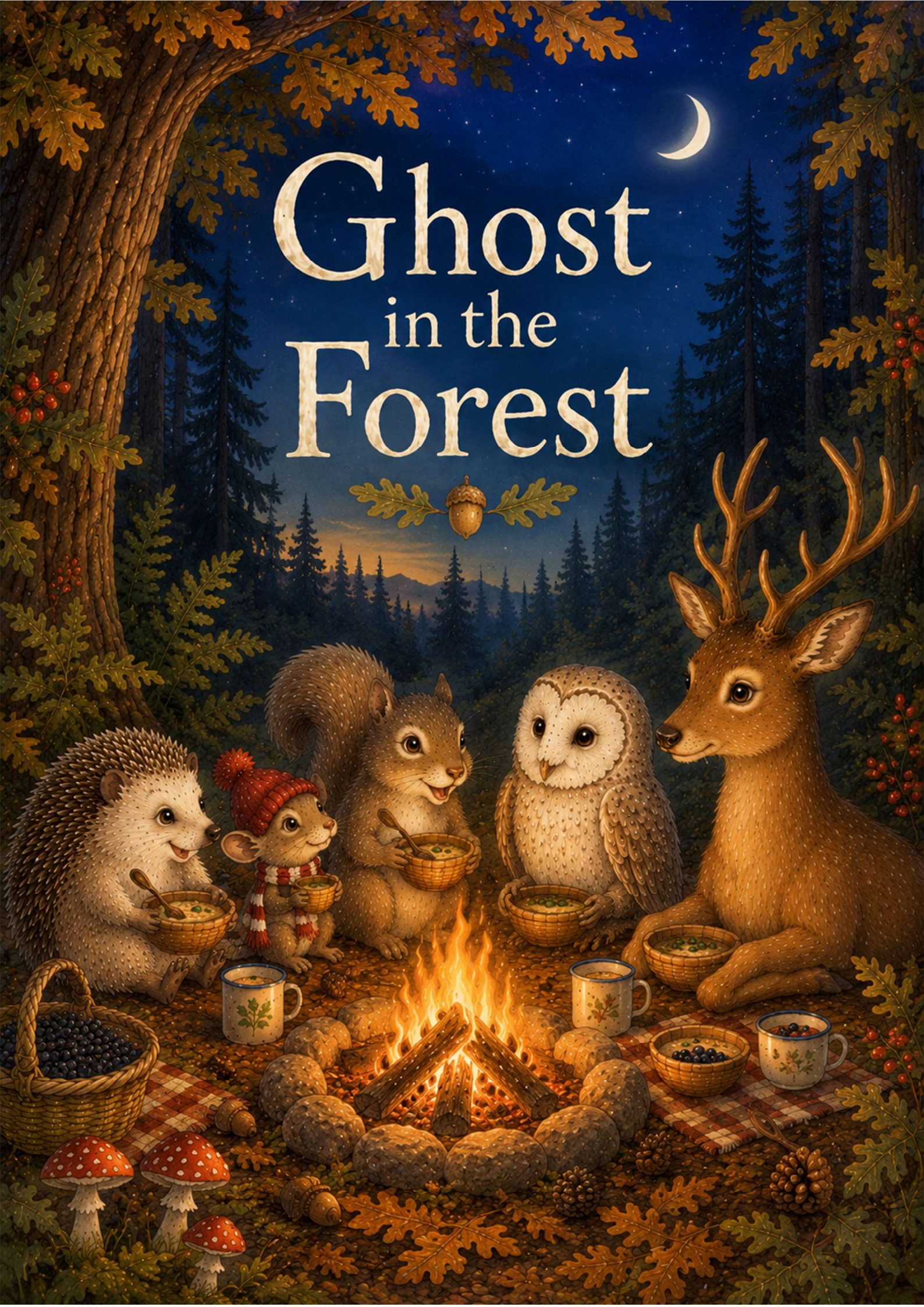


Ghost in the Forest



Created with love by Sarah Fisher

The forest was at its most beautiful in autumn. The leaves had turned to amber and gold, and the air smelled of woodsmoke and wet earth and the very last of the season's blackberries.

Niblet, Lingonberry, Tuppence and Clarence had finished a very fine breakfast and were sitting in the pale morning sunshine, enjoying the particular satisfaction that comes from having eaten well. Tuppence was working his way through what appeared to be an impressive quantity of blackberry jam, most of which had found its way onto his fingers, his scarf and a small patch of fur behind his left ear that he hadn't noticed yet.

Clarence had risen to his feet. This was always a sign that a speech was coming.

