

# When the Dead Whisper

By J. R. McLemore

I walked into the cemetery on a cold, but beautifully sunny day. The sky was deep blue and clear, save for a few wispy cirrus clouds. I was bundled in my wool coat, my breath vaporized before me as though I was exhaling cigarette smoke. I hadn't been here in over twenty years.

As children, my sister and I played hide-and-seek with our friends among the burial markers. Most of the graves were extremely old, dating back to the early 1800s. One grave had a rock as its marker, with marbles cemented onto it, spelling out a single name—Zina. This mysterious grave was at the back edge of the grounds, beside the forest. Lichens covered most of the headstones, while creeper vines extended from the nearby woods. Large marble monuments dotted the area, marking plots of the wealthier families, but there was one tombstone in particular that stood out from the rest—the statue of a cherub.

This cherub balanced on one foot, extending its arms toward heaven. The angel's face had weathered over the decades and moss grew up its leg. By itself, the sculpture was not scary, but coupled with the legend told by the neighborhood kids, it was ominous.

In the legend, a prominent citizen, Elizabeth Stanchfield, erected the figure to watch over her deceased infant. Elizabeth and her husband, Graham, tried unsuccessfully for years to have children, until she eventually became pregnant. Her husband was ecstatic when the child was born until he learned that it was not his, but instead, the child of one of his house staff.

While Graham was away on business, Elizabeth had a secret love affair with their groundskeeper. Graham was enraged when he discovered this, and ran out of the house, searching for this gardener. Unable to find him and still furious, Graham went home and killed the illegitimate child.

The local magistrate tried Graham, found him guilty, and sentenced him to death. Elizabeth inherited the estate and the money, some of which she spent to erect the statue over her child's grave.

This was the legend of the cherub that we knew, but some older boys in our neighborhood embellished it.

My sister and I were with four of our neighborhood friends in the cemetery. We were playing the usual game of hide-and-seek, when Danny Pruitt and his two cronies came upon us. Danny had a reputation as a bully, a boy frequently in trouble at school and, from time to time, with the police. My heart rate doubled when I saw him approach behind our friend Billy Lehman. Danny stuck his finger in his mouth, wet it, and poked it in Billy's ear, giving him a nasty "Wet Willy".

"What are you babies doing?" Danny asked.

His two friends stood behind him with smirks on their faces.

Billy stepped away, wiping the spittle out of his ear, and not daring turn his back on Danny.

"We're playing hide-an'-seek," my sister, Amy, said. "And we're *not* babies."

The sun was waning in the sky, melting into the western horizon.

"Aren't you scared of ghosts grabbing you?" Robbie Stark, one of Danny's friends, asked us.

"There's no such thing as ghosts. My mom said so," Amy said.

"Oh yeah? Then I guess you're brave enough to listen to the cherub's secret, aren't ya?" Danny said sneering.

It was obvious we had no idea what Danny was talking about as we exchanged glances at each other. Our faces had quizzical looks because none of us knew this part of the legend.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never heard the story of the baby’s cherub,” Danny said.

Again, we each looked around and then back at Danny. We shook our heads.

He explained to us that if you put your ear to the statue’s lips and cupped your hands, the statue would whisper a secret to you at midnight on the infant’s birthday.

He did not tell us what the secret was, however. We asked him if he had ever been brave enough to do this himself. He said he had and that if we wanted to know what the secret was, we would have to do this ourselves.

Finally, Danny and his degenerate entourage started to leave, but not before Robbie Stark snatched our friend Lenny’s baseball cap. They high-tailed it through the burial markers with Lenny following them, calling for them to give back his hat.

The sun was below the trees now, making the graveyard appear monochrome. Amy grabbed my arm and said, “C’mon. We gotta go eat supper.”

We started down the path toward the road. As we walked past the cherub, Amy stopped to look at the grave. While I stared at the statue, she checked the birth date on the child's headstone. She told me the child's birthday was only three months away, in November.

We were lying in bed on the night of the infant's birthday when I heard Amy's bedsprings creak as she climbed from under her covers. I saw that she was dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt.

"Where're you goin'?" I whispered to her.

"Shhh. I'm goin' to the cemetery to see if Danny Pruitt's a liar."

"You know he is," I protested and told her mom and dad would spank her if they caught her out at this hour.

"They won't know unless you rat on me, you little snitch," she said.

"I wanna come."

"No. You'll get us caught for sure."

"No I won't."

"Yes you will. Just stay here—"

"I'll call for dad," I told her, slowly raising my voice.

She plopped onto my mattress and clamped her hand over my mouth.

“Okay, but you better be real quiet,” she said, releasing me to get dressed.

We crept out of our bedroom window and ran to the graveyard. The moon was waxing and shone bright enough so that we didn’t need flashlights, which was a good thing, because we neglected to bring any.

I have to admit, I was scared walking among the graves at night, even with Amy along. I kept trying to coax her into going back home, but she wouldn’t have it.

We stopped in front of the statue of the cherub. The moonlight glistened on the figure as if it had sequined skin. Amy held her watch up to her face and pressed the side button. I saw its green glow.

“What time is it?” I asked her.

“It’s 11:58,” she replied.

I felt fidgety, as if eyes watched us from the shadows of the nearby trees. I tried once again to persuade Amy to leave, but she was committed to fulfilling this task.

At midnight, Amy pressed her ear to the marble, cupped her hands, and listened. It was only a couple of seconds, but I remember quivering in the cold night air, feeling those seconds drag on for minutes.

I nearly soiled myself when Amy yelped and bolted down the path between the graves, running for the road. My heart was racing and my legs moved like pistons. I was sure someone or something was behind us, giving chase. Of course, when I turned and looked back there was nothing there. None of that mattered though, because Amy was well ahead of me and I was not about to slow down or stop, so I kept running.

She was visibly upset. By what, I didn't know, until we were on the road and she told me what happened. She said the stone figure whispered a date in her ear, that she felt the figure's lips move. I thought she was just trying to scare me.

After that, we never talked about that night. She never told me the date the cherub whispered to her, but I found out one day while I was sneaking peeks at her diary. I saw where she had written her account of that incident, and I realized she wasn't kidding about it. She had jotted down the date. It was January 12, 2008; such a long way off, I remember thinking.

I hadn't given much thought to that date or what happened that night in a couple of decades. Childhood is always fraught with such nonsense, or so one would think. At least I thought so up until three days ago, the same day I got that dreaded phone call from my mom.

You see, mom called me on January 12, and yes, the year is 2008. She called to tell me that my sister had died. Today, we are gathered for her funeral. I weep dearly for my sister, but I keep having this thought: *when the dead whisper, you may not want to hear what they have to say.*

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