRY.



HOW DO YOU LIKE MY COSTUME?



AAAHHH!