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Questions

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QUESTIONS

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First Edition

“No, who is she? I’m not taking another step until I know who is in this field with me. So far my count is three friends who are running away, you, some plants called the old ones, some girl, and myself.”

“And someone else.”

“Who?” demanded Josh.

“Alice,” whispered the corn.

Josh’s blood froze. “Alice who? Is this like the girl Alice who disappeared in this field a long time ago?”

“Yes.”

“I’m outta here.” Josh turned to follow his friends. “I want nothing to do with any ghost. Tell her I don’t want to talk to her and I definitely don’t want to see her.” As he walked towards Andy’s yard, Josh heard the complaints of the corn and the raspy voices of the old ones.

CHAPTER 2

Lunch

“Tongue!” Josh spat. “Why did I have to bring tongue?” The corn chuckled in a rattling sort of way.

“We’re all out of bologna and that olive loaf you like so much,” Mom had said. *“But Grandma left us a freshly cooked tongue when she dropped by last night.”*

“I almost had the kids convinced I wasn’t a hick and she sends a tongue sandwich in my lunch!” He took a swing at the closest corn stalk.

“Careful, we’re getting old and brittle now,” whispered the corn.

Josh had told the corn many things as he walked to school over the last couple of weeks. The corn was a good listener, but October was rapidly approaching. The corn rattled almost as much as it whispered. Sometimes the rattling seemed to make

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sense, like the corn had a comment it didn't want to voice. Josh liked the corn and had come to admire its strength and patience. He never bent or hurt a stalk anymore. He would miss the corn after the harvest.

Days passed quickly in Mrs. Smith's class. She didn't call on Josh much, and he volunteered less. He had been moved near the window and the African violet. The African violet often made comments about the teacher, some of which were not very nice. Mostly it complained about needing water.

Josh would sit in the empty seat beside Andy at the lunch table in the gym along with several other boys who all lived in Devonshire Estates. The room was noisy and smelled of whatever was being served by the apron. Today it was fish. Josh didn't like fish; especially the way the school fixed it.

"What a strange place to eat lunch," Josh mused one day. This exact spot where he sat, minus the table, had been where Brenda had almost taken his head off with a ball in one of Mr. Kitch's gym games of throw-the-ball-as-hard-as-you-can-at-someone. The place smelled of sweat and old gym shoes and fish.

"What ya eating?" asked Andy, his mouth full of peanut butter.

"You don't want to know." Josh took a bite.

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“Looks like bologna or liverwurst,” said Brad who lived five houses up the street from Josh. Brad would have had blond hair if his parents ever let it grow past a quarter of an inch long. He was short, but athletic, always ready to hit or throw a ball. He had taken Josh’s head off in the last throw-the-ball-as-hard-as-you-can-at-someone game.

“It’s not,” he replied after taking drink of milk.

“Then what is it?” asked Andy as he leaned forward to get a sniff. Josh pulled the sandwich away from his nose.

“Hey, I don’t want your boogers all over my sandwich! It’s tongue, OK?”

The table went quiet.

“Tongue,” said Andy. “Whose tongue?”

“Happy’s.”

Brad’s eyes popped. “Happy? Like in Sneezy... and Dopey... and Doc?”

“Nah, Happy was my grandma’s cow.” Josh took another bite enjoying their looks of disgust; he would definitely have to tell the corn about this.

“You’re eating a cow’s tongue? What’s it taste like?” asked Andy.

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“A lot like the bologna Brad’s eating. You just put on a bit of ketchup and yum!”



The next day Josh was sitting alone at a lunch table. The thought of tongue had been a bit too much for the guys and they had found a new table without a seat for the tongue sandwich.

Brenda and Jerika were eating at the table directly in front of him.

Brenda leaned back. “Andy said you were eating tongue. When are you going to stop making up stories? First chickens and now you’re eating body parts.” Josh could smell the unmistakable odor of peanut butter on her breath.

“Yeah, so what? It’s better than eating tubers,” Josh retorted.

