

A full moon hangs in a dark, cloudy night sky, framed by the silhouettes of tree branches. Below the moon, a stone castle tower with battlements and small arched windows stands prominently. The scene is atmospheric and mysterious.

HAYCORN SMITH AND THE CASTLE GHOST

John Kachuba

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CASTLE GHOST

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

1

SOMETHING SPLASHED IN THE RIVER.

I carefully parted the weeds, peering into the darkness. My hands shook.

“It sure is dark out there,” I whispered to Budge, who hunkered down behind the rock.

Something splashed again.

“I heard *that*,” Budge said, rising to one knee. “What do you see? Is it the Frog?”

The Loveland Frog. Budge and I had spent almost every night the last two weeks at the Little Miami River looking for the creature. It had been maybe ten years since two Loveland cops saw the giant beast one night by the river and shot at it. Plenty of people believed it was still out there somewhere. People like us.

Whatever it was, it was moving up the river. Splashing. Coming closer.

“Hand me the light! Quick!”

Budge thrust the flashlight at me. I grabbed it, turned it on, and aimed it across the water. Mist floated over the river like ghosts.

Budge peeked over the rock. "I don't see anything," he said, "except ... *that!*" He jerked the light in my hand sharply to the left.

"What the ...? Jeezul-Pete!"

Two red eyes glared at us through the mist.

"It's the Frog!"

Budge was ready to bolt. I caught him by the arm. "Shut up! Don't move! Maybe it hasn't seen us."

Suddenly, I had the urge to pee.

We froze. We were so afraid, it never dawned on us to turn off the light. We stood there like idiots, the red eyes coming closer. We heard the thing panting. Hideous.

"Goodbye, Haycorn," Budge whispered.

The creature was so close we could make out a large black shape below those freaky eyes.

Then it barked.

We looked at each other.

"Woof?" Budge said, just as Mrs. Riley's Doberman trotted up out of the river, shaking water off, soaking us.

"Stupid dog!" I said, "Go home!"

We watched it run off into the night.

"Guess we're done here?" Budge asked.

I sighed. "Looks like it. You know, we may *never* catch the Frog."

He patted my shoulder. "Maybe next time. But I've got to get going anyway. Merv will kill me if I'm out too late."

We trudged up the riverbank to the street where we had left our bikes. *Yeah, maybe next time.*

• • •

My name is Haycorn Smith.

I know. Go ahead. Laugh. You wouldn't be the first. But laugh all you want; Dad says my name is an old one and famous. Some duke or something in England, a long time ago. That's cool.

Still, there's always some jerk dissing me about my name, and sometimes I just fight back.

Which really ticks off Mom. She's on our town's city council and is *in the public eye*, as she likes to say, but Jeezul, what's a guy to do? Wasn't she ever twelve?

Dad was twelve once. He tells me not to get into fights but then he says he knows they can't always be avoided, which to me sounds like, *sic 'em, Haycorn!* The bad news is that I'm not really all that tough. The good news is, we're all getting older and there aren't that many fights anymore. We all just talk smack. It's cooler and doesn't draw blood.

And when it comes to talking smack, Budge Shifflet's the champ. He's been my best friend ever since he moved up here from Virginia. His mother always calls him "Budge" and that's how we all know him. Funny, though, I'm not sure what his real name is. Walter, I think. Budge's dad is short and stocky, like a fire hydrant, not at all like Budge, who is tall and spaghetti thin. He doesn't talk much, but he can put you down in three words; "pencil-necked geek" is Budge at his best. I think he learned how to talk like that to survive, since he's the only boy in a family of four girls, three of them older than him. Any time I feel bad about being an only child I spend a few hours at Budge's house. I feel a whole lot better after that.

