



Chester Aaron

# **An American Ghost**



***Chester Aaron***

ZUMAYA THRESHOLDS

AUSTIN TX

2011

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Summary: When flood waters sweep his house down the Mississippi River in the 1860s, Wisconsin fourteen-year-old Albie encounters a mountain lion who is also trying desperately to stay alive, and who proves less dangerous than the men Albie meets next.

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***For Willy van der  
Schoot Abbink, who  
discovered California***

It is usually called the mountain lion. It is often called cougar. Or puma or panther. At the turn of the century visitors to the western mountains and deserts, impressed with the animal's ability to move in and out of shadows without being seen or heard, called it the American ghost.

## PROLOGUE

“Can’t believe it’s Indians,” Albie’s father said. “Indians wouldn’t leave all them tracks. And bare feet. I’m sayin’ it’s not Indians.”

“Course there’s tracks,” Sam Abernathy said. “Not even Indians gonna move three cows without leavin’ tracks. Bare feet. Just one of their tricks. Lookit them dogs, will you? They smell Indians. Simple as that.”

The two mongrels, Judy and Devil, had been scouting the land ever since they’d left the Abernathy farm. They’d flushed several coveys of quail and a few deer, but their chase had been brief and listless. Now both dogs were racing down the draw, baying at the ground.

“Slaves,” Albie’s father said. “They been slippin’ up the river more and more. That explains the bare feet.”

“Indians,” Sam Abernathy said. “But it don’t matter none. Slaves or Indians, they steal our cows, they get shot. Simple as that.”

The baying changed pitch and volume, and as if it were the signal he’d been waiting for, Sam Abernathy urged his big bay stallion forward. Albie’s fa-

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ther clucked his tongue and put Autumn into a canter.

Albie let Summer take the bit, knowing she'd been waiting for a run all day. Her body shot forward, heaving between his legs. His head fell back as she moved into full gallop.

Sam's black stallion leaped a fallen tree, and Autumn, close behind, with Albie's father huddled low, followed. Albie again let Summer choose her pace and time. He felt her pick up speed, and as she gauged the distance and bunched her muscles for the jump, he readied his body.

Then he was up and drifting and over, and down hard, almost off the saddle but catching himself in time and pressing his body to hers as she carried him through a grove of birches.

"The dogs got 'em," Sam called.

Without pulling in his stallion, Sam drew his rifle from its scabbard. Seeing his father do the same, Albie caught the reins in his left hand and reached his right down to loosen the buckskin thong and withdraw his own Sharps.

He bent low again over Summer's neck. The branches whipped his body, and he squinted to keep his eyes from watering. He tasted the wind, cold and sharp as a knife blade, in his open mouth and against the back of his throat.

"Ol' Judy and Devil got 'em," Sam shouted, and the words echoed inside Albie's head: *Got them, got them, we got them.*

Summer broke clear of the birches, and with the ease and grace of a long-winged bird, she took a water-filled ditch and, without losing stride, carried

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up a slope and onto the level and into the flat meadow.

Albie saw them then—two figures running through the hip-high grass. Albie's father raised his rifle, but Sam shouted, "The dogs, don't shoot the dogs," as Judy and Devil leaped to pull the two men down into the grass.

Shouts from Sam and his father mingled with the snarls and growls of Judy and Devil as Albie pulled Summer up hard, his rifle ready.

When Sam and Albie's father pulled off the dogs, the two men remained on the ground. Both sleeves of one man's jacket had been torn away, and his arms were bleeding. The other held a wet red hand to his throat.

Albie had seen pictures of runaway slaves in the newspapers that had managed to find their way to the farm, and these men were so dark he thought at first they were slaves. But when Sam gestured a command with his rifle, the men stood up, he saw they were Indians. And young—only a year or two older than he was. Fifteen, maybe sixteen. Their trousers and jackets were now ripped and torn even more than they had been before the dogs got to them.

"There's your slaves," Sam Abernathy said with a laugh.

The two men seemed to be unaware, or unconcerned, about their various wounds. They stood with their arms at their sides, their heaving chests the only parts of their bodies that moved. And their black eyes, which shifted from Sam Abernathy to Albie's father and to Albie. Shifted, hovered, and

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shifted with an indifference that was almost contempt.

“Look at them moccasins,” Albie’s father said. “Hardly any soles left on ‘em. Pretty sick-lookin’ couple of braves, I’d say. They look like they ain’t et for a couple weeks.”

“And they ain’t gonna eat again,” Sam Abernathy said. “Simple as that.”

The two Indians watched, not even their eyes moving now as Sam raised his rifle.

They left the bodies in the high grass. Albie’s father argued with Sam about the Indians being buried, saying they might have been baptized, they might very well be Christians. Sam Abernathy said if Albie’s father had a shovel hid up there on his saddle, he’d be glad to help dig the hole. But a man did need a shovel to dig a hole. It was as simple as that.

