

Homecoming

by David K Shute

Katie and Lynne raced their bikes up the road to Gram's house, following their mother Janika, who was gliding on rollerskates. They went even faster when the bridge came into sight.. They loved how the old wooden boards of the bridge made them bump up and down on their bikes, and they loved how it always looked so dark in there even though it wasn't scary at all. Laughing and giggling, Lynne and Katie pulled ahead of their mother. This time, they wanted to reach the old covered bridge before Momma.

Momma Janika wasn't having any of that. She saw what the girls had in mind and turned on the speed. She wasn't known as the lightning bolt of her derby league for nothing. She needed to get to the mouth of the bridge first to make sure no vehicles were coming through the one lane bridge the other way before her girls came speeding around the turn onto Keystone Way. With two powerful moves, she shot ahead of the girls, and twirled to a stop at the turn, then looked carefully ahead through the bridge. As usual, nothing was coming, so she turned and waved her girls ahead.

The two girls saw Momma waving them on and in a great rush of pedalling and giggling, went around the corner and ahead of Momma into the bridge – and stopped, as fast as they could. Someone was standing at the far end of the bridge, where it was still darkened. Janika saw them stop and rushed to them.

“What, what is it!” she asked, “why did you stop?” Janika looked down the length of the bridge. Both girls raised their arms and pointed to the figure they saw standing in the bridge. At first Janika didn't see anything but her eyes adjusted and then she could see a figure, barely outlined in the gloom of the bridge. A young woman, it seemed, wearing strange old clothes.

“Who is that Momma?” the girls asked. “Why is she dressed so funny?” Whoever it was didn't look at all scary, just strange.



“You stay here,” said Janika. She held out a hand. “I will go and see.” As soon as Janika moved toward the figure, it seemed to vanish. “No way” said Janika, involuntarily.

“What is it Momma? Where did it go?” said the girls. Now they were both a little scared and more than a little curious. The only thing they'd ever heard of that could disappear like that was a ghost, like in the story Aunt Mary told them.

Together, all three of them moved forward slowly through the bridge, looking to see if the figure would return. Katie and Lynne thought that going really slow was almost more fun than going fast, because the bumps were bigger. When they got to the other side, the two girls stopped and looked down into the river, looking for some clue. There was nothing; the river was just the river.

“OK, guess it's nothing, let's get to Gram's house,” said Janika, shaking her head.

“Grammy, Grammy, we saw a ghost!” the two girls exclaimed as soon as they saw Grams. Grams and Grampy smiled big smiles. They wanted to know all about it. After the girls told them

about the beautiful princess with the magical dress who was waiting to talk to them on the bridge, Grams and Gramps looked at Janika,

“The thing is,” said Janika, “I saw something too. I can't explain it”

“Well, I can,” said Grampy, as if this was no big news. “These redwoods have been home to spirits ever since Henry Van Valkenburgh and Henry Cowell set up shop. Everything changed when the powder works blew up and San Francisco was destroyed by the earthquake and the tree fell on Van Valkenburgh. No more powder for the army, no more bricks for the city and no more paper mill for Van Valkenburg. The spirits have been trying to set it all back right again ever since.” The two girls looked at Grampy with big wide eyes.

“Karl!” protested Grams. “How can you say such things?” She looked at the two girls and was about to tell them not to listen to him.

“Well,” said Janika, in defense of her beloved Grampy, “Mary and I did see the spirit of Christine up in the ruins of the old mansion. You remember that.”

“Well, yes,” said Grams, “but you were young girls at the time. You had active imaginations.”

“Then how do you explain the fact that magnetism and gravity is all screwy in these hills,” said Grampy. “Just go up to the Mystery Spot to see for yourself.”

“I don't,” said Grams, “and I'm not going to try. Now, we have some bread and some muffins and some cookies that Janika and I baked, who wants some?”

“Me, me!” cried out Katie and Lynne.

“OK kids, time to go home,” said Momma after they finished with the treats. “Get your bikes ready.” Janika sat down and put on her roller skates.

“You know what,” said Grampy, “I'll walk you over to the bridge. I want to check something.”