"Now then," he began, smoothing his feathers with great purpose. "A well-run forest requires a well-run day. I have given this considerable thought and I think you will all agree that what is needed is a proper plan."

Lingonberry nodded slowly and settled a little deeper into his spot by the roots of the old oak. Niblet listened politely. Tuppence licked his fingers. The speech continued.

It was, by any measure, a thorough speech. It covered morning tasks, afternoon tasks, the correct method for storing acorns and the importance of not leaving things where other people might trip over them, Tuppence.

At some point during the section on seasonal maintenance, Lingonberry's eyes closed. Niblet noticed. He gave Lingonberry a gentle poke. Lingonberry's eyes opened. He nodded thoughtfully, as though he had been listening carefully all along.

Then, from somewhere across the clearing, came the sound of small, quick feet and a flash of red bobbing through the long grass.

Pipkin arrived at considerable speed.

Pipkin was always in a hurry. His friends were quite used to him arriving at speed, red hat bobbing, scarf streaming behind him. It was simply how Pipkin moved through the world.

But the hat was askew. That was new.

And the look on his face was one none of them had seen before.

Even Clarence stopped talking.

“Oh my gosh,” Pipkin gasped, skidding to a halt in front of them. “You will never guess what I just saw. Never in a million years. Even if I gave you a million guesses and you were very good at guessing games, you would never, ever...”

“Perhaps,” said Niblet gently, placing a paw on his shoulder, “you’d better just tell us.”

Pipkin took a breath. His friends leaned in. Even Tuppence paused, a jammy finger halfway to his mouth.

“I was in the forest,” Pipkin said carefully, “checking the leaves weren’t blocking any of the important trails. And I saw...” he stopped. Took a very deep breath. “A ghost.”

There was a pause.



Lingonberry's mouth curved into a very small, very quiet half smile. Niblet wrung his paws. Tuppence considered this for a moment, then went back to his fingers.

Which left Clarence.

Clarence, who had been waiting very patiently for exactly this kind of moment.

He drew himself up to his full height and cleared his throat. "Oh, Pipkin." Clarence sighed the sigh of someone carrying a very great burden. "This is like the time you were convinced there was a fairy living in the old oak tree. You were extremely excited about that, as I recall. Do you remember what that turned out to be?"

Pipkin's ears went slightly pink. "That was a moth," he said quietly. "But this is a very different thing entirely. This time I am absolutely sure." He straightened himself up as best he could with a wonky hat. "I was checking the trails and I heard a rustle behind me. I turned around and I saw it. Very clearly. It was white and it moved and it was definitely, completely, one hundred percent a ghost. I let out a shriek and I must have frightened it away."

"A shriek," said Clarence. "A small one," said Pipkin.

Clarence shook his head slowly, in the manner of someone who has seen rather a lot of the world and found it frequently disappointing. "Pipkin, I must insist that you put this nonsense out of your head immediately. There are no such things as ghosts. I have lived in this forest for a great many years, and I can tell you with absolute certainty that if there were such things, I would have encountered them myself long before now." Pipkin opened his mouth.

"Long before now," Clarence repeated firmly.

Niblet, meanwhile, was attending to more important matters.

The pumpkin patch required his full attention at this time of year. Each one needed checking, measuring by eye, and a little gentle encouragement. Niblet moved quietly between them, duster raised, murmuring soft words of support to each one in turn. It was a well known fact, at least to Niblet, that pumpkins grew best when they knew someone believed in them.

He had just reached his favourite, a particularly fine specimen, round and bright and coming along beautifully, and was giving it an extra polish when something caught his eye.

A flash of white. There, by the old tree stump. The ferns rustled, just slightly, and then were still. Niblet's duster stopped moving. His heart beat a little faster.

He thought of Pipkin's face that morning, hat all askew, words tumbling out of him. Could it be? Surely not. And yet.

Niblet gathered his courage in both paws, which took a moment, and approached the old tree stump very slowly and very carefully. He held his breath. He peered behind the largest fern.

A clump of mushrooms looked back at him. Fresh ones, white capped and perfect, just pushing up through the soft earth. Niblet let out a long, slow breath.

He stood there for a moment, feeling slightly silly, then noted the exact position of the mushrooms carefully. They would make a very fine addition to a soup. Or possibly a stew.

He straightened up, tucked his duster away, and went back to his pumpkins. He would tell Pipkin at dinnertime, very kindly, what his ghost had almost certainly been.



By late afternoon, the light had begun to soften and the shadows between the trees had grown long and golden.

Tuppence had been busy. There were sticks to gather, and dried leaves for kindling, and the campfire wouldn't light itself. He worked happily enough, collecting little armfuls and stacking them neatly, though he had to stop occasionally to check whether any blackberries had found their way into the vicinity. Just to be thorough.