Budge and I hang out a lot at the Little Miami River, which winds right through the center of Loveland. Sometimes, we ride our bikes on the trail that runs along the river. When we can scrape up some money, we'll rent a canoe from Bruce's, under the railroad bridge, and paddle down the river. It's a pretty river, with big white sycamores lining the banks. The Shawnee Indians called them "ghost trees." The river's not very deep, except in the spring when it runs high with rain and snow. Sometimes, the river floods Nisbet Park and downtown Loveland. One time, Mom and I put on waders and inspected the damage after a flood. The water had risen right to the top of the park's amphitheater. Looked like a giant swimming pool.

Mostly though, we hang by the river, sometimes fishing, but pretty much just talking and watching the water go by. I like to watch the great blue herons on their stilt legs fishing in the shallows.

On some nights, we might hunt for the Loveland Frog.

This is no ordinary frog, by the way. Those cops, years ago? One was on patrol when he saw something in the water. In the dark, he couldn't tell what it was. A man? An animal? He got out of his car and started down the bank, his flashlight lighting the way through the rocks and weeds. The thing didn't move. The cop still couldn't tell what it was, but it must have scared the bejeezus out of him, because he called for backup. When another cop rushed to the scene, they stepped cautiously on the rocks along the bank, drawing closer to the thing in the water. Suddenly, this beast leaps at them out of the darkness. It looks like a huge frog with glowing red eyes. The cops scream like little girls, yank out their guns and start blasting away. They miss. Whatever it was disappears in the night, never to be seen again. This is a true story, I swear. It was in the newspapers.

We were kids when that happened. Older now, we waste quite a few evenings looking for the Frog. We aren't the only ones, either. One of Mom and Dad's friends sometimes stays out all night with all kinds of electronic gear.

Loveland is a quiet town. Big houses—some of them McMansions—nice lawns, little crime. But then there's the Loveland Frog. How do you explain that?

"How do you explain that?" I asked Mom one night. She had just returned from a city council meeting. She was still wearing her dress clothes but had plunked herself down on the couch with an iced tea. She looked exhausted.

"How do I explain what?" She held the cold glass to her forehead, as though she had a headache.

"The Loveland Frog."

She sighed. "Are you still on that kick?"

"I was just on the Internet again, reading about it."

"Sometimes I wish the Internet had never been born."

"It wasn't born," I said, "Mister Google invented it."

She gave me a sour look. "Mister Google?" She kicked off her shoes and curled her legs on the couch. "Okay, fine. What do you want to know?"

"The cops saw it like ten years ago, right?" She nodded. "So, what's happened since then? Has anyone else seen it?"

Just then, Dad entered the room. He stood in the doorway, blinking at us from behind his glasses. They made him look nerdy, but I knew he wasn't a nerd. Dad was pretty cool, actually. "Hey, it's time for *Survivor*," he said. "Anyone want to watch it with me? They're in Costa Rica now."

"I'd love to go to Costa Rica." Mom pulled back her chestnut-colored hair, readjusting her ponytail. She took a big gulp of her tea. "How come you never take me to Costa Rica?" she asked Dad.

"Bugs, Sweetheart. Big ones. Big creepy crawlies." Dad wiggled his eyebrows like crazy caterpillars.

"Mom?"

"In a minute, Hay. Wait a second, Ron," she said to Dad, "you think I'm afraid of bugs?"

"Uh, yeah."

She set her iced tea on the table beside the couch. "Where did you ever get that idea?"

"Mom? The Frog?" I said.

She didn't pay me any attention. Instead, she zeroed in on Dad with her Snake-Eye expression. Dad was in for it. I've learned to get out of her way when I see that look. Dad was a slow learner.

"Where?" He turned on the TV. "Have you forgotten the Everglades? That little camping trip before we had Buddy, here?"

"You mean the camping trip where we *made* him," she said.

"Hell-o, I'm still in the room," I said. "I can hear you."

Dad held the remote in his hand, but he was looking at Mom. It wasn't *Survivor* on the screen; it was *SpongeBob SquarePants*; a

better choice, I thought. “Whatever, Anne. All I know is, *someone* was afraid of the bugs.”

“If you mean the clouds of mosquitoes that were everywhere, finding their way onto any part of exposed skin, into any nook and cranny and I do mean *any*...”