Albie’s father argued that, well, they ought to at least look for rocks to cover the bodies. Sam agreed, and the three of them searched the grass for suitable rocks but gave up after a few minutes.

With the help of Judy and Devil, the three cows were collected and moved toward the birch grove. Albie, tying his scabbard, looked up when his father indicated the darkening sky. When he glanced back, to see the sky growing even darker, almost black, he saw the first buzzard circling high and then drifting down and then gliding into the spring-green grass.



# CHAPTER 1

Albie put the second pail of milk next to the first and decided to reward Daisy and Violet with another forkful of hay. He paused with the fork in midair and turned to gaze down through the barn. He did not move, did not breathe.

Had it stopped?

As he leaned the fork against a post, the tines bit into the soft, dung-soaked planks. Back in these sweet-scented shadows, with Daisy and Violet chomping their hay and snorting and shifting their hooves, with the chickens clucking and scratching and pecking at the planks, it was impossible to know for sure if the rain had stopped.

Shep was gulping down chunks of the heart and liver Albie's father had torn from the cougar he'd killed that morning, but as Albie carried the two pails of milk toward the door, the dog deserted his food to rush down through the dark barn.

The chickens scattered, clucking and flapping their wings. Big Red, the rooster, his five-fingered crimson comb held erect, not only refused to run but charged Shep, dipping his head and raising it high, bristling his ruff of red feathers. When Shep

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ran past, ignoring him, Big Red made a brief pretense at chasing after the hound then strutted about, reminding his harem he'd once again saved them from disaster.

At the door, Shep waited at Albie's side, anxious to follow him to the milk house, to the cooler sunk deep in the hillside, or to wherever else he was planning to go. When Albie placed the pails on the floor near the open doorway, Shep took advantage of the delay. He raced back to his food, sending the hens flapping and cackling and forcing Big Red into a repeat performance of his prowess.

Yes, the rain had stopped.

For four days, from sunrise to sunset and with a whistling wind throughout the night, the rain had fallen with that dull, ominous waterfall sound that never varied in pitch or tempo. Now, finally, it had stopped.

Albie stepped into mud that sucked at his knee-high boots. Behind him, the chickens cackled and flapped again. Shep darted past, stopping only to be sure Albie did not turn back.

Not only had the rain stopped, but the sun was also trying to fight its way through the low, soggy clouds. The black western sky, as Albie watched, was converted into gray and the gray to speckled gray-pink. It stretched across the horizon on top of the far surface of the brown ocean, curled between sky and water like the upturned belly of a mammoth trout.

Albie reached the bank above the river. River, not ocean, though it stretched away like an ocean, without a distant bank, without a tree or a bridge or

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even a boat to break the view. As his father had done hundreds of times over the years, and as he and Shep had done five times each of these past four days, Albie now picked his way down the path to the oak stake.

Ten years ago, in the same month—March—and on just about the same day, the seventh, the river had crested where the oak stake entered the ground. He'd been four years old then, almost five, but he still recalled details of that day—the tattered cap on his father's shaggy head, the faded trousers tucked into black boots, the stern command: "You stay up there on that bank, Albie, don't you come no further."

Two days later, in from an inspection of the river, his father had said to Albie's mother, "The storm's over. It ain't rained for twenty-four hours almost, but she's still rising. All that snow melting. You better pack things you don't want to leave behind. I'll get Star hitched to the wagon. Just in case."

Albie and even Elizabeth, a year younger, had helped load the trunks and boxes and a few of the more precious pieces of furniture. Albie and Elizabeth, both fully dressed, had finally fallen asleep in front of the fire, but their mother and father had stayed awake all night. Every twenty or thirty minutes, Albie's father had gone into the darkness to inspect the river.

After one trip, near dawn, Albie had awakened to hear him say, "She's going down. I think we're safe." Eight hours later, the river had dropped three

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feet, and by the next evening it had dropped another four.

That evening, they'd unpacked the wagon, and Albie's mother had made what his father had called "an early Thanksgiving dinner."

In the summer, Albie could walk down the path from the top of the bank, past the stake, across the cracked mud flats to the foaming edge of the river in fifteen minutes. Today, he passed the stake and reached the river, flowing fast now with an angry growl, in less than five minutes.

The river stretched beyond where, yesterday, a row of young willows had lined a swelling sandbar (the willows were gone now). Stretched beyond where the docks and boats and eight white houses, yesterday, had disappeared between his first and second inspections. Between where he now stood and the speckled belly of that mammoth trout, there was nothing but water, nothing but that ocean-river flowing with that persistent growl that shook the ground beneath Albie's feet.

Nothing but, at that moment drifting into view, a floating tree, rolling and rocking as the conflicting currents beneath the surface chewed at its various root and branch extremities and sought to swallow it. Two limbs, reaching up through the viscous brown surface like the arms of a drowning man, clutched at the sky and then, as the tree surrendered to the major current and rolled over, disappeared beneath the brown, growling flatness.