That was more than fine with the girls and maybe not so fine with Grams but off they all went. Because Grampy was walking, the girls could pedal ahead and then come back, so they saw the opening to the bridge well before the adults did. They knew they weren't supposed to go through the bridge before Momma looked, but they could go up to the stop sign, so they did. And looked into the bridge. She was there! The girls raced back to Momma and Grampy.

“She's there, she's there,” they shouted. “Come quick!”

“Oh good, I was hoping this would happen,” said Grampy with a smile. He pulled something

out of his pocket and studied it. To Janika he said “Go, go and see.” Janika took off on her skates like a shot, followed by her girls, who pedalled as fast as they could. Grampy ran the last 50 yards to the stop sign in front of the bridge.

Halfway down the bridge, in the darkest part, they all could see the outline of a young woman dressed in a fancy dress from a long time ago, maybe the Civil War. She was turned toward them, with her hands clasped together at her waist, as if she were both inviting and imploring them to come forward. Nobody moved.

“Well, I’ll be,” said Grampy, looking at the small instrument he held flat in the palm of his hand. “Will you look at that.” He held a compass; the needle was spinning slowly around in a circle. Even the girls knew it wasn’t supposed to do that.

“Go see what it wants,” said Grampy to Janika. “You can get away quickest of all of us if need be.” Janika looked back in disbelief.

“You want me to go talk to something we have no idea what it is and leave my children? No way.” Janika shook her head absolutely no.

“Then I’ll go,” said Katie. She took off on her bike before anybody could stop her.

The ghostly woman stood and watched her approach, unclasping her hands and holding her hands out, palms up. Her mouth started to move as Katie got closer; a wind blew through the bridge. This was more than Momma Janika could take; she bolted toward her daughter as Katie go to within 20 feet of the ghost. As soon as Janika moved, the ghost disappeared. Janika caught up to Katie and hugged her. Katie wiggled free. Grampy and Lynne ran to Janika and Katie.

“Well, I’ll be,” exclaimed Grampy. The compass needle pointed steadily north.

“Mommy, she talked to me,” gushed Katie. “She talked to me. She said she wanted help to find something. She needs help Momma, she needs help! We have to help her!”

“Oh sweetie, I don’t know. I don’t know how to help a ghost.” Janika was more than a little confused. “First thing we’re going to do is go home and write everything down.”

“Maybe the girls can draw pictures,” added Grampy. The girls really like this idea and couldn’t wait to get home to start.

“What am I going to do,” said Janika to Grampy.

“Just wait. It’ll blow over. If it’s worth anything to you, asking for help is what most ghosts do. They’re only here because of unfinished business.” Grampy turned and headed home. Janika took off after her now hyperactive girls.

“That's outrageous. That's just plain outrageous” was all Grams could say when she heard the story. “Maybe Janika and Mary really did see a ghost all those years ago.”

“I have to see this for myself” was all Aunt Mary could say when she heard the story. “I won't be in California until next week so don't chase away the ghost until I get there, OK?”

“We haven't seen it again since then, but the girls carry a compass whenever we go to Grams over the bridge. The needle often spins when we stand on the bridge,” said Janika. Her two girls held up their newly acquired compasses so Aunt Mary could see them on the video chat. “It doesn't make any sense.”

“Yes it does!” said Katie. “Grampy says its the ghost,” said Lynne.

“Yes, I bet he does,” said Mary. “I'll see you next week.”

“I know, I know you want me to come and see with you,” said Mary to the girls as they finally got ready to go to Gram's house by walking over the bridge. “But I want to see for myself. So you go ahead and maybe you will see it first.” The girls were very disappointed but Momma made them go without Mary. Then Mary walked by herself.

