



# MOONCAT JACK

**T**he first time I heard about Mooncat Jack he whispered into our lives like a tradition born overnight. It was our second day back at school after Christmas break the year I turned twelve. That year Richie Perullo, who sat two seats behind me, didn't come back from vacation. The day after Christmas Richie took his little brother skating on Cherry Hill Pond, and Jimmy broke through a thin patch of ice and got trapped underneath. My best friend Wilt Corman was there when it happened. The way I heard it Richie and Wilt flattened out and formed a kind of half-assed, two-man human chain with Wilt's bony legs stretching toward shore and Richie soaking himself trying to fish out his kid brother. By the time they ran for help, Jimmy had been under too long and Richie was blue from hypothermia.

Those two used to fight all the time—Jimmy was three years younger and Richie used to kick the daylight out of him—but you almost never saw them apart.

Despite the wicked cold snap that set in after New Year's, they sent us outside for recess that whole week. The dry cold made our noses run. A few kids rallied to get a kickball game going, but our lungs burned if we ran too much and no one wanted to chase the ball. At Holy Mother the parking lot doubled as a playground and there wasn't much to do but huddle together and kick around chunks of snow until they disintegrated.

That's when Wilt told us what really happened out on the ice the day Jimmy died.

"Mooncat Jack was there," he said. "He grabbed Jimmy and pulled him under the water, grabbed him right out of Ronnie's hands. I saw him. He was smiling when he did it."

It felt sad and kind of weird not having Jimmy and Richie around anymore, so no one wanted to be too hard on Wilt, but none of us believed him. Maybe we figured he made it up to feel better about not saving Jimmy, or maybe he did it for attention.

That's what Susie McKinney thought, anyway. "You're, like, unhinged, Wilt," she told him. "Mentally, I mean."

Eddie Spirowski mimicked her, pointing his index finger at his head and spinning it in circles. "Yeah, dude, un-hinged! Totally mental!"

Wilt shut up then, no comeback, no defense, and everyone laughed.

The only kid other than me who didn't make fun of him was Joey Reagan, who said he knew about a kid in Center Quogue who went missing and later they found his body in the woods by the parkway. Mooncat Jack stole him out of his bedroom, he said. The girl who found the body claimed she saw Jack dump it, but when the police came, they couldn't find anyone. Joey said Mooncat Jack went around taking kids no one was watching or kids that no one wanted or someone wanted gone. He took them in the dark, laughing and smiling with teeth like black dice and eyes that might look like empty sockets or pools of dead water waiting to suck people down inside them. The Mooncat, he told us, dressed completely in black.

We all got quiet listening to the story, but none of us bought it. Joey was kind of dim. He forgot his homework a lot and did things like staying up late studying history the night before an English test. Everybody knew he was chicken and would've jumped out of his skin if he thought Mooncat Jack was real.

"If he takes kids no one wants," Eddie said, "then why don't he take you, Joey?"

Eddie's joke broke the spell, and we let Joey have it.

Wilt drifted away, forgotten for the moment. No one wanted to rag on him too much because he'd been right there when Jimmy died, but Joey was a big fat apple waiting to be picked. Thing was he had a good sense of humor and was popular, so he knew we were only kidding. At least until Spirowski made a crack about his mother. That earned Eddie a place at the bottom of a pile-on, face down, rolling around in the gravel-stained snow. Wilt watched from the sidelines, a slanted phony grin on his face, and tried to look like he belonged, but a deep shadow hung over him and his laugh crackled like a mean, dry cough.

A few days later I walked home with Wilt from the drugstore near school after playing Defender and Berzerk for a quarter a game. We both liked Donkey Kong better, but it cost fifty cents and we were short on change. I asked Wilt if he really meant what he said about Mooncat Jack.

He told me he just made it up like Susie said. He got it from dreams he had where he saw an ugly man hiding in the curtains or under the basement stairs, grinning and waiting to grab him. In some of the dreams Wilt was hiding, quaking as he listened to the man shuffle closer until he could feel him standing right by his side. He called him Mooncat Jack, but he probably picked the name up from Joey Reagan's dumb stories. The dark man was just a bad dream, he said, and sooner or later he would go away. Bad dreams always did.

Wilt hung his head and kicked an ice chunk the size of a golf ball along in a crooked line until it bounced over the curb and sailed out of sight between the tines of a sewer grate.

“I’d believe you if you say it’s true,” I told him. “I mean it. Really.”