A shack, three white hens roosting on its peaked roof, bobbed along behind the tree, moving closer, falling back, moving closer. Albie continued watch-

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ing until the tree finally snatched the shack—the hens leaped and ran back and forth and then settled again. and Then both the shack and the tree dissolved into the belly of the speckled trout.

On his way back, Albie stopped at the oak stake. He rested his hand on the top, his fingertips caressing the deep impressions made by his father's heavy sledge ten years before.

Today was Tuesday. They'd be home tomorrow. At least, his father would be home. If they were still needed at the Abernathys after tomorrow, his mother and Elizabeth would remain a few more days and would keep Alice Anne with them. But in three or four days, they'd all be home.

He could admit now that, yes, he'd been frightened. But with the rain stopped and the sun coming out and with his father coming home tomorrow, he was safe.

After the last four days, Albie decided, he could do just about everything there was to do on the farm. Had his father really been as confident as, four days ago, he'd declared he was?

The youngest Abernathy girl had appeared that day, bearing the almost illegible note that told of her father's injury. Albie's mother and father had prepared to return with the girl immediately.

"I'll be there three nights," his father had said. "Maybe four."

"I'll probably stay longer," his mother had said.

Albie had managed to pretend unconcern.

"You can both stay longer," he'd said. "I'll be all right. Don't hurry back just on account of me."

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His mother had assured him they'd not be hurrying back on account of him. The Abernathy boys had promised to be home in four days and would then relieve Albie's father. If their wives came with them, Mary Abernathy would be in good hands.

"But they got their work to do, too. If they don't come, I might stay on a while. It's a bad time for Samuel to break his leg, with Mary still so weak and the children still so helpless."

Albie studied the river one last time then started back to the house. He hummed to himself, trying to recall his father's song. "On Canaan's shore...on Canaan's shore..." He laughed and raced Shep to the house. If his father had not truly been confident four days ago, he would be, or could be, from now on.

In the house, Albie added a large oak log to the fire. The flames seemed to crackle with special energy, with greater heat. He cut the last shreds of venison from the roast his father had brought him the second morning, and then, with the bone, he lured Shep onto the back porch, where the dog grabbed it and carried it off toward the barn. There, even Big Red would be intimidated by the menacing sounds of crunching jaws.

Albie disposed of the venison along with two slices of thickly buttered brown bread his mother had sent this morning. From one of the two storage closets, stocked from floor to ceiling with jars of vegetables, fruit, rabbit and venison, Albie chose a pint of stewed tomatoes, which he ate directly from the jar. After tonight, with his mother home, he'd no longer be permitted such behavior.

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To eat from a jar or a pot or to eat standing up was, his mother argued, the manners of a pagan, and she would have no pagans in her house. Well, despite such irritating restrictions, he was anxious to have her here, ordering him to wash his hands and comb his hair before he came to the table. He chuckled to himself, pausing near the sink to try to remember if he'd washed his face or combed his hair once since they'd been at the Abernathys.

After he stacked the dishes in the iron pan, Albie removed his boots and lay on the rug in front of the fire. He'd rest for just a few minutes before going out to make sure the animals were settled for the night and the barn doors bolted.

Staring up into the beamed ceiling, at the shifting patterns of shadows within the thrust and cross of the rafters, lying there with the heat from the crackling fire on his body, Albie fought against the temptation to sleep. He forced himself to run over a list of chores he might have forgotten, but he assured himself he'd completed all the chores his father had suggested.

Tomorrow, after the outside chores, he'd wash the dishes and clean the house, or at least that part of the house he'd used. How clever he'd been not to use his bedroom upstairs but to sleep down here, in front of the fire. Not having used the rooms upstairs, he'd not have to worry about getting them in order. Wouldn't they, his mother and father, be impressed?

Maybe, he thought, he better do the dishes and clean the large kitchen tonight, before he spread his blankets and fell asleep. If they came early, before

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he finished the chores...well, just another minute or two.

The fire roared in the hearth. From the hill above the chicken coops, a fox barked. Shep charged out of the barn, baying, and was off, his heavy voice informing Albie, and the fox, that they were in for a long night race. Albie smiled as he yawned. Shep needed the exercise. Late tonight he'd return to the back porch, wet and muddy and exhausted, announcing his presence with two short barks. Then he'd curl up on the sacking near the back door to keep a delayed guard over the animals and the house.

Albie closed his eyes and listened. This was the first night he didn't hear ghost noises, the first night he didn't have to keep his rifle at his side. Where was his rifle? He raised his head. There, leaning against the back of a chair. Within easy reach, just in case. He lay back, reassured. He wasn't frightened, definitely not, but he'd sure be glad when they were all home.

He listened, and heard Elizabeth teasing Alice Anne, and he heard the house ring with Alice Anne's giggles. He'd have to pretend, of course, he'd not even known they were gone. He'd succeeded in feigning nonchalance every morning when his father, as he'd promised he would, came to talk about possible problems. Not, his father had repeated every morning, to satisfy himself about Albie's competence, but to bring him food and to answer any questions that might have come up after the previous day's visit.