“I’m not eating tubers, I’m eating peanut butter. You are so weird.”

“Peanuts are tubers, Blondie. If you would pay more attention to school and less to other people’s business you might have picked that up in science.”

With a huff, Brenda swirled around and said something to the girls at the table. They all giggled. Josh didn’t look to see if they

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were glancing back at him, instead he took a bite of tongue and thought how glad he was that cows didn't eat corn or tubers.

When she and the girls finished their lunch, Brenda stood up and deliberately knocked Josh's coat onto the floor. Making sure her foot hooked it, she dragged the jacket to the garbage can in the middle of the gym. The girls all laughed, dumped their lunch remains into the can, and headed outside.

With a sigh, Josh went to get his coat. Andy beat him to it and tossed the coat through the air to Josh.

"Thanks."

Andy shrugged. "What did you have for lunch? Never mind, I don't think I really want to know." Andy grinned. "You want to play some marbles? I just got a new bag."

Together they headed outside.

CHAPTER 4

The Old Ones

“Here he comes,” whispered the corn at the field’s edge.

“We see,” hissed another voice.

Andy, Brad, Brenda, and Jerika stood in front of the drab yellow door of the school waiting for him to chicken out of walking into the field. Stepping off the path and into the brittle stalks of corn, Josh turned and watched them as they watched for him to come back out. The corn held its breath; all was calm and motionless.

What a rotten day it had been. The guys had told everyone he walked home through the cornfield and had been talking to the African violet. From that point on, no one, except the African violet and Mrs. Smith, talked to him. Everyone just looked at him

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like a person would look at a dog being taken to a vet to be put down.

Soon his audience left. Josh stepped carefully through the rows of corn. He wanted to be alone with the corn. He felt comfortable with the corn.



“*Boy,*” whispered a rough, hoarse voice. “*Boy.*”

Josh froze. Within the breeze that rustled the long, dried brownish leaves of the corn a voice, that didn’t sound like the corn, had said something. Corn spoke with a voice as smooth as the silk on their ears. This voice was rough and full of dirt. He shook his head. This was nonsense. The guys had spooked him.

“*Boy, listen closely,*” rasped the voice. It sounded like glass in a garbage disposal.

Again, the crinkled voice bore into his head. Josh ran.

“*Wait, we have something to say to you,*” the voice croaked.

He didn’t want to hear.

“*Please.*”

This came just before he burst out of the field. Josh stopped feet away from the edge. He turned and faced the corn.

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“What?” he demanded. “What do you have to say? What are you?” A sigh ran through the field, the stalks swaying like an old woman waltzing.

“Our days are few, soon the corn will be harvested. We must tell you a story. We must tell you how it came to be,” whispered the new voice.

“Who are you? You aren’t the ones I’ve talked to before.”

“They are here.”

“So talk. What do you need to tell me?”

“You must come with us to the center, to the mouth. We cannot tell you here.”

Josh stepped cautiously towards the field. “The mouth... what mouth?”

“Come, follow us,” said the corn, one stalk passing the word to another diagonally across the field.

“No. I’ve been told that people have died in this field. Kids think I’m crazy to even walk in here. Tell me here or don’t tell me at all.”

“We cannot. Follow us to the center,” whispered the corn.

“No.” Josh turned and walked away from the field. He heard the crinkled protests as well as the silky voices of his friends in the field all urging him to come back and listen. Josh went to his room when he got home, mumbling a “nothing” when his mom

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asked what had happened at school. Flopping full-length on his bed, he stared at the ceiling. A plant had never scared him before. But this time the voices in the field sent chills up his back.

He rolled to his left and looked at the fern.

“What happened?” asked the plant.

Josh repeated all he had heard from the guys and Brenda. How the field was haunted and how everyone thought someone had been killed there. Josh also told the fern about the change in the corn. How the soft voices had been replaced with a rough, raspy voice.

The fern chuckled. *“You were listening to the elders, the old ones. They have voices as old as the dirt.”*

“How can there be elders in a cornfield? Corn dies every year. It gets cut down and dies. Nothing survives the harvest and the winter.”

