

Hear the Dead Cry

Charlie Price

Random House Children's Books

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ABOUT THE BOOK

*The cemetery I know best is Forest Grove.
I spend most of my time there.
That's where most of my friends are ...
The ones my age and the children,
they almost all need someone to talk to.
They weren't ready. They'll tell you that.*

When Murray hears a terrified new voice pleading for help at the cemetery, he is convinced it's Nikki, a popular young cheerleader who went missing over a month ago - but who will believe him? And where is the body? Together with Pearl, the daughter of the cemetery groundskeeper, Murray must struggle to uncover the truth in a town full of secrets.



Hear the Dead Cry

CHARLIE PRICE

CORGI BOOKS

To my wife, Joanie:

You're the Ace of my heart's suit of cards.

From the song "The Province of Ledger Domaine," by
Charlie Price

DO THE DEAD CRY?

THE WAIT OF the dead was the loneliest thing Nikki could ever have imagined. Lonelier than thinking her friends were making fun of her. Lonelier than sitting by herself in the gym on a bottom bleacher while others danced.

Maybe she could endure the loneliness if she wasn't so angry—furious really.

He took her and hid her and no one would ever know what had happened. No one would find her. And the years would move away like a train abandoning a station. The tracks becoming covered with weeds, disappearing, with no one to stop there again.

Do the dead cry? Do they ache in sorrow? Do they weep in helpless frustration?

You know they do.

MURRAY IN THE CEMETERY

I'LL BE READY to die right after high school. Join my friends. Edwin, 1953, polio, says he was glad to die. He's a very nice guy and he was super in math. But he hated that iron lung. Get it over with, he says.

That's the way I feel, too. Mom doesn't really need me. I don't have a job. I don't drive.

Kids at school tease me about my name, Murray. Say it's expired, like out of date. And I don't know how they found out about my mom. Maybe some kid's parent saw it in the paper when she was arrested for prostitution. She didn't have to go to jail. And they ride me about my face. I've spent time looking in the mirror. I don't think I'm so ugly. I've had some trouble with my pimples, but I bet everybody has to work on their pimples once in a while.

Blessed Daughter, Born 1966, tells me not to worry. She says I'm cool anyway, but she doesn't realize the way kids in my classes rag on me. She says I'll grow out of it, but she died when she was eleven, brain tumor, so I don't think she's really an expert.

She's smart, though. She tells me what to say to the guys who tease me about my looks or my mother. "Don't get too close, I have AIDS." Cool, huh? They leave me alone now, which is fine with me.

My best friend is probably Dearly.

DEARLY BELOVED.
BORN 1944 DIED 1969
IN BEAUTY REPOSE.

Car wreck, she told me. When she accepted the date, she didn't know he drank so much. She smelled it on his

breath the minute she opened her front door. She stayed dry, not sure if she'd have to drive after the party. They didn't get that far. They hit a tree. He broke his neck. She went through the convertible's windshield and bled to death.

Dearly Beloved was perky. She brushed her hair and put on makeup in the filling station where she made him stop before the accident. She even considered taking off her underwear and putting it in her purse, but she was glad she hadn't, after what happened. He was a business manager for a national fraternity. Kappa Chi. He had long fingers.

They are not graveyards. I hate it when people say that. They are cemeteries. The one I know best is Forest Grove. I spend most of my time there. That's where most of my friends are. I don't spend much time with the older people. I figure they deserved it. Not *deserved* it, really, but what could they expect? After forty, you're going to die. The ones my age and the children, they almost all need someone to talk to. I comfort them the best I can. They weren't ready. They'll tell you that. They're not jealous or mean or scary like you might think. Just really lonely. Everybody needs a friend. Even James.

JAMES MCNAUGHTON
TAKEN IN HIS BLOOM
NEVER FORGOTTEN
BORN 1900 DIED 1918

I figure the war got him. He doesn't talk to me yet.

I think of myself as The Comforter. That's what I want on my stone.

If I do kick, I'll be the first Kiefer to have graduated from high school in California. That's the promise I made to Mom, my obligation. She won't miss me. I'm more in the way than anything.

Mr. Janochek, the groundskeeper, has been real nice to me, but he still asks me to leave when they lock the front gate at nine at night. I tell him sure, and head out, but he knows I don't leave. I don't have to be home until eleven on weeknights, if then, and I don't have to come home at all Friday and Saturday. Mom thinks I'm out partying because that's what she does.