She always loved Paradise Park so much. It was cool and quiet and serene and she could walk along the river and listen to the water and the birds and the wind in the trees. It was all so much different than her life as a flight attendant - airports and jets and cities and noise. Soon it was all going to get even more intense; she had just been accepted into the first crews chosen to train for Pristine Galactic, the company's plan for suborbital flights. She couldn't go any higher than that as a flight attendant. But for now it was peace and quiet. She started to sing one of the gospel ballads her band performed in the clubs in San Francisco. She sang:

I have climbed highest mountains
I have run through the fields
Only to be with you
Only to be with you

I have run
I have crawled
I have scaled these city walls

These city walls
Only to be with you

But I still haven't found what I'm looking for
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for

I have kissed honey lips
Felt the healing in her fingertips
Burning like a fire
This burning inside me

I have spoke with the tongue of angels
I have held the hand of a devil
It was warm in the night
I was cold as a stone

But I still haven't found what I'm looking for
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for

I believe in the Kingdom Come
Then all the colors will bleed into one
Bleed into one
But yes I'm still running

You broke the bonds
And you loosed the chains
Carried the cross
Of my shame
Oh my shame
You know I believe it



She was still singing as she entered the bridge. She didn't get more than two steps onto the bridge before she swore she could hear another voice singing harmony to her voice. The further she got the more present the second harmony voice became, until finally she stopped walking and just listened. The other voice stopped also. Then she heard a whisper, as if someone were standing right next to her. "Come and visit me" the voice said, a woman's voice. "Come to my house." Mary turned around everywhere but there was no person there to be seen. "Come soon" said the voice, fading away.

Well, thought Mary, I guess there really is something here. She hurried now to get to Gram's house. Janika and her whole family plus her two nieces Maddy and Lila were waiting. They had all gathered because Mary had said she had a big announcement.

As soon as Mary got in the door, she announced that she had two big announcements. First, she had been accepted into the training program for the first crews on the Pristine Galactic flights. "I am going as high as you can go without actually being an astronaut," she announced with a big smile. After all the congratulations and high fives were over, even from Lynne, she then got very serious.

"What's the other announcement," asked Grams. Mary was looking very strange.

"I heard the ghost on the bridge!" Everyone jumped up and surrounded her, demanding to hear the details. Everyone except Grampy. He took his camera and a few other things and took off for the bridge.

"Come to my house, she said," repeated Janika. "What house could that be? We don't even know who this ghost is."

"Well, we did once see a ghost in the ruins of an old house," Mary reminded Janika.

"What ghost? What house? Ghosts aren't real," said Maddy and Lila.

Janika and Mary explained briefly about meeting the widow of Henry Van Valkenburgh on what once was the terrace of their beautiful mansion up on the cliff above Paradise Park. "I remember she was so beautiful," said Janika.

"And lonely," said Mary. "Maybe that's why she's appearing here now."

Maddy and Lila immediately headed toward the door, explaining that they were going to go talk to the lonely beautiful ghost on the bridge, even if it was scary. But two things stopped them. First was Mary saying no, don't go to the bridge, let's go to the ruins of the house. The second was Grampy, coming back in the door with the news that the ghost had left no electromagnetic signature on the bridge.

"If there was a ghost then, there isn't now," he said. He went back to pattering in the garden.

Maddy and Lila turned to Mary, “Come on, take us to the ruins. She asked you to come, she didn't say you couldn't bring anybody,” said Maddy.

“After lunch,” proclaimed Grams. “I did not work all morning just to have you rush away from this food.” Nobody dared leave until the lunch, and the long discussion of ghosts, was over. Then Janika and the girls went home for a nap. Mary and her nieces hiked up to the ruins of the mansion.



It was quite difficult to find the ruins. The redwood forest had grown back in still more than when Mary had last seen it. Other people had removed some of the stones of the terrace and house foundation. Mary was ready to give up but Lila and Maddy persisted, eventually finding the remains of the path to the house and the terrace. When finally all three were standing in the little clearing that once was the terrace, Mary sighed. “We must be crazy, chasing after ghosts.”

Just at that moment, Lila saw a small creature poke its face through a bush. Lila was sure she'd seen a troll or a fairy. Lila was about to say something but the sprite motioned to be quiet, and then sprinkled a cloud of redwood dust into the air. It disappeared. “No, wait!” cried Lila and she ran after it, ignoring Maddy and Mary's cries to stop. “I can't let her get lost,” said Maddy, and she too took off into the forest, calling after Lila.