“The corn, yes. But not all dies. There are plants that survive the harvest and the winter, small plants, ones that rise every year and are reborn like a phoenix after a fire. That is who you were listening to, Josh.”

“They said something about a mouth in the field. What was that all about? The whole thing gives me the willies.”

“I don’t know,” whispered the fern, *“I am a houseplant. I don’t get out much. I will say that you should probably listen to them. The old*

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ones know about the old times. If they want to talk to you, it must be important.” It chuckled again. *“You are probably the only human they’ve ever tried to talk to in their history. You should be honored, not scared.”*

“Sorry. Maybe I should take you with me to talk to these old ones.”

“You forget; I’m a houseplant. I like it here in your room. By the way, I’m a bit thirsty.”

Josh got up and poured water onto the plant. It gurgled a thank you. After a nap, Josh got up and headed to dinner. His mom served corn.

CHAPTER 6

Andy's Sleepover

“Remember: no talking to the bushes!” joked Andy as he and Josh set up the tent in his backyard. The tent was closer to the house than it was to the cornfield.

“When is everyone else coming?” asked Josh hammering a tent stake into the hard ground.

“In an hour or so. I’m surprised Brad’s not already here. He really likes setting up tents for some reason.” With a grunt the two boys pulled the canvas tight and tied the tent down. “There, that ought to do it. The weather’s supposed to be good tonight. No wind or rain, just a bit chilly.”

Josh arranged the rocks around the fire pit. “I can’t believe your folks let you have a campfire behind the house. We had one on the farm, but it was in the middle of a barnyard.”

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Andy looked at Josh. “Can you really talk to plants? I mean, you say things to them and they say things back?”

Josh rearranged the rocks around the pit. “Yeah, ever since I was a baby. Weird, huh?”

“Yeah. Weird.” Andy pulled on the ropes to make sure they were tight. Then he sat back on his haunches and stared at Josh. “What’s it like? Are the plants always talking?”

“Well, plants don’t talk very loud. I have to really pay attention to hear them. I think I miss most of what they say. It’s not like having a conversation with a person. It’s like when the wind blows, I hear voices in it.” Josh stood up and wiped his hands on his jeans. “And they don’t seem to talk much to each other.”

Andy stood up and glanced at the field. “Weird. Do you talk to them with your mouth or just in your head?”

“I’m not crazy, if that’s what you think. I use my mouth. And I don’t know how they talk since they obviously don’t have mouths. And I don’t know how they hear either. I do have to use my ears though. I had a fern once that would talk all night. I put a bag over it, but it got really upset. I eventually had to put my head under the pillow to get any sleep.” Josh hefted his sleeping bag into the tent. “Don’t tell anyone else about this, OK? The

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guys already think I'm strange and Brenda doesn't need anything else to talk about."

"Josh, we have to talk to you. Tomorrow is our last day."

Andy saw Josh look at the field. "What? Did the corn say something?"

"Yeah, it said it is going to be cut down tomorrow."



Andy, Josh, Dana, and Brad dangled marshmallows over the campfire flames. Brad's suddenly turned into a torch and splashed shadows on the withered cornstalks. Brad blew the marshmallow out like a candle.

"Just like I like 'em," whooped Brad, "burnt to a crisp!" Brad waved his marshmallow stick around making the black blob on the end to glow brightly.

"Hey, watch it will ya!" yelled Josh. "If that thing flew into the field it could start a fire. A dry, old cornfield is a bonfire waiting to happen."

Dana looked at the field. "If it caught fire, all the ghosts would come running out." Josh heard Andy inhale sharply at the thought. "Then what would we do?"

"Probably run screaming into the house!" laughed Brad.

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“No probably about it, I’d be gone!” said Andy with a glance towards the corn.

“Josh, bring them with you,” said the rough voice of what the fern had called the old ones. *“You need to come now, before the corn is gone. The corn can lead you.”*

“Me, too,” laughed Josh. “But I don’t think there’s any ghosts in there. Just a few critters and a bunch of plants.”