I don't even need a flashlight anymore. I know where the tree roots are that stick up between the shadier tombstones. Plus, real late at night and early, early morning are the best times to visit. It's super quiet. Easy to hear. Easy to concentrate. Nobody having a funeral or mowing or planting flowers. No cars. They don't even unlock the gate until eight in the morning, and if the weather's bad, sometimes I have the whole place pretty much to myself.

I have kind of a schedule. I start with the youngest because I figure they need the most company. I have about five or ten friends. I don't really count James, yet. And lately I've been hearing a new person, but I can't seem to locate the grave.

Or maybe I could be The Listener. That's better than "The Comforter." Jeez, *comforter* sounds like a bed cover. The Listener. That's mystic.

THE LISTENER
FRIEND TO THE DECEASED

Two lines. It's all even and everything. I'm pretty sure Dearly will like it.

In about three or four years, you ought to come see me. Ask Mr. Janochek where "The Listener" plot is. He'll know. He keeps all the stuff looking good. He's probably the one who'll find me. He'll understand. I bet you anything.

THE DEPUTY

DEPUTY GATES WAS OVER twenty years with the Sierra County Sheriff's Department out of Riverton, California. He was familiar with sorrow. His wife was long gone, a casualty of his earlier love affair with gambling. His son was dead, two years this coming August, from a speedball overdose the summer before he was going to be the starting middle linebacker on the high school football team. A mistake, Gates hoped ... an accident, he prayed.

Shortly after his wife left, Gates resigned from the Sheriff's Department and began an even faster slide downhill. Spending nearly every night in casinos, he bet away his house and the rest of his savings. He borrowed until he wiped out his pension, and then was arrested during an altercation with a loan broker. A trip to his own jail embarrassed him enough to start an ongoing recovery process with Twelve-Step meetings.

Now, years later, he sat in his car at Whiskeytown Lake in the foothills west of Riverton, California. The area was at the end of the Central Valley, dry and hot as a griddle through the summers, even though it was surrounded by mountains. Thankfully, it was winter now, and the temperature, fifty-five degrees, made the November day comfortable.

Sitting, quiet, thinking, Gates saw quail families combing through the manzanita. Saw a jack raise its ears as it hesitated to leave its crumple of boulders and chance open ground.

He wondered why he had stayed with investigating. Morbid curiosity? A bitter upbringing that led to foolish notions of power and justice? A uniform that extended playing cowboy into adulthood? He knew he backslid into

the job as a sheriff's investigator after his son's death. But not even the domestic violence, the senseless vandalism, the unsolved crimes, and the occasional gore could drive him to civilian work.

He smelled the diesel of a tour bus in the parking lot behind him and heard the faint rumbling as its engine idled. For the hundredth time that week, he thought about the missing Parker girl.

On a rainy evening, October 17, Nikki Parker had left the school gym when cheerleading practice was over, about 6:00. She said good-bye to the woman faculty advisor and to her teammates, who were discussing which four girls made the sturdiest pyramid bottom for a football game stunt. She was always second from the top, so she didn't care what they decided.

Investigators assume that she left the gym and walked downhill toward the parking lot, where she had put her car that morning. The car still sat there the following day, and there was no evidence that she had reached it.

Police surmised that someone she knew had offered her a ride in the evening rain, and she got in with them and disappeared off the face of the earth. The high school grounds were grid-searched by hundreds of law enforcement personnel and volunteers. Not a trace. A list of her closer acquaintances was made, anyone she might have accepted a ride from, and all were interviewed and alibis checked. All school administrative, teaching, maintenance, food service, and transportation employees were interviewed and checked. No one could find an eyewitness to her activity once she left the gym.

The police suspect list was topped by her ex-boyfriend, Rudy, a nineteen-year-old who had dropped out of her high school a year before. He had given up his senior year to travel and work on the cars in his uncle's racing team.

Some said that, after he got back last summer, he ganged up with the town's main conduit for Southern

California skag, a small group of bright, disaffected kids from wealthy families who could afford to ride Harleys and have "Dragoons" embroidered on the back of their lambskin jackets. Some said they were his boyhood friends, but that he wasn't really running with them. At any rate, he didn't have an alibi for the 6:00 to 7:00 time slot that day. Nikki's girlfriends thought he was really handsome and sometimes really mean, and that she probably would have gotten into a car with him.

Rudy's statement stank with bravado. "You know what *you* were doing two days ago, 6:00 to 7:00? Somebody says they know that, they probably did whatever you're asking about. I'm busy. I'm doing things all the time. I was with friends doing something. That's all I got. You know what else? I loved that girl. Anybody hurt her, I'd kill them myself, no shit. Give me a few days. I'll figure out what I was doing."