We’d been friends since kindergarten, and I was worried he might be sick. Since coming back from break he always looked pale, and he ran out of energy too fast and fell asleep in class in the afternoon. But Wilt had been kind of sad for a while even before what happened with Jimmy. Something bad went wrong between his parents and they had split up over the summer. Now Wilt only saw his father a couple of times a month. Mr. Corman was a big, gravel-voiced man with one eye always twitching, and he favored a heavy overcoat that floated around him like a furry sail. I could usually tell when Wilt was going to see him on the weekend because he got quiet and sullen toward the end of the week. Wilt was the only kid I knew whose parents were divorced. It made him sort of an oddball in our class.

What I didn’t know, then—what no one our age knew, then—was that for months rumors had traveled like dervishes among our parents and neighbors about the real reason the Cormans got divorced. The adults whispered words like “touching” and “abuse” and said Mrs. Corman was living “in denial.” Most of them thought it a matter of time before the police showed up outside the Corman house, and fathers who had business with Wilt’s dad slowly let it dry up. All I knew was that in the fourth grade my dad stopped letting me spend much time at Wilt’s house, though he let Wilt come over to our place whenever he wanted.

After we trudged on in silence for a while, I asked, “You still coming Saturday?”

Wilt slugged me in the arm. “Duh, why wouldn’t I? It’s your birthday, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, cool!” I’d thought he might not want to go to a party and see everyone have fun, but maybe it would cheer him up.

Wilt checked his watch as we came down North Park Street. “I’m gonna be late,” he said, and we hauled butt down the road.

Wilt’s mother gave him a curfew anytime he went anywhere and made his life miserable if he wasn’t home on time, so Wilt was eternally watching the clock when we hung out. Sometimes, if he was going to be late, he had to ask to use the phone at our house to call his Mom just so she knew where he was. It didn’t save him from a scolding, but it helped.

Wilt raced up his front path and yanked the door open. He stuck his head in and yelled that he was home over the television noise barreling out of the living room. His grandmother liked to watch the tube with the sound turned up full volume.

Wilt twisted around in the opening, winded from running but glad to be in under the wire. He waved once, then slipped inside and slammed the door behind him.

I walked up the street toward home, taking my time in the twilight. The thickening dark leached the color from the houses and trees, turning everything into sharp black shapes like the silhouettes we made out of construction paper in the third grade. I used to like that time of day, when it felt like I could slip away giggling into those unlit spaces where I imagined I could watch the world roll by, listen to everyone's secrets, and go wherever I wanted without ever being seen. Thinking about it made me feel confident and a little giddy, and I swore I would find that place one day. I meant it, too. Strange how we see the world sometimes, how near at hand a getaway can seem when really it's light years distant and maybe doesn't exist at all.

Coming around the corner of my block I thought I saw my Dad cross our front lawn and turn past the side of the house, looking up like he was checking the gutters or the snow gathered on the roof. But it must have been a trick of the light or old Mr. Rollins who lived next door, because Dad's car wasn't in the driveway when I got there, the signal that he was working late. A porch light burned inside an amber sconce beside our front door. Its twin above the side door lit the driveway. The smell of dinner cooking drifted from the kitchen vent, and through the window I saw Mom standing at the oven. Matty sat at the kitchen table, coloring with his crayons and drinking milk. He sniffled and Mom handed him a tissue, not missing a step between the stove and the sink.

I looped my backpack over the door handle, jumped off the stoop and crunched into the yard. Our back lawn ran to a stream that cut through our property, and I chugged down to the bank where ledges of snow had frozen into crisp overhangs melted away underneath by flowing water. I wandered along, kicking them loose and watching them splash into the weak current where they melted before they sank. When the last one vanished I tossed rocks into the stream and packed dirty snowballs and hurled them as hard as I could into the woods. Most hit the ground and broke apart. A few shook dead branches loose, but the best were the ones that smacked loud and square against a tree trunk. A hit like that left half a snowball clinging to the thick bark, and in the dark they looked like the tiny scalps of ghostly babies struggling to be born from the knothole wombs of the trees, white and frozen in time, trapped dead before they ever began to live.

I stayed out back until my fingertips went a little numb and my stomach started grumbling. The sky had turned black, by then, and it glittered with stars.

Matty already had his face in a dish when I walked in. I hung my coat in the closet and left my backpack at the foot of the stairs. Mom filled a plate for me while I took a fork and knife from the drawer, grabbed a napkin and a