

knew there was no way to stop a haystack fire once it got started.

I crumbled into my father's arms and we held each other until the fire and the screaming both died down. There was nothing more we could do.

The next day the sheriff came out and listened to my story. After I was done, he went out and checked the ashes of the haystack fire. There, in its midst, he found a set of bones. The bones of a little girl. From the looks of the body, she'd been dead about a year.

THE HAUNTED HAYSTACK

A Ghost Story For Brave Souls



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got there, he turned around, encouraging me to come to him.

Just before I reached him, he turned his back to me and hunched his shoulders. My gut wrenched. I could only hope that he wasn't planning to sacrifice himself for me.

He wasn't.

As soon as the haystack reached the edge of the burned field, my father turned around. A beacon of light burst from the torch which he held high in his hand.

As I passed him, he hurled the torch into the haystack. The haystack quickly backed away, but it was too late. The fire had begun to catch.

Quickly the flames raced around the sides and up to the top. A hideous scream filled the air, and suddenly my heart stopped beating.

"Toby," it yelled one last time, and this time I recognized the voice. It belonged to my sister. The one we'd lost the year before.

I could tell by the look on my father's face that he had heard it too. Suddenly he covered his face with his hands and fell to the ground.

I stood for a moment, paralyzed with fear. There was nothing to do. The only water was at the farm house, 500 yards away. And from past experience I

Within seconds my worst fears were realized as the rustling sound appeared behind me again. This time, though, it was accompanied by a pitiful sobbing. The haystack was crying!

"Again," my father yelled, bringing me out of the shock. "Now."

I rolled to the side as before, but this time immediately sprang back up to my feet. I knew if I allowed my muscles to relax for one second, they would refuse to work for me again.

I was up just after the boom sounded. It didn't do any good. The crying and rustling was right behind me, only this time it was louder.

"Head for the lower forty," my father yelled. I couldn't believe he'd think I had the strength to make it another 500 yards beyond the house, but he did. I had never disobeyed a direct order from my father, so I had no choice now, even though I knew I would probably be dead before I reached it.

Just as I passed the house, my father sprinted out the door. He had something in his hands, but I couldn't see what it was.

"Come on, son," he yelled. He ran ahead of me to the field we had burned off just the day before.

I staggered forward, barely able to remain upright. He didn't wait for me, but hurried on ahead. When he

THE HAUNTED HAYSTACK

A year ago my little sister disappeared. She just walked out into the hayfields one day and never came back. It was the most traumatic experience of my life. Until last night.

Last night I went out with some friends from a neighboring farm. We went into town and had dinner. Then we went to a movie.

It was great because it was a scary movie. I was sitting next to Mary Lou Pendergrass and every time she got scared, she huddled real close to me. By the end of the movie I had my arm around her shoulders and was holding her close.

After the movie we went to the soda shop and got chocolate malts. Mary Lou and I shared one. That meant that when we both went to suck the straw at the same time, our faces were real close together.

Anyway, by the end of the evening I was feeling pretty good. We all piled into Robert Morgan's car and headed home. After we dropped the girls off, we headed to Robert's place. I was going to walk home from there.

I didn't mind walking because our farms aren't that far apart. If you go the direct route it's only a mile or so across the edge of their field and then through mine. If you go by way of the road, you have to go clear back out to the highway and then about four miles to the next turn off, and then make your way back.

Besides, the way I was feeling, I was planning on floating home instead of walking.

Anyway, by the time I started back it was after midnight. As I climbed over the fence that separated our properties, I heard a rustling sound off to my right. It sounded like somebody was climbing into a haystack to hide. And there were plenty of haystacks around. We'd just finished cutting it the week before, and it was stacked in huge beautiful piles all over the field.

"Who's there?" I asked. No one answered, so I called a little louder. "Who's there?"

Only silence came back.

I decided maybe I'd been hearing things. It was probably nothing more than a haystack settling a bit.



I screamed again and my legs found the strength to make another leap forward.

The wind must have been blowing at my back, because it carried the sound of this scream to the house. I saw a light go on in my parents' upstairs room. I screamed again and my dad's head peered out the window.

He must have not been sure about what he saw, because he swung open the window and stuck his head out for a better look. A second later his head disappeared, then he reappeared with his shotgun.

I knew we weren't in range yet, and I was glad. I wasn't sure he knew it was me and not some maniac running across the field toward him.

"Dad, help me," I screamed.

"Keep coming," he yelled. "Then when I yell now, you hit the ground."

A second later his call came. I was ready for it, but instead of just dropping to the ground, I sprung to the side and rolled behind another haystack. The boom from the double barrels split the night.

I saw little tufts of hay leap from the haystack, but I refused to wait long enough to see if it fell. Even though my body resented it, I forced it to begin running again.

They do that. Every so often a clump of hay decides it doesn't like where it's sitting and rolls down the side until it finds a place more to its liking.

My head tried to tell me that's what it was, but my heart refused to believe it. Somehow the night felt sinister. It was probably the movie we'd seen.

I continued on my way, walking a little faster than before, when suddenly I heard the noise following me. I turned around quickly, but nothing was there. Just the haystacks around me.

I looked around, trying to catch sight of movement from someplace, but I didn't see any. Those haystacks were plenty big to hide behind though.

I finally decided my best bet was to head for the house. I did so, but I didn't want whoever it was to think I was scared, so I just walked fast. I tried forcing out a careless whistle, but it sounded more like a strangled gasp so I gave it up.

As soon as I started moving forward, the rustling behind me started again. I stopped and swung around.

There, directly behind me was a haystack. I knew I hadn't just walked around it or through it. Somehow it had just moved there.

I kept my eyes glued to it and began backing up. It moved with me. My heart thumped within my chest,

but I forced my legs to stop. The haystack also stopped, but a little closer than I was comfortable with.

I quickly backed up some more and it followed. That's when I started running. I knew I still had over half a mile to go before I got home. I also knew that, even though I was a good farm worker, farm work didn't often include running long distances at top speed.



Somehow my legs found the strength. They started flying toward the farmhouse faster than they'd ever run before.

Before I was halfway there, my lungs started screaming for more air. I opened my mouth as wide as it would go to try and get more in, but it didn't help. I could feel my whole body getting tired.

I screamed as loud as I could, even though I knew I was too far away from the farmhouse to