Jeezul! TMI. On TV, a starfish wearing a pirate’s hat chased SpongeBob. I skulked off to my bedroom. Mom and Dad never even knew I was gone.

Look, I love my parents, I really do. They’re great. Sometimes, though, they’re clueless. They can be really embarrassing. And gross. I can’t get far enough away when they’re like that.

I flopped on my bed with a Harry Potter book—one I’d probably already read a million times—and let it take me away from the noise in the living room. Magic. Books always do that for me. I lose myself in them in no time. The Potter books are cool, but I’m also reading a lot about ghosts and ghost hunting, and that’s way cool. That stuff really happens, unlike the Harry Potter stuff. It’s right there in black and white and on TV, too.

Harry was flying around in a mean game of Quidditch when my cell phone beeped. A text message.

HEY, HAY

Only Budge thinks that’s funny, and he says it all the time. I mean, *all* the time.

HEY, I wrote.

SUP?

NADT. U?

BORED.

ME 2.

I won’t bother you with the details; nobody wants to read our text messages. Budge wanted to know if we could hang out at the castle after school the next day, which sounded cool, so I told him yeah, sure.

AWESO, he wrote, C U.

I went back to Harry Potter, but couldn’t concentrate. I kept thinking about the Loveland Castle, as it was called, although its real

name was Chateau Laroche. It had been a long time since Budge and I were last there. On weekends you could go inside the castle. That's when the Knights of the Golden Trail, the guys that ran the place, were there to let you in and give you a tour. They all called themselves *Sir* this, or *Sir* that. I think they really believed they were real knights, even though one was a barber and another stocked shelves at Kroger. Whatever, the place was still incredible. Inside, there were flags and banners and suits of armor. Swords and axes hung on the walls. It was all pretty sweet.

I knew the castle wouldn't be open after school, but that was okay. I decided we'd go anyway.

Math was my last class of the day. I hate math, and my grades prove it. I flunked math in sixth grade and had to have a tutor over the summer. Yeah, that was fun. Like having a tooth yanked. The tutor was this geeky guy with really thick glasses and an accent. He always said my name like "Hi-corn." I had to call him Mister Kashir. His breath smelled like tuna fish.

Somehow, I squeaked through seventh-grade math but now I still had to get through my last year at Loveland Middle School. Math is boring, boring, boring. If it wasn't for the fact that Ama Yendi sat only a few seats from me, I would not be able to stay awake. She was smart, much smarter than me. And pretty.

Math scared the bejeezus out of me. I once had a dream where all the sixes and eights and nines were snakes twisting around my feet trying to pull me down. They were going to square-root me.

After school, Budge and I rode our bikes to the Loveland Castle. The road down to the castle was steep, narrow, and twisty. You took your life in your hands trying to ride it, so we walked the bikes down to the riverbank and left them under a tree. It was cloudy and the river looked like it was made of steel. There was nobody at the castle. No surprise.

I get goose bumps every time I see the place. I don't know why, except that it's way cool. Awesome. Exactly like a real castle. It's built with stones dragged up from the river and it has arches and towers

and all that castle stuff. Mom says that one man built it all by himself. It took him years to build. She says he was an old man when he died and that he still hadn't finished it. That's why the other guys are there now, the Knights. They're finishing the job he started.

"Look!" Budge pointed to the square tower at the front of the castle. "Check it out."

A big black bird squatted on top of the tower. A vulture. We picked up some rocks and chucked them at the bird, but he was too high up. We moved closer. Before we could get him, he spread his wings and flew off over the river.

"Take that!" Budge said.

"We missed him, dummy."

Budge shrugged. "We scared him, though."

I approached the solid, wooden castle door, studded with about a million iron nails. "Think we can get inside?"

"I don't think we should," Budge said, looking around nervously.

I tried the latch anyway. "Nope. Locked," I said.