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It was a two-hour trip, but every morning, after he'd completed the chores on the Abernathy farm, his father had appeared on the muddy road, riding Autumn.

This morning, in the heavy rain, his father had ridden Summer.

"With this rain," he'd said, "I didn't want to have to fight that stubborn Autumn all the way. And it was a good thing, I'll tell you. Autumn would have spooked when we met that cougar. But Summer here..." And he'd reached down to pat her steaming buckskin neck. "...she just stood still and let me get off two perfect shots."

He'd reached behind him and, before dismounting, had tossed down the still-bloody pelt.

During the next hour, his father had examined the animals and the interior of the barn and the house. He'd nodded and slapped Albie on the back.

"Wouldn't none of it look any better if I'd done it myself."

Albie had accompanied his father down the path to the river.

"It's coming up pretty fast," Albie had said.

His father had nodded. He'd studied the flat spread of water and then the sky.

"If it rains another day or two like this, we're in trouble. If it's still raining tomorrow when I come, we might just have to move out. We can stay with the Abernathys."

"But what about those levees, Pa? Weren't they built to hold back floods?"

"I don't know about them levees. I've seen 'em, but they don't seem like much to me. Just banks of

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mud. You know what I think? I think this summer, we'll pull up and move."

"Move? Where to, Pa?"

"Back further. And up. The top of the hill. We start building in May, we can move in by August. Then this old river can flood all she wants, far as I'm concerned. The Abernathy boys'll help. Maybe even the Hasses and the Wurteles. I've built many a house for friends, and many a barn, too. Now my friends can help me. Your mother's never said a word, but I know. Every year, every spring, I know what she's thinking."

Albie had waited, knowing his father would explain.

"She thinks Pa was out of his mind, building so close to the river. It ain't been too bad, though. Your grandpa built the house in eighteen-thirty and it's only been flooded once. I was eight or nine years old. Not bad, once in almost thirty years. But the danger's always there, and your ma knows it."

The fire was dying. Albie threw another log on the flames, and instead of retrieving his blankets from the window seat, he rolled up in the hooked rug. He'd just sleep for a half-hour. Then he'd take the lantern and make sure the animals were secure. He didn't have to worry about oversleeping because when Shep returned, his barks from the back porch would awaken him.

Albie slept more soundly than he'd slept since the family had been gone. He slept so soundly he didn't hear the first faint tapping raindrops, didn't hear the tapping increase to a steady fall. And he didn't hear the heavy rumble that swelled to a roar

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as the wall of water that had breached and demolished the levee five miles to the north swept down the river, spread across fields, toppled trees, demolished bridges, swallowed animals, carried entire villages before and under its assault.

The house that had survived almost thirty years was lifted and rotated and tipped almost over and leveled and rotated again. Albie screamed as the water poured through doors and windows and cracked walls, and up through the shattered flooring. He was still screaming when he at last fought free of the rug in which he'd wrapped himself.

He tried to stand, but the water tossed him back and forth, from wall to wall. His hands and knees, once, twice, scraped rough surfaces he tried to grasp. Then he was on the stairs leading up toward the bedrooms. The water, at whatever step he was holding to, swirled above his waist.

Coughing, gagging, Albie pulled himself up until, on the fourth step from the top, he was clear of the water. Though he knew he was at the top of the stairs, he felt as if he were descending. He waited. If the water was below him and he was escaping it, he had to be climbing.

While he waited, thinking, the house continued to shift and rotate, like a wood chip caught in a series of whirlpools. He could see nothing in the darkness, but he could hear. He could hear the rain falling, and he could hear the wind crackling, and he could hear the water slapping the walls of the house.

At the top of the stairs, on the landing, he paused to rest. He coughed out more of the water,

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and he sat with his back against a wall for support. Shivering, clutching his arms around his chest, he tried to make sense out of what had happened. All he could do was shiver and cough.

Albie stood and staggered along the hallway. The first room on the left was his parents' bedroom. He found the door, but it wouldn't open. Farther down the hall, on the opposite side, was his bedroom. The door, open, hung by the top hinge only. Inside the room, he went to the window. He could see nothing. It was as black outside as it was inside.

He picked his way about the room, stumbling over an upturned chair, tangling his feet in a piece of clothing, until he touched and recognized the heavy oak dresser his father had built last Christmas.

The dresser had slid halfway across the room, but it had not toppled over. One of the five drawers had fallen out, but the other four, though open, were still intact. Albie found a drawer filled with heavy flannel underwear and shirts and another containing wool socks and a pair of heavy trousers. He pulled off his soaked clothing, dried himself with a combination of clothes he could not identify, and drew on underwear and trousers and shirt.

Only then did he realize his boots were gone; he was in his bare feet. He pulled on a pair of warm wool socks.

Finding the chair, he set it upright, pushed it to the window and sat on it, a blanket tight around his body. He was still too stunned, too exhausted, to think clearly. He dozed, jerked awake, dozed again, awakened again, until he realized he was staring,

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fully awake, at the pale gray light that filled the window.