Dana looked up from the marshmallow he had been trying to pull from his roasting stick.

“Oh, there’s probably wolves and bears and elk and big giant, hairy monsters,” said Brad in his spookiest voice.

“Really?” asked Dana.

The boys stared at him. “Yeah, and killer bunnies and squirrels with knives. Come on, Dana,” kidded Josh, “it’s just a cornfield.”

“Hey, does anyone know any ghost stories? I know this one about a skeleton that killed a bunch of kids who were camping,” said Brad.

“Why don’t we skip that one?” said Andy. “How about the one about the old cat that my Uncle Fred once had?”

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"We have only a few hours to stand. The farmer will come before sun-up to cut us down. The old ones cannot lead you because they are too small. Please." Josh glanced at the field.

"Forget the stories," said Josh, "if you want to be scared, why don't we go into the cornfield?"

There was a long silence followed by a bit more silence. Josh looked around the circle. Andy was poking a stick into the fire. Brad was staring at the fire. Dana was knocking a dirt-covered marshmallow around with a stick. The fire crackled merrily as if laughing at their discomfort.

"Bring them into the field with you if you must. We need to show you," rattled the corn.

Josh stood. "Well, I'm going to take a walk in the field. I like the field at night. If you want to come, follow me. If you don't want to come, burn another marshmallow. I'll be back soon."

"I'm coming with you," Andy stood up. "I've been afraid of that field too long."

With a shuffling of feet and a couple of grunts of agreement, Dana and Brad stood up and slowly followed Josh towards the field. All of them flicked on their flashlights and scanned the field. The stalks danced in the light and shadows.

"Hurry. You must hurry."

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No fence separated Andy's yard from the tall, brittle stalks of corn so the boys were able to step easily into the field. The corn brushed their clothes and reached out to grab their hands and faces.

Josh heard a voice to his left. "*This way.*"

"Come on, let's go this way." Josh cut across a couple of rows of corn with the boys following as silently as they could behind him. The beams of light bounced harmlessly from stalk to stalk. "Try not to knock down any of the stalks. They're going to be harvested tomorrow."

"How do you know that?" asked Brad.

"The corn told him," said Andy in such a matter-of-fact way that Josh was startled. Brad nodded as if he accepted the explanation without question. "I was looking at some old pictures my grandpa took of this field from a plane. I know there's a clearing over that way." He nodded in the direction Josh had been leading them.

"I'm lost already. Every direction looks the same," said Dana.

"Shh... I'm listening," whispered Josh.

"Listening!" snapped Dana. "To what?"

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“To the corn. Listen to it rattle. See? It rattled over there. It wants us to go that way.” Josh once again stepped carefully through the standing stalks. As he did, he heard a loud “Snap!” and motioned to the boys to stop. They stood silently for a minute or so listening... listening.

“What’s the matter?” whispered Andy.

“I heard something,” whispered Josh.

“Man, you’re really weirding me out. This is worse than the worst ghost story. I want to go back to the tent.”

“Shh! Listen.”

There was a definite crack as a cornstalk was pushed down.

“There’s something in the field with us!” Brad whispered urgently. “It’s the ghost of the cornfield! It’s a monster! It’s...”

“...a killer bunny?” Josh finished. “Would you be quiet so we can figure out what it is? A ghost wouldn’t snap a cornstalk. It could come up right behind you without even being heard.”

“Oh, thanks, that *really* helps.” Brad glanced over his shoulder.

“There are no ghosts or monsters in here, just corn and some critters. It’s probably a raccoon. Stand still.” In his mind Josh crossed his fingers. To be honest, the noise had him worried as well, and he knew it wasn’t a raccoon.

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After a moment the noise continued and it was getting louder. Josh could hear Andy breathing deeply as he tried to control himself. “Josh, I’m heading back. Which way is my house?”

Josh held his finger to his lips.

“No! I want to go home! Which way?”

“Just follow this row of corn that way. It will take you out at the edge of your yard.”