After a few minutes, the forest fell silent. Mary felt a cool breeze rub against her arm, and she looked around. The shimmering figure of the ghost of Mrs. Van Valkenburgh stood a few feet away.

“Thank you for coming,” said the spirit. “Please, you must help Sarah, she cannot go until she finds her father. She thinks she caused her father's death but she did not. She is looking in the wrong place. Henry is not there, he is not in Eden. Help her.”

“How? Who is Sarah? What can I do? How do I find her?” pleaded Mary, reaching toward the spirit. She heard someone coming quickly through the forest toward them.

“I must go. She will come again to the bridge, but you can only speak with her in Eden. I must go.” The spirit turned and looked in the direction of what used to be the house. A second spirit, a man dressed in fine clothes, came into view and took her arm. They stood for a moment.

Maddy and Lila stepped through the last fern into the clearing in time to see Mary holding out her hands toward a shimmering in the clearing and saying “No wait I have more questions wait...”

The spirits of the Van Valkenburghs smiled, turned, and walked away into nothingness, leaving Mary behind. Maddy and Lila rushed forward, wanting to know what happened.

After Mary told them, Lila held up what looked like a piece of petrified redwood that had the distinct image of a tree bending down over a large flat rock in a pool in a river. “The fairy I was chasing led me to this,” said Lila. “Well, Maddy helped.”

“The sprite stopped right on top of this, we would never have seen it otherwise,” said Maddy.

Mary and Maddy and Lila returned to Gram's house with their treasure and their story.

“Some people think Eden is in Iraq, near Basrah,” said Mary. “There was an article on it in one of our magazines, and I met the author on a flight to Kuwait once.”

Grams was skeptical. “The garden of Eden is an idea, not a real place. I don't know how you can go there to meet a ghost.”

“In dreams!” declared Maddy. “Lots of people dream about beautiful gardens and ghosts.”

Grams didn't think this was completely crazy. “So you're saying we should go spend the night at the Dream Inn and hope somebody has a dream about Eden to meet this ghost Sarah. We don't even know who this Sarah is.”

“Yeah, let's go sleep at the Dream Inn!” said Lila. “I have dreams all the time! And Aunt

Janika saw Sarah, we know what she looks like. Oh Grams, can we go?”

“Wait, let's think about this a little more,” said Mary, becoming businesslike. “I've also seen articles that say the Garden of Eden is now under water near where Bahrain is now. It so happens I can trade with someone I know to get a round trip to Dubai next week. I could go and do some research there.”

Just then Grampy came in from his chores. “What makes you think its the biblical Eden? I think there's a Garden of Eden about five miles from here. Nice swimming hole for the locals; most people can't find it.”

Maddy held up the treasure they'd found as a result of chasing the sprite. “Yes, look, a tree and a river and a pond. This has to be it.”

“Where did you get that?” asked Grampy. “This can't be petrified, the minerals aren't in these hills.”

“I saw a fairy in the woods,” answered Lila. “I chased it.”

“More like it was leading you, I think,” said Maddy, “it kept leaving little markers or waiting for you to catch up.”

“Yes, and then when it stopped, it was standing on top of an old old stump that was like rock and we found this,” said Lila.

“Well,” said Grams, looking at her husband like he'd been playing games with them, “who do you think this Sarah is?”

Grampy smiled. “I honestly don't know. But my guess is she's somehow connected to these redwoods, that's why she stays so close. Maybe her father worked in the Powder Mill when it blew up. You know this whole paradise park was a gunpowder factory and that bridge was a main part of it. I think you can even find pictures of it from then.”

“Oh geez,” said Mary suddenly. “I texted Janika and told her what's going on and she said all you have to do to find out who Sarah was is look up the history of the state park here. She was the youngest daughter of Henry Cowell, the man who used to own most of these forests. UC Santa Cruz is built on what used to be his ranch.”

“Now you know who the ghost is and who she's looking for. Time for a trip to Garden of Eden, don't you think?” said Grampy. “If you go, I'm taking pictures. And a few other readings.”

“No!” said Lila, “you'll scare away the ghost.”

“Maybe,” said Grampy, “but people have taken pictures of angels recently.” He looked at the

assembled faces and laughed. “OK fine, you take the pictures. I'm going to work on a GPS.”