Albie threw off his blanket and ran to examine the damage the water had delivered to the barn.

The barn was gone.

A vast endless plain of water lay outside, flowing, hovering a foot or two below the windowsill, slapping and sloshing against the exterior walls of the house. From this window, the barn was always in full view, but now it was gone—washed away. So was the milk house, so was the smokehouse, so was the outhouse, so were the pig pens and the chicken coops. Everything—everything—was gone. Where all the buildings had been, there was only that flat viscous sheet of brown fluid.

The house shook, like a dog throwing off water. It tilted and rotated to the left and rotated back to the right. A tall grove of poplars drifted by, screened by the rain and the gray morning light. They disappeared.

How could trees remain upright when they floated?

Albie staggered back to the chair. It wasn't the trees that were floating it was the house. The house, like a boat, with Albie the lone passenger, was floating down the river.

## CHAPTER 2

Floating. Floating like a boat.

Albie rushed into the hall. The window at the end had opened yesterday onto a small garden area his mother reserved every spring for the planting of flowers. There was only water; there was no freshly tilled soil or green grass or potted herbs.

The window had been torn from its frame. The wind drove rain through the hole in the wall, forming a stream that flowed down the slope of the floor, down the steps and into the flood that swirled through the kitchen below.

A second effort to open the door to his parents' bedroom was no more successful than the first had been. Having left his boots downstairs, Albie walked in his stocking feet to the landing. There was the water, shifting in gentle waves against the walls, three or four feet below the ceiling. Pieces of lumber, jars, bottles, cans, bits of cloth floated on the surface. The rug in which he'd slept last night in front of the fire floated in the middle of the room, humped over like a dark waterlogged body.

Albie climbed along the inclined hallway, carrying with him a long piece of lumber he'd recognized

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as one of the columns that had held up the back porch. A piece had been torn from one end of the column, leaving it shaped like a wedge. Using the column alternately as a ram, a lever, and a pry, he succeeded in opening the door of his parents' bedroom just enough to peek inside.

The big bed had slid against the door, and its weight was keeping the door closed. After he forced it open enough so he could slip inside, Albie used the same piece of porch-column to lift and slide the bed. Once he had the door open he worked the bed back against it to keep it from closing.

He was glad his father couldn't see the room. It was just last summer, nine months ago, that he had carved the holes in the wall and fixed the weights with ropes and set the windows he'd bought the winter before from that salesman from Duluth. Albie, that day the salesman had stopped by, had been permitted to stay up till long past midnight to hear the tales of the man's experiences on the railroads and the steamboats and the stagecoaches. Now, those windows, like that night, were gone forever.

Looking through one window and then the other, he saw the same brown expanse of water he'd seen from his own room. But then, past the rim of the window that opened to the west, floating faster than his own house, came what could have been either a house or a barn, no more than a hundred yards away, wrapped in looping strands of barbed wire. The building and, within the wire, the bloated body of a cow with all four legs stiffly upright, floated with quiet serenity.

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Albie turned away. He crawled across the bed. In his room he'd be dry and out of the wind. He'd not yet examined the two other rooms farther up the hallway, Elizabeth and Alice Anne's room and his mother's workroom, but he'd do that next. First, he needed sort his thoughts and fit them into some form of plan for his rescue.

As long as the rain continued falling, as long as the river continued rising, as long as there was no land in sight, he was restricted to this house, almost to his room. He was not a very capable swimmer—he knew that too well. Some days, in the summer, in Willow Creek, he could manage to cross the creek three times, dog paddling, without stopping. But even an excellent swimmer challenging this current would be risking death.

Summer...Willow Creek...how far in the past that seemed! His father and Sam Abernathy had talked about damming up the creek this summer so some of the flatland could be irrigated. Well, they now had their dam.

Willow Creek, Albie knew, flowed into the Redman River, and the Redman flowed into the Wisconsin and the Wisconsin into the Mississippi. And the Mississippi, he recalled with a chill that infiltrated his warm, dry clothes, flowed into the Gulf and, from the Gulf, into the Atlantic Ocean. Right this minute, he could be floating down the Wisconsin, or even down the Mississippi. Whichever, he knew one thing for sure—he was moving toward the Gulf. If, in the next five or six days, he weren't rescued, he'd be out of the Gulf and into the Atlantic Ocean.



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Albie left the window, stunned, and wandered up the hallway, staying close to the wall. The floor, which had once been so clean and polished, could not be seen under the brown water that ran ankle-deep from the smashed window to the steps and down the.

When he opened the door of Elizabeth and Alice Anne's room, it fell forward, into the room. He stopped at the entry. It was useless to go inside. The room had been demolished. A corner of the roof had fallen in, and a large portion of the north wall, or what had been the north wall, had collapsed. The two beds, the chairs, the twin dressers, clothes, dolls—everything was soaked or buried under debris. Nothing could be salvaged.