After a while he found he was rather thirsty, and the pond wasn't far. He thought he might take a small detour. Just for a drink. And perhaps a look around, in case there happened to be a blackberry patch nearby. For later.

He found a fallen acorn cap by the water's edge, perfectly shaped for the purpose, and crouched down to scoop up a little drink. The pond was very still. The trees reflected perfectly in it, dark and quiet and...

Something white flashed across the water. Tuppence leapt up with a squeak, water sloshing straight down his front, soaking his tummy entirely.

He spun around, heart hammering, and looked up. Clarence was making his way overhead, wings broad and pale against the dimming sky, conducting his end-of-day inspection of the forest with the air of someone doing something very important. Tuppence looked down at his wet tummy. Then back up at Clarence. Then back at the pond.

He began to laugh, very quietly, to himself. Clarence's white underside, reflected in the still water. Of course. That was all it was.

He dried off his tummy with a nearby leaf and reached for a large, nearby blackberry. For the shock. He'd earned it.

And as he made his way back toward the campfire to start the soup, he thought that he must remember to tell Pipkin this evening. Poor little thing had been worrying all day. Well, mystery solved. Tuppence had worked it out, which, he felt, reflected rather well on him. He ate another blackberry, just to be sure he'd fully recovered.



Lingonberry had been walking since morning. This suited him perfectly. Lingonberry was built for walking. Long, steady, unhurried steps that covered the ground quietly and thoroughly. He was the only one of the friends large enough to patrol the very edges of the forest and be back in time for dinner, and he took the responsibility seriously, in the same calm, unshowy way he took most things.

It had been a good day. The autumn colours were at their finest out near the edges, all deep amber and soft gold, and he had plodded along at his usual easy pace, thinking his usual easy thoughts, and enjoyed it all thoroughly. One medium-sized branch had needed moving, which he had dealt with without much fuss. Other than that, the forest had been quiet and peaceful. Just the way he liked it.

As the light began to fade he turned for home, his thoughts settling contentedly on the campfire, the soup, and the very agreeable prospect of a long snooze afterwards. He made his way back along West Forest path, the familiar trees closing in gently around him in the dusk. He rounded a corner.

And stopped.

It was unusual for Lingonberry to stop suddenly. He wasn't really built for sudden. But there, just at the side of the path ahead of him, stood a white figure.

He looked at it carefully. Then took a few slow steps toward it, ready to offer a polite greeting. And then he saw what it was. The pale, peeling bark of a silver birch, catching the last of the evening light.

Not much point saying hello to a tree, he thought. He gave a small, quiet chuckle, entirely to himself, and carried on. He must remember to tell Pipkin this evening, he thought as he walked. He was almost certain that was what the little one had seen. He'd be relieved to know it. Poor Pipkin.

Lingonberry plodded on contentedly toward the smell of woodsmoke and soup, and thought that on balance, it had been a very fine day indeed.



Back at the clearing, the campfire was going beautifully.

Tuppence had done an excellent job, which he felt deserved more acknowledgement than it had received. The flames were steady, the kindling had caught first time, and the pumpkin soup was bubbling away in the big pot with a smell that made everyone feel that the world was a fundamentally good place.

Clarence had completed his survey of the forest and was giving a detailed account of his findings. It was, by any measure, a comprehensive report. It covered the northern tree line, the state of the eastern brambles, the importance of aerial observation and the underappreciated complexity of forest management generally. Tuppence stirred the soup. Niblet nodded along attentively, though somewhere behind his eyes he was wondering whether an extra polish in the morning might bring his favourite pumpkin up to a really exceptional shine.

Lingonberry arrived last, as was usual, settling himself down by the fire with the quiet satisfaction of someone who had covered a lot of ground and earned their dinner. Pipkin had raced in just before him, red hat somewhat askew, and had arranged himself on his log with his bowl on his lap.

Except he wasn't really eating. He was watching the treeline. Every rustle made his ears twitch. Every shadow drew his eye. His soup sat untouched, going slowly cold, while the others ate and Clarence continued his report.

Then a twig cracked somewhere in the darkness beyond the clearing. Pipkin shot to his feet. The soup went everywhere. There was a brief silence, during which Tuppence looked down at himself, then across at Niblet, then over at Lingonberry, all of whom were now wearing a considerable amount of pumpkin soup.

"Sorry," said Pipkin in a very small voice. "Sorry, sorry, I'm so sorry, I'll get a cloth, I..."