Josh watched as the Andy, followed closely by Brad and Dana, crunched their way through the field away from him. Soon, he couldn’t hear them at all.

“Josh, come on. You need to follow us. You are close.”

“There’s something in the field with me. What is it?”

“Two girls. They are standing three rows from you.”

“Why are they in here? Did you call them too?”

“No, we did not call them. One comes into the field and talks like you. She says she is following you.”

“She can hear you too?” whispered Josh.

“Yes, but she is following you, not us. Please, we must move on.”

“No, who is she? I’m not taking another step until I know who is in this field with me. So far my count is three friends who

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are running away, you, some plants called the old ones, some girl, and myself.”

“And someone else.”

“Who?” demanded Josh.

“Alice,” whispered the corn.

Josh’s blood froze. “Alice who? Is this like the girl Alice who disappeared in this field a long time ago?”

“Yes.”

“I’m outta here.” Josh turned to follow his friends. “I want nothing to do with any ghost. Tell her I don’t want to talk to her and I definitely don’t want to see her.” As he walked towards Andy’s yard, Josh heard the complaints of the corn and the raspy voices of the old ones.

A translucent girl stepped into the row in front of him. She appeared to be a few years older than he was, maybe sixteen or so. She held out a hand as if trying to stop him, but Josh had already stopped. Beckoning with her hand, she motioned Josh to follow her.

“No way,” yelled Josh. He turned to go in the other direction. Two steps away from the girl, he saw that he was headed right at her again.

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“Josh, follow her. It is for her that we have been asking you to follow us. She needs your help.”

Josh eyed her suspiciously. He heard footsteps pounding behind him. He turned to see Andy, Brad, Brenda, Jerika, and Dana sprinting towards him. They stopped suddenly when they saw the misty girl standing just beyond Josh.

“Who’s that?” demanded Brenda.

“Where did you come from?” asked Josh.

“Jerika was spending the night at my house and we saw the four of you slip into the field. We followed you,” blurted Brenda. The other kids stood and stared transfixed at the ghost.

“Corn, which girl was following me? Brenda or her?” Josh glanced at the ghostly form of Alice who was still motioning him to follow.

“Both. Only one makes noise as it follows.” A breeze rattled the dried stalks. *“Come. You must follow us into the field.”*

Andy broke from his fear. “Josh, what’s going on here? What is that?”

“Obviously, it’s that ghost you keep telling me about that lives in the field. Andy, meet Alice.”

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Alice turned and looked at Andy. Andy went even whiter than he had been. In the full moonlight, he almost looked as if he were a ghost too.

“A g-g-g-g-ghost?” whispered Brad. Dana huddled a bit closer to Brad and Andy. Jerika moved towards Josh.

“Alice?” asked Brenda. “This wouldn’t be the same Alice you’ve been going on about in class would it?”

“I think so,” said Josh. “Since this now officially falls into the report category, do you have any ideas of what we should do next, partner?”

“How about RUN!?” whispered Dana. The rest of the kids nodded enthusiastically.

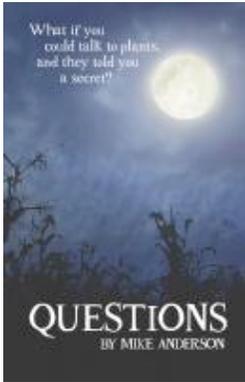
“I tried,” said Josh. “The ghost moves too fast. You might be able to outrun Brenda though.”

Brenda shot him a dirty look.

Jerika cleared her throat and timidly said, “She doesn’t seem to want to hurt us. How about following her?”

Alice turned and floated into the corn.

“Come,” rattled the corn. *“This way.”*



Life for Josh isn't the easiest. He has just moved into a new school and has conversations with the corn. A school field trip to a local retirement home unearths a bit of the town's unspoken oral history. Two teenagers had run away, causing embarrassment to their families. The corn leads Josh to a long-dead Alice. Josh is quickly plunged into danger and adventure as his relationship with his classmates deepens into friendship and respect.

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