Next on the police favorites list was a young man named John Turner, who was Nikki's private tennis coach and trainer. He was seen as a marginal citizen who made his money by supplying a variety of needs for his all-female clientele. He was tan, facile, and few men who met him trusted him. Many of Nikki's friends, however, thought he was a "hottie."

Nikki's parents paid for the court lessons and the training. They had no idea about the man's character or how much time their daughter actually spent with him. "She has her own car, you know. She's away from home several hours a day and that's the way it is with all the girls now," her mother had told the investigating officer. Everyone thought she would get in a car with him if he invited her.

Turner was glib. "Of course I know Nikki, but I haven't set eyes on her since her lesson last week. She didn't show up for this week's," he told the investigating officer. "I don't

have one bit of useful information for you and my next lesson is in fifteen minutes, so if you're through ...?"

The third candidate was an overweight school bus driver with a comb-over who should have been right in that area at the same time Nikki exited the front of the gymnasium building. The man, Buell Nostrum, had no criminal record, but word around the school was that he took a strong interest in pretty girls, trying to engage them in conversation, reaching to help them down the bus steps. Administrators were aware of Nostrum's interest but no formal complaint had been filed by either students or parents, and no administrative action had been taken. His supervisor suspected him of fudging time cards and stealing tools occasionally from the vehicle maintenance barn but could never marshal the hard evidence necessary to fire him.

Nostrum's story was that he didn't even know the girl. Possibly true because she never took the bus and he never drove for school sports functions. Police weren't able to confirm whether or not he attended games where he would have seen her cheerlead. He denied it and his wife corroborated. He said he had been doing errands that night and had gone the opposite direction out of the maintenance yard where he routinely parked.

"I didn't go out front at all. I was headed to that big Shopko out on Lake Boulevard. That's why I was late getting home, and you can ask my wife."

Police did. And she confirmed it. A search of the house turned up shopping bags from that market but no recent receipts to confirm dates of purchase.

At the end of October, investigators were left with a missing person, three possible suspects, and not a shred of viable evidence indicating what had actually happened. The parents could afford a \$50,000 reward, and the community raised an additional \$25,000 to go on top of it. The

community organized bloodhound searches of every park and forest area within reason. Ponds and rivers were dragged, and scuba divers went deep into the two local lakes.

Over two thousand man-hours and nobody found a thing.

PEARL OF THE CEMETERY

PEARL DIDN'T THINK about things. If your Dad worked in a cemetery, would you think about things? Death just around the corner? Nope. She'd save her thinking for homework. She was a private person, and those backbiting queen bees in her classes weren't going to get a shred of personal information to use against her. She had a few friends but none she really trusted. School didn't feel safe in that way.

Today she didn't care about school. She was focused on that dorky kid who talked to graves. She knew he had seen her a couple of times, but he didn't know that she had actually heard him talking to the headstones.

She knew he was spending nearly all his time after school here. She knew that two or three times a week, her dad had to ask him to leave at nine, when he locked the gate. Her dad was the groundskeeper for the Forest Grove Cemetery. He didn't dig graves or anything gross like that, but he managed the landscaping, arranged the burials, and sold new plots to families who needed a pretty place to bury somebody.

Her dad did a nice job with the flowers and even the road. He blew leaves and weeds off the lanes and kept the vines off the big metal gates. Pearl liked the funny stone houses where some families put their relatives, and all the different types of crosses and the statues of angels and saints that watched over everybody. When she died, she wouldn't mind being put here. But she wouldn't want that kid sitting over her and talking. She was certain about that.

Pearl decided to bust him while he was doing his thing with the graves. She would let him know he wasn't fooling anybody, let him know she was the boss in this cemetery. She knew he was usually just down the hill in the late

afternoon. Since her dad was still working, this was the perfect time.

She left the cottage, being careful the screen door didn't slam, walked quietly down the road and right up behind where he sat in front of a tombstone, and said, "They're dead, you know!" He jumped about a foot, which wasn't easy from a sitting position.

He started stammering at her. Totally irritating. She told him to calm down or she'd make her dad tell him to leave. Then she got mad at herself. *Here's a ninth grader going to get her dad to come help her!*

"What are you doing talking to a headstone?"

"I'm not talking to a headstone." He was looking at her like *she* was the idiot.

"You're talking to yourself?" she asked.

"No."

"Well?" she said. She had her hands on her hips like a traffic cop.

"It's really none of your business," he said, turning his back to her.

"Everything that happens here is my business," she told him. "My dad runs this place."

"You're Janochek's kid?" he blurted, surprising the heck out of her.