Janika, Mary, Lila and Maddy were standing at the junction of the Ox Trail and the railroad tracks, trying to see where the side trail to the Garden of Eden went. All the hiker stories on the Internet said it was here at the tracks. As they searched, they heard and felt a deep rumbling coming toward them. “It's the train!” said Janika, “quick, get off the tracks.” The rumbling got louder, mixed with the clickety-clack sounds of railway wheels.

The open train cars were about half full of people; most of them waved as they went past, heading up the mountain. Janika, Mary, Lila and Maddy waved and smiled back, until the caboose went by, and they all saw the man dressed in overalls and boots and a hat in a style from the Civil War era standing at the back rail. He did not wave or smile as he looked intently at them. He pointed at a particularly large, overgrown bush on the other side of the tracks, put his two hands together and bowed slightly toward them, straightened and disappeared.

“Well,” said Mary, “did you all just see what I saw? A ghost?” They all agreed this was the only explanation and there was nothing to do but keep going down the trail, even if the ghosts did now seem to know they were coming.

They rushed over to the bush and looked around. Sure enough, there was a trail. Thanking the ghost, they went down the trail. The trail became much steeper and more difficult. They worked hard and made slow progress for about half an hour. They came to a turn in the path which opened suddenly to the banks of the river. Further up the river, on the far side, they could see a large tree leaning out over a large rock in the river.



“That's the place,” exclaimed Lila, “the place in the picture the wood sprite showed us!” She pointed and began moving quickly toward it.

“She's right,” said Maddy, who held out the petrified redwood piece to compare scenes. “We might be here.”

“We'll see,” said Mary.

The four of them reached the large flat rock and poked around. It was a beautiful pool of water in a gorge that narrowed to a waterfall at one end. Trees and flowers and plants grew in abundance; the air was rich with lovely scents and the mists of the waterfall. There were places to lay out in the warm sun, places to jump from the high banks into the pool, places to sit and let the cool clean water flow over your skin and body.

“This certainly does feel like paradise,” said Janika, “I can see why Sarah might think her father came here.”

“Yes, but where is Sarah?” asked Mary. “After all, we came here to find her spirit.”

“I think she has to show herself to us, we can't find her,” said Maddy. “Oh, this water feels so good.”

“I agree,” said Mary brightly. “It feels so good that I am going swimming – now!”

“Now!” said Jesse, “you'll get everything all wet.”

“Maybe...” said Mary. “There are ways to go swimming without getting your clothes wet.”

They were all lounging around on the rocks drying off in the sun when Janika suddenly pointed toward the narrow end of the gorge. “Look” she said.



Standing there in her fine dress was a young woman. She looked a little bit afraid, but nonetheless she came forward over the pond to stand near Janika.

Janika sat up. Her skin was tingling. “We’re here to help you,” she said out loud to the ghost. All three of the others could feel the tingling energy as well. “Are you Sarah?”

The ghostly woman clasped her hands together and nodded vigorously. A circle of ripples developed on the surface of the pond water. Although none of them heard any sound, they all were sure they heard a young woman’s voice say “Yes I am Sarah Cowell.”

Mary and the others didn’t dare move, but Mary said “Janika, be careful.”

Janika did not take her eyes away from the ghost, but nodded to acknowledge Mary. Then she said, “How can we help you? Why are you here?”

The look of pain and sorrow and relief and determination on the face of the ghost struck them all. They understood Sarah the ghost was looking for her father because she broke his heart when she died.

“You're looking for your father,” repeated Janika. “Is that right?” The body of the ghost brightened.

“Mrs. Van Valkenburgh told us he's not here,” blurted Maddy, trying to be helpful. The body of the ghost dimmed and nearly disappeared; her head slumped and she grabbed her heart.

“Wait!” cried Mary. “We'll help you find him! Maybe he's at his ranch, or down by the beach. Don't go.”

The ghost brightened again. Sarah had already looked everywhere at the ranch, or everywhere she could, and she was afraid of the beach. There were other energies there.

“If we go, can you come with us?” asked Janika. “We can go down to the beach to look for you.”