“Pipkin,” said Lingonberry, when the fussing had settled. “Come and sit down.” His voice was gentle, as it always was. “I think I may know what you saw this morning. On your way through the forest, were you perhaps near West Forest path?”

Pipkin frowned. “I don’t think so.”

“There’s a silver birch there,” Lingonberry said. “Beautiful tree. The bark is very white, especially in low light. It gave me quite a pause myself this evening, coming home.”

Niblet nodded eagerly. “And I found the most wonderful clump of white mushrooms by the old tree stump this afternoon. Very ghostly looking, I must say, for just a moment. Nothing to worry about at all.” He paused. “Actually Pipkin, do you remember roughly where you were? Just so I could, you know. For the soup.”

“It wasn’t mushrooms,” said Pipkin quietly.

“Well,” said Tuppenche cheerfully, “I can tell you that I had quite a fright myself this afternoon. Went to get a drink from the pond and saw something white flash across the water. Nearly jumped out of my spines.” He stirred his soup with great authority. “Turned out to be Clarence flying overhead. Just his reflection. Gave me quite a shock I don’t mind telling you, but once I’d worked it out I felt much better.” He helped himself to another bowl. “And you will too.”

“It wasn’t a reflection,” said Pipkin. “It wasn’t by the pond. It moved, and it rustled, and it was...”

“Pipkin.” Clarence set down his bowl. He had been waiting for this moment with some patience, which was not his natural state.

“I have listened to a great deal of this today and I think it is time I spoke plainly.” He settled his feathers and adopted the expression of someone about to say something very important.

“There is always an explanation. Always. In all my years in this forest, and I have been here since there were half the trees there are now and not a single pumpkin to speak of, I have never once encountered anything that did not have a perfectly rational...”

He stopped.

His beak remained open.

His eyes had gone very wide and were fixed on something at the far edge of the clearing, just beyond the reach of the firelight.

The friends looked at Clarence. Clarence, who never stopped mid-sentence. Clarence, who had, in living memory, never once paused for anything.

Very slowly, Niblet turned to see what he was looking at. At the very edge of the clearing, just where the firelight faded into darkness, stood a figure.

It was white. Brilliantly, completely white, so bright in the moonlight that it seemed almost to glow. It was quite still. The forest around it seemed to hold its breath.

Pipkin didn't hesitate. He crossed the distance between himself and Lingonberry in approximately one second and disappeared behind his rear right leg.

Niblet clutched his soup bowl with both paws. He wasn't entirely sure why. It just seemed important to be holding something.

Nobody spoke. The fire crackled softly. Somewhere far away an owl called, and then was quiet, and the silence settled back around them like a blanket.

They waited.



And then, after what felt like a very long time indeed, a voice came from the edge of the clearing. It was the smallest voice any of them had ever heard. But it was, unmistakably, friendly.

“Hello.”

There was a pause. Pipkin’s head appeared slowly around Lingonberry’s leg.

Niblet took a breath, set his soup bowl down very carefully, and walked toward the figure. Slowly. One step at a time.

As he drew closer, the firelight reached a little further, and he saw. A ferret. Very small. Very white. With enormous dark eyes that were watching him with an expression that was, if anything, more frightened than his own.

“Oh my goodness,” Niblet said softly. “You gave us all the most terrible fright.” He looked back at his friends, then gently back at the ferret.

“What are you doing all the way out here?”

He offered his paw, and the ferret took it, and Niblet led him slowly back toward the warmth of the campfire. The friends let out a collective breath that had been held for quite some time.

Lingonberry’s face settled into its usual warmth. Tuppence’s paw moved quietly back toward his soup bowl. Pipkin emerged fully from behind Lingonberry’s leg, attempting to look as though he had simply been standing there all along.

And Clarence smoothed his feathers down with great dignity. He smoothed them again. Then once more, as several were still pointing in entirely the wrong direction. “Yes,” he said, to nobody in particular. “Quite. As I suspected.”



The ferret took it in both paws and drank, and the warmth of it spread across his face in a way that made all of them feel rather glad to have made it.

Then Lingonberry finished the mouthful of soup he was enjoying and gently asked, “So what is your name?”

“I don’t know,” the ferret replied. “I’m not sure I’ve had one before.”

“How lucky,” said Niblet. “You get to choose it for yourself. What do you think you would like to be called?”

The ferret thought for a while, and after a pause said softly, “I quite like Ghost.”

“Then Ghost it is!” bellowed Clarence, having now recovered quite completely from his shock and being back to his old, loud self.

So Ghost settled down by the campfire, and after a while, when Pipkin had curled up in his tail and was snoring gently, he thought that he liked his new name, and his new family, and he very much liked pumpkin soup.