Albie gasped at the thought of what would have happened had this occurred when Elizabeth and Alice Anne were in their beds.

The damage was almost as great in his mother's workroom. The window was gone, the door lay on the floor, the spinning wheel and the loom and the long worktable lay in a single pile of shattered wood. What had been strips of brightly colored cloth, to be made into rugs, lay in their crushed baskets, all of the cloth now a dull, wet gray.

Albie returned to his room. How long would he have to remain here? In this room, in this house? How long would it be until the house was seen, and he was rescued? Would the house survive the destruction it had already absorbed?

Several of the beams downstairs had collapsed. The walls, in many places, had broken away from the frame. A collision with rocks or trees or even a

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sudden shift of wind might complete the destruction. Even if he were able to swim, he'd be no safer.

Unable to see any land, he did not know the direction he might go to escape the river. And even if he knew which direction might be the wisest choice, he'd not be able to overcome the current. He was certain of only one fact about direction: he was moving down a river that would eventually deliver him into the Atlantic Ocean.

A tree floated by, followed by carcasses of cows and horses and pigs and the remains of other buildings less fortunate, less well-constructed, than this house his grandfather had built thirty years ago. Could those cows be Violet and Daisy?

Albie left the room and went to the farthest end of the landing and the back stairs. Down there, in what had been the kitchen, in front of the fire, he and Elizabeth and Alice Anne had sat through hundreds of meals at the long oak table. How many mugs of hot chocolate had his mother made for him there, how many delicious...oh, how he'd love to be sitting there now, watching his mother sew, watching Elizabeth prepare clothes for her doll, watching his father carve a handle for one of his tools, listening to the sounds of little Alice Anne in the crib.

With a groan, he laid his head in his arms.

By now his parents would know the house was gone, with Albie inside. That was it! They'd know what to do. They were organizing search parties this very minute. They were sending word up and down the Mississippi for people to keep a sharp eye out for a floating house in which a boy named Albie

## ***An American Ghost***

Bancroft was stranded. He had to stay alert, he had to keep constant watch at all the windows.

How would he attract their attention? With smoke. But to have smoke, he had to have a fire, and he had nothing to burn and nothing to light a fire with. He could only hope the wind wouldn't destroy his shout, the driving rain wouldn't shield the towel or blanket he'd wave.

How had his parents survived? They'd lived and farmed in Indian territory, they'd lived through droughts and blizzards, they'd lost homes to government agents, and, finally, they'd returned to live where his father had started, at his own father's home. They'd never admitted defeat or despair. As soon as the rain stopped, probably the very first day, his father would be starting the new house, higher, farther back in the hills.

But he couldn't do both. He couldn't direct a search for his son *and* start a new house.

Albie stared down at the space where the oak table had been, stared not with anger or remorse but with resignation, as if there were nothing incongruous about the lower half of a house being filled with water. Why, as he watched the alien debris floating in the brown foam, did he think of Daisy and Violet? Of Shep? Of Big Red?

Why should his parents, viewing the empty space where their home had once stood, think that a little bag of skin and bones had survived a tragedy that had demolished a structure of heavy beams? The simplest reasoning would prove the inevitability of his death and the improbability of his body ever being recovered. Or, if recovered, identified.

## ***Chester Aaron***

There would be no need to waste time and energy on search parties. No need to...

*What was that?*

He'd heard a voice. He was certain. Back in his room, he tugged and pushed and finally managed to open the window. He leaned out as far as he could. Nothing except that dreary sweep of brown, surly liquid sustaining, here and there, a tip of a tree, a portion of a barrel, a corner of a box, logs like the backs of sleeping alligators.

Out of the room and at the end of the hall, clinging to an exposed stud, he saw, again, nothing—nothing but the water. The rain soaked his head and face and the wind threw back his call.

“Here! I’m in here! In this house! Help!” Running and slipping and falling and sliding along the water-covered floor almost to the landing, he kept calling out, “Help! Help! I’m in here! In this house! Help!”

On his feet, he crawled over the bed in his parents’ room and went to the window. There, no more than a hundred yards away, floated a house and, in a hole that had been the upper window, two people, a man and a woman. They were waving their arms and calling in weak voices, “Can you help us? Please help us.”

The sound of the voices and the sight of two other humans charged Albie’s body with such energy he leaped and danced about, waving his arms, kicking his feet, shouting, “Thank you...thank you...thank you...”

Then he realized, seeing the two people who looked, from this distance, to be older than his

## ***An American Ghost***

grandparents, who looked as if they needed help as much as he did, perhaps more—then he realized there would be no rescue. His arms dropped to his sides. He fell against the wall. He tried to return their calls, tried to use his voice, but in his disappointment he could only manage a weak flicker of the fingers on his right hand.

The old people continued calling. “Who are you? What’s your name?”

Albie cupped his hands to his mouth and mumbled and then shouted, “Bancroft. Albert Bancroft. What’s yours?”