"How do you know his name?"

"What's your name?" he asked, before she could get back on top of things.

"Pearl." *Shoot!* She wanted to go on the offensive. "I've seen you slinking around here, day after day"—shaking her head like he was beyond help—"You're just a goofy grave sniffer!" *There. That's more like it.*

Murray gave up hoping she would just leave. He turned to face her. Pearl was standing right up close to him, looking belligerent.

"Damn it! Don't you have any manners?" He was losing patience.

“Me? I’m not the one creeping around a cemetery like a body snatcher. It’s supposed to be quiet and dignified here.”

Murray skidded back and forth between anger and amusement. He hated being talked to in that tone of voice, but on the other hand, she was kind of cute, trying to be so tough with her bad-guy pose, and at the same time leaking a smile at the corners of her mouth.

“I am not bothering you. Go do whatever it is you do and leave me alone!”

“No.”

“No ...?” He was getting tired of this game.

“Tell me what you’re doing.”

“You’ll just keep hassling me.”

“No, I won’t,” Pearl said, taking her hands off her hips and softening her expression. “I’m not really trying to hurt your feelings. I just kind of like messing with you.”

“Can you see that I don’t like it?”

“Yeah, but you’ll get used to it. I’m a lot of fun to be around.”

Murray barked a laugh in spite of himself. “Who told you that?”

“My dad.”

“Jeez, he *has* to say stuff like that. You’re his kid.”

“No, he means it.”

Murray massaged his forehead. “You’ll just tell and I’ll get in trouble and everything will get screwed up.”

Pearl looked him right in the eye. “Are you doing something bad?”

“No. No! It’s nothing like that. You’d never understand in a million years.”

Pearl took a half step toward him. “Hey. I’m sorry I scared you and acted, like, so tough. Tell me what you’re doing. Please.”

Murray looked at her. She was probably thirteen or fourteen. She had a curly blond tangle of hair and she wore

overalls with a colored T-shirt underneath a faded jean jacket. She wasn't wearing makeup. Her brown walking shoes were scuffed. She had a decent face with straight teeth and a smudge of dirt near her chin. She smelled like woodsmoke from her dad's workshop stove. Her face now held a sincere pleading look that begged to be trusted.

"No," he said. He saw the way her face fell and felt a quick pang. "No," he repeated, more softly.

Pearl turned and stomped away before he could say more.

Back up the hill, she stormed into the workshop and slammed the door. She didn't respond to her father's offer of ham sandwiches and coleslaw, didn't say a word as she passed through the back door and walked into the small two-bedroom cottage the cemetery provided as housing. She went to her room and closed the door. She tore her jean jacket off and threw it at the wall by her bed, hitting the poster of Cheryl Miller coaching during a timeout in a WNBA game and the one beside it of Haley Joel Osment in *The Sixth Sense*. She loved his movie with Robert Duvall. The posters rattled with the jacket's impact but neither fell.

That wack ... that stupid dick! She was too mad to sit. She'd fix that kid. Count on it!

JANOCHEK: KEEPER OF THE GROUNDS

HE HAD BEEN watching those kids, Pearl and the Kiefer boy, and thought, *God, how did any of us ever make it to adults?* Pearl was acting tough, like a bouncer, and Kiefer looked like he just wanted to be left in peace. Fat chance, now that he was on her radar. Pearl made Canyon's freshman girls' basketball team because she was what the coach called aggressive, tenacious on defense. Once she started something, she didn't let go easily. He loved to watch her fight the taller girls for rebounds.

He thought Pearl had reason to be angry; mad that he had married her mom instead of someone stable, mad that her mom ignored her, mad that she was an only child living in a cemetery instead of a neighborhood with other kids.

Janocek had tried to talk with her about some of these things, but since she'd been eleven, talking hadn't gone so well. So he just tried to be polite and put food on the table. She didn't want to ride bikes or go to movies with him on the weekends anymore. He wished that she got invited to sleepovers or had a group of girlfriends who called her.

He knew she was embarrassed by his work. And he wondered if kids teased her about being a ghoul. He told her if anyone made fun of her or gave her trouble, he would come to school and bite them on the neck.

He knew that the Kiefer kid hung around the cemetery nearly every night. Murray Kiefer. What a name to be saddled with. Kiefer's mom reminded Janocek a little of Pearl's mom. Vera Kiefer was a party girl, and she hooked up with different men who would keep her in food, liquor, and rent for a couple of weeks at a time. He could make a pretty cold comparison with his dead wife, Doreen. He thought he probably should have divorced her when Pearl