The ghost started to weep. He liked his boat, she told them. Others were coming, it was time to go. Sarah the ghost turned around and walked back into the narrow end of the gorge.

Mary and Janika and Maddy were too stunned to move or do anything. Not Lila. She jumped up and shouted “Come on, what are we waiting for! We gotta get down to the beach.”

With that, they hurriedly gathered their things and went back to Gram's house. Grammy and Grampy listened to the story without saying a thing. Janika's girls were both afraid and fascinated. By that time, Janika's husband Tommy had shown up, looking for his children.

“Not much choice about it,” said Grampy, “we have to go down to the beach. I hate that place.”

“Karl,” said Grams, a little annoyed, “you don't have to come along, you know.”

“Of course I do,” he replied with a grin, “I want to test this.” He held out a compass-like device that seemed to have some kind of computer board attached to it. “My GPS – Ghost Positioning Sensor.” He turned to Tommy. “Thanks for all that fast design work Tommy – I would have missed the EMP detector circuit if it wasn't for you.”

“What?” said Janika, looking at her husband, “what? What design?”

Tommy smiled. “Well, Karl called and asked a couple questions, so some guys at work and I

kinda cobbled together a design for him.”

“I had the basic structure,” said Grampy.

“And the skills to build it,” added Tommy. “We won't know if it works until we see a ghost though.”

“OK,” said Grams. “Then we go down to the beach.”

“I want some ice cream,” said Katie. “Mom please can we get some ice cream!” This was an idea that Lynne, Maddy and Lila liked a lot.

“We should go to Marianne's,” said Mary, “then down to East Cliff, where the river comes out. Sarah said he liked his boat.”

“Oh yes,” said Grams, “Marianne's is the best. That's on the way.” So they went.

Ice creams in hand, the girls all piled out of Janika's van and started down the path from the parking area to the mouth of the river. Grampy and Tommy just stood and stared at the beach, the ocean and the GhPS. It was a beautiful evening, with the crescent of an early setting moon dropping toward the horizon. The GhPS showed no signs of any ghost activity.

The girls looked everywhere around the river and the beach around it. No ghost. Finally they all just came and sat on the beach to look at the moon.

“Hey girls,” shouted Tommy, “we're going to walk over to the lighthouse.” Karl and Tommy headed that way across the sandy beach. The GhPS had been pointing in that direction. The evening grew darker, the moon got bigger as it dropped its crescent point to the horizon.

Suddenly Katie pointed out onto the water. “Look at that boat – nobody's sailing it!”

“Wait, yes there is someone,” said Mary, squinting. “There's a man and a woman.”

“Ghost ahoy” shouted Grampy. Tommy and Grampy were all excited, looking at the GhPS and pointing out to sea.

Slowly, the small sailboat drifted away from the mouth of the river toward the crescent moon. The mast of the boat lined up perfectly with the shape of the moon; it looked like the moon was the sail on the boat. Everyone felt a sudden sharp tingling on their skin. It looked as though the moon pulsed

with a bright burst that transformed the whole boat into light. For just an instant, the moon grew full and the boat seemed to sail right into the face of it and disappeared. The moon shrank again to a waxing crescent.

Janika heard the voice of Sarah, as clearly as if she were standing right there next to her.

“Thank you, oh thank you so much, I am home!”

“She's home!” cried Janika, “she's free!”

“We did it! We did it! We did it!” cried everyone at once and the girls all hugged.

“Did you see what I saw,” said Tommy to Grampy. They were both staring at the GhPS device more than a little amazed.

“Yep,” said Grampy, “blew it right out. Dead as a doornail. Back to the drawing board.”

“Yeah, but now we know. It does work. Come on, let's go join the girls. We don't say anything unless they ask,” said Tommy.



Back at the house in Paradise Park, they all retold their own version of what they saw, and mostly, it was all the same. The ghostly boat, the unusual moon, the moment of connection and wham all done.

“But Sarah talked only to you at the end,” said Mary to Janika, maybe a little jealous.

“Don't be so sure that's a good thing,” said Grampy. “Now that you helped one ghost, there might be more.”