He heard the sound of their voices, but he couldn’t distinguish words. The wind was not in their favor. They drifted farther apart; their voices could barely be heard. As if by mutual agreement, the three of them stopped calling.

Remaining at the window, Albie continued watching the house drift farther away. The rain spilled over his head and body, but he barely felt it. An abrupt cross-current caught the other house and spun it around until the two old people were no longer visible.

Albie stayed at the window, blinking against the rain. Even by leaning out, he could no longer see the house.

He leaped across the bed and sloshed through the flowing water to the end of the hallway. From the hole where the window had been he could see the house again. It came about just enough to display the two people still standing at their own window. Just before it shifted—to turn, to take them from view once more—they waved. Albie lifted his

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arm. He waited until the house lost its shape, until its form and color merged with the gray windswept rain.

Back in his room, he sat on the bed. He'd eaten nothing since last night, and though he wasn't hungry, he knew that to survive he must eat. But he had no food.

Ah, but he did have food.

Removing his damp clothes, hopping up and down as he fought the buttons, Albie burst out laughing. Why hadn't he thought of this before?

Undressed, his flesh covered with chill bumps, he waded through the water and down the hallway, his thin white body almost glowing in the dark, dank air. He descended the four steps.

The icy bite of the water took his breath away, but he continued moving down. The water reached his knees, his thighs, his waist. He shoved away from the wall and began collecting the various jars and cans and tin and wooden boxes floating on the water. A few of the jars were broken, but most were salvageable, and thanks to the strong hands of his father, who'd given each cap its final turn on the red rubber washer, the contents remained unharmed.

He relayed everything he collected to the landing.

One of the two cupboards was open. Its shelves, now empty, had been filled with vegetables, fruits, rabbit and venison that had been canned the previous fall. Some of the collection at the top of the landing had been from that cupboard.

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The door of the second cupboard, a large cooler that stored the bulk of the family's food, was still closed. With his fingers, Albie followed the edge of the door beneath the water's surface. He found the latch, opened it, and, struggling against the force of the water, pulled the door free.

Jars and boxes and cans tumbled out, several striking him on his head and shoulders. He gathered as many as he could, not taking time to examine their contents, and carried them to the steps, moving fast so they'd not be swept through the holes in the walls and into the open current.

Without taking time to dry himself or dress in dry clothes, Albie transferred his collection from the steps and the landing to his room. He resisted the temptation to argue that he'd stored enough, so he'd not have to enter the water again. He had to be practical. He had enough food to survive for several weeks, but what if he were compelled to remain in the house for more than several weeks?

The thought sent a chill deep into his heart, but the possibility had to be faced. He returned to the stairs and went down into the water.

He recovered a large tin box in which, he knew, his mother had stored several loaves of bread and cakes and cookies. The lid was tight. He'd examine the contents later, but he was sure they'd be dry.

A water-tight barrel was half-filled with slabs of salt pork. He pushed and tugged and rolled the barrel up the steps to the landing. A tightly sealed miniature trunk of wood and leather contained his father's pipes and tobacco. He carried that to safety, too, not because he intended to smoke but because

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its presence would offer him an aromatic reminder of his father, of him sitting at the fire at night telling stories, playing his accordion, singing, blowing voluptuous blue smoke rings for Alice Anne to poke her pudgy pink fingers through.

On those shelves he could reach, and in the few drawers he could open, Albie found bits and pieces of things for which he might—who could predict?—discover a use. The large ball of strong cord his mother had begun collecting before he'd been born. A wooden sewing box filled with thread and needles and two pairs of scissors. Three forks, a spoon, a table knife were all that remained of the prized set of silverware his mother had inherited from her mother. Albie took them all. Just in case some day...

His arms, finally, could not complete another stroke. Both hands were so numb they could no longer close around an object. His feet were blue, his chin and mouth trembled, his teeth chattered. He gagged on a mouthful of water and wrapped his arms around a post still supporting the bannister. He endured a coughing spasm then dragged himself up the stairs.

Before he could store even one of the many objects he'd recovered, he had to get dry, he had to get warm. In his room, he rubbed himself with a wool blanket. He pulled on red flannel underwear and a pair of trousers his mother had made from cloth she'd woven from wool she'd spun, cloth so dense and thick it was almost waterproof. Dry and warm once again, he felt better.



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Rolling up his trousers and sliding up the legs of his underwear, he carried his salvage to the bedroom. Now, perhaps, he could relax. And he could eat.

He managed, after much exertion, to open a pint jar filled with rabbit. He also opened a jar of green beans. They were not his favorite vegetable, but he thought he had better get used to eating such food.

Lying on his bed, Albie ate all the rabbit and about a third of the beans. He drank the juice and closed the bean jar as tightly as he could manage. Lying back on his bed, he listened to the water slamming the outside of the wall against which his head rested. The rain, the ever-present rain, continued its steady, drumming fall. The gallant old house, still resisting the attacks of wind and rain and current, could only creak and sigh and groan in protest.

