

## Grampy Hagen's Tale

Steven Schmidt

"They's some folks what believes in haints," said Grampy Hagen. We, my brother Johnnie and I, were ready for bed, but first we huddled together in front of the fire while Grampy Hagen sat in the big old oak rocking chair. "Yes, sir, some folks believes in haints 'n spooks 'n things. But I weren't one of 'em, no sir! Leastwise, not afore I spent the night in the cabin down in the holler by the Willow Creek wash."

Grampy bent over to fetch up an ember so he could light up his pipe. He grabbed up a smoking twig; then he looked us square in the face and asked, "You boys believe in haints?" Johnnie shook his head. He was almost ten and a half and more than a whole year older 'n me. So I shook my head too.

"Why I'd have thought sure that you boys hada believe in haints 'n goblins 'n spooks."

"Tell us what happened in the Holler!" said Johnnie. "Yeah, tell us, Grampy," I said.

"Well, I reckon I could tell you," Grampy mused, "but it won't scare you much, seein'g's how you don't believe in haints."

Grampy lay back in the rocker and puffed on his pipe awhile. Johnnie 'n me lay on the pillow we'd snatched off the sofa.

"Before I come up here, I lived way down in North Carolina. Near the town of Boomer, my pappy's farm was.

"Well, down the road a couple o' miles was this dry wash called Willow Creek. An' back when my pappy was about yer age, there was this feller named Holder who built hisself a cabin down there. He never had no wife, nor family, nor nuthin'. He just lived there all alone, 'cept he had a pet o' sorts. A big ol' bobcat it was. Biggest wildcat in the county, folks said. Anyways, a feller down to Taylorsville, name a' Zach, got hisself murdered. This feller Zach ran a feed store 'n sold chickens and pork on the side. An' when they found

him murdered, they found, too, these big ol' tracks outside the door. Cat tracks they was: big ones too! So they came up to the wash 'n 'rested Holder an' took him away an' hung him. Folks said he 'n that cat o' his been takin' birds 'n stock off-a the farms round abouts and sold 'em to the feller Zach, only Zach never paid him what he promised.

"Anyway, when they took old man Holder away, that cat just caused all sorts of trouble so one of the sheriff's men took a big ol' knife an' cut off its head. Ever since then nobody lived in that cabin 'cause they said it was 'hainted.

"Well, when my brother Felix 'n me was round yer age, we figer'd we might just go there an' see for ourselves if'n it were hainted or not.

"We got to the cabin long about sundown 'n we scouted 'round a bit, then Felix reckoned how he had better get on back home 'cause Mama would worry if'n both of us was out the whole night long. He weren't scared but he knew Mama would be if'n least one of us warn't home.



"So, I watched him head on back, then I gathered up some tinder 'n built me a nice fire on the hearth. I broke out my kit bag 'n started fryin' me up a nice platter o' bacon 'n 'taters. They was jest about crisp 'n brown when I heard this thump come from upstairs. Then came the sound of feet coming all soft 'n quiet down the stairs. I turned and looked 'n I saw the yeller body of a big old Bobcat just a' standing on the stair! He was the biggest ol' cat I'd ever seen! Only he didn't have no head!"

"Weren't you all scared, Grampy?" Johnnie asked. I didn't say nothing; I just moved a little closer to Grampy's big red slippers and chewed a bit on the corner of the pillow.

"Well, I'll tell you. I weren't scared at first. That's cause I'd always heard that spooks 'n haints couldn't hurt nothing that was real. So I just set there watching him. That big ol' headless cat started to move closer, so I set down my pan with the taters 'n bacon in it and I went on over to check the door. Dang, if that cat didn't jest walk on over to my pan, set down and eat my whole blamed supper!"

"But, Grampy." I tugged on the leg of his pajamas. "How could the cat eat your dinner if he didn't have no head?"

"Why, he just grabbed at the bacon with his claws 'n tossed it up to where his head outta be 'n dang me if'n it didn't jest disappear!"

Johnnie dug his elbow into my side and said, "See, I told you!"

"Now, boys, when that cat had finished the whole pan, he kind of looked in my direction 'n scratched where his nose oughta be. I was standing by the door, you see, noticing how well-made the latch was. Yes, sir, I was really a-studying that latch while that cat jest sort o' crept my way. You know, it was a wonderful made latch. Yessir, there was something wonderful 'bout the way that lock was made. It hadn't been used for years, yet it still worked as clean 'n easy as one fresh from the store.

"By now that cat was, oh 'bout eight-nine feet away from me 'n he started to tuck hisself all up in a lump, like a tabby cat a'gettin' ready to set upon a field mouse, 'n his stubby ol' tail was just a-beating back an' forth. It was 'bout that time I thought I'd step outside 'n get a good look at that latch. It opened so easy, you see. And when it was down?—why, shoo, a herd a' cattle couldn't have busted it open. I took a couple o' good steps out into the yard so I could get a good

idea jest how the latch laid in the door. When all of a sudden of like, that dag-blamed ol' cat jest took a jump at me! Right through the door! Jest like two inches o' pine warn't nuthin' but smoke!

"Shoo, if I didn't light outa there like the devil hisself was after me! I must 've run most nearly a mile before I stopped 'n set a while on a rock. I jest sat there by the roadside, tryin' to get my wind back. I looked back toward the cabin, but there weren't nuthin' to see. I felt the wind change an' come blow in my face, and when I turned back toward town, there sat that dag cat! Just sittin' there in the road, pretty as you please. He looked at me an' said, "That was one hell of a race we jest had, wahren't it?"

We both cried out all at once, "What happened then, Grampy! What happened?"

"Why, nuthin'!" Grampy smiled as he shook out his pipe in the fireplace. Then he stood up and gathered us up in his arms and took us into our bedroom. He laid us on our bed before he spoke. "They found me there the next morning, asleep in the grass by the road. We went back to the cabin that day, but there wahren't nuthin' left. The fire I'd left had sent the whole cabin up in smoke. We looked through the ashes, but didn't find nuthin' 'cept two things—my fry-pan and the charred bones of a wildcat!"