We wandered in and out of the stables that never held any horses, and through the terraced garden alongside the castle, where a steep hill rose behind it. If I were an enemy trying to capture the castle, I'd just get up on top of that hill and roll boulders or something down on it. Maybe, boiling oil. I'd read somewhere they used to do that in the olden days. Must have hurt.

Once, when I was at the castle, there were some guys dressed like knights, with armor and stuff, and they were whacking each other with these fake swords. They were hitting each other really hard. The swords banged off their big soup can helmets and sometimes a guy would get knocked down. Nobody ever got killed, though.

Now, it was just me and Budge, and we didn't have swords.

"It's kind of creepy here, don't you think?" Budge said, as we walked through a series of stone arches.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's so quiet and all," Budge said.

"Could be because there's no one else here, Einstein?"

"I know. That's not what I meant," he said, still looking around as though expecting someone. "Do you think anyone died here?"

"What? You mean like knights?"

"I don't know, anyone," Budge said.

"Probably not. Wait, what was that?" We stopped in a passageway between rows of stone arches. It was dark in there. "Did you hear that?"

"That scratching noise?" Budge said, looking around.

I nodded. We stood there and then we heard it again. It sounded like someone scratching a nail or a stick on the rock walls. "There ... that." My palms were sweating even though the air was cool in the passageway. I felt a lump in my throat.

"Oh, crap!" Budge's eyes went wide as Frisbees.

Something moved in the shadows near our feet. Budge yelled, or maybe it was me, I don't remember, and we ran out of there into the daylight. We stopped outside the castle, a safe distance away. We were breathing hard. Neither of us could speak.

I saw movement along the ground beneath the first arch. A small, dark shape humping along. A groundhog.

"Hey, Budge," I said, pointing to the animal.

It sat up on its hind legs as if saying "goodbye" to us.

Budge laughed. "If I was a knight, I would have whacked that weasel with my sword."

"Yeah, right. And it's a groundhog, not a weasel."

It wasn't that we were still afraid, really, but it was getting late. We had to get home for dinner, so we grabbed our bikes. Budge walked ahead of me. As we started to walk the bikes up the road to where it was level enough for us to finally ride them, I could have sworn I heard a laugh from the darkness behind me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Kachuba is the award-winning author of twelve books of fiction and non-fiction. His most recent work, *Shapeshifters: A History*, was a finalist in the Horror Writers Association's Bram Stoker Award. John holds M.A. degrees in Creative Writing from Antioch University Midwest and Ohio University. He is a frequent speaker at conferences, universities, and libraries, and on podcasts, radio, and television. You can find out more about John on his website, johnkachuba.com.

A BOY IS IN DANGER WHEN HE STUMBLES UPON A CRIME
COMMITTED BY TWO PROMINENT MEN OF HIS TOWN, BUT FINDS
AN UNUSUAL ALLY IN THE FORM OF A CASTLE GHOST.

Twelve-year-old Haycorn may know all about ghosts of Ohio, but even he is stunned when he and his friend Budge encounter a ghost in a castle.

The boys witness a clandestine meeting there between two men involving a kick-back scheme, putting their lives, and that of Haycorn's mother, in jeopardy.

But the ghost may have other plans for all of them.

"The premise of this ghosthunters' story is as delicious as the beautifully rendered voice that John Kachuba brings to his characters and prose, in a way that's comfortably familiar and excitingly off-center in the same read."

Chris Tebbetts, co-author (with James Patterson), Middle School, *The Worst Years of My Life*

"With a name like Haycorn, you're destined for big adventures, but it's also the smaller things, like friendship, family and crushes, that make this boy's story a winner. Mystery, history, friendships and family resilience come together in this fun story for readers both young and old."

Sara Bennett Wealer, author of *Grave Things Like Love* and *Now and When*

"The beating heart of this engaging story is twelve-year-old Haycorn Smith, a character as unique as his name. With its crisp prose and engaging characters, young readers (and adults as well) will love this story of an intrepid twelve-year-old with the moxie to do the right thing, even when he's compelled to break the rules."

Raul Ramos y Sanchez, award-winning author of *Mustang to Paducah*



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