Should he try to build a raft? How would he do it? He had no tools, nothing with which to secure one board to another. Anyway, why consider building a raft? The house itself was a stronger and more comfortable boat or raft than he could manage to build.

Rescue. That was what he had to hope for. But he would have to be on the alert every hour, every minute. After the flood, steamers and ferries and rafts would be traveling the river again. He'd have to be prepared to signal them in case they saw the house and dismissed it as just one more unfortunate victim they could do nothing for. But since there *were* victims, there would almost certainly be

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search parties examining every cove and island. All right, he would be ready.

If only the rain would stop.

It didn't stop. The drumming, drumming, ever-pouring rain added its bulk to the ocean of water already spread across the countryside, moving it hourly, daily, over more prairie land, lifting its already murderous crest, drowning more animals, more people, destroying more homes.

He had no choice. He would wait right here, in this room. He had food, blankets, clothing. All that was necessary now was the continued durability of the house.

The rest of the day, Albie occupied himself by moving from window to window, searching for the slightest sign of a boat. The carcasses of drowned animals floated by so frequently now he no longer noticed them. Twice he saw animals swimming—once, a raccoon that climbed onto a floating log and grinned up at him, and then a large buck, its antlered head up out of the water, swimming toward what appeared to be a floor of a house or barn.

Near dusk, Albie completed his final tour for the day. He lay on his bed and tried to convince himself the rain wasn't falling as hard as it had been. The house rocked and swayed with the current. As he drew a blanket over his body, he thought he heard voices. He listened and sat up, but each time he traced the sound to the collision of jars or pots in the water below, or to the boards of the house as they strained against the flood.

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Drummed to sleep by the rain and the whispering wind, Albie listened with relief and gratification to his mother's praise of his housecleaning, to his father's proud commendations for his care of the stock, to Elizabeth's taunts about his uncombed hair, to Alice Anne's infectious giggles.

He was eased out of his dream when the house struck a log, or a series of logs. Several dull thuds rippled through the flooring and up through the bed frame. A violent crash, not a dull thud this time, plucked him out of bed and threw him across the room. A giant hand seemed to be scraping its long nails the length of the roof and along the walls, probing for a crack to use as a grip with which to tear the building apart.

The side of the house in which Albie's parents' bedroom lay sounded as if it were collapsing. The treasure he'd brought from the kitchen slid from one end of his own room to the other as the entire house tilted up and down and up. Jars smashed, the chair fell over, brushing Albie's thigh as it tumbled across the room. One of the four oak feet of the bed collapsed, and the corner of the frame fell to the floor.

Then, abruptly—silence. Even the wind dropped to a whisper, to a sigh, to nothing. The rain tapped at the window and stopped.

The house was still drifting, but the floor, Albie discovered as he stood and very carefully made his way back to the bed, seemed level, almost stable. Safer, more secure. He ran his hands across the soles of his feet. He'd not cut them. He lay down on

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the tilted bed and drew the blanket up over his body again, to await the next catastrophe.

The knots in his tense muscles eased. The silence, the continuing durability of the house, was reassuring. Like a great ship undaunted by even the most ferocious ocean, the house floated on—through the newly risen wind, through the revived rain, through the oppressive darkness.

By dawn, when he awakened, the rain had become a mist. Albie stretched, kicked free of the blanket and sat up. Several jars, he saw, were broken. He'd have to be careful, walking in his bare feet.

He opened the window and leaned out. No boats, no people, no rescuers. Only the remains of what had once been walls or roofs, fences, wagons, and what had once been horses or cows. Bloated, distorted, water-bleached, one animal was indistinguishable from another.

The opening at the end of the hall offered no hope, either, but once there, Albie saw the cause of last night's explosion, or rather, the sound that had been like an explosion.

The house had collided with an enormous oak tree and, caught within the grip of several branches, would not be easily released. Had he wanted to, Albie could have stepped through the opening directly onto the trunk of the tree. But the mist, hovering close about the house like a fine cotton shroud, threatened to thicken at any moment. He could see no farther than thirty or forty feet beyond the house. Even the base of the tree trunk was obscured within that cotton fog.

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He went into his parents' bedroom. A limb that was as thick as his waist had, like a great battering ram, smashed a large portion of the wall. The same limb, at least two feet thick, ran the length of the room and continued through the opposite wall so the house was now suspended from it like a piece of washing from a clothesline.

A finger of ice pricked Albie's heart as a growl sounded from behind his back. He had to be imagining the growl—it had to be a trick of the wind. He turned, slowly.

It was no trick.

In the corner of the room, behind a net of limbs and branches and twigs and wall boards intricately interwoven to form a natural cage, a mountain lion (called a cougar, a panther, or an American ghost, depending upon who might be cursing it) stood erect. Restricted by the cage, it could not rise on its hind legs, it could not turn, it could barely lie flat. As Albie stared, the lion's claws tore at the branches. Screaming, spitting, he struggled furiously to be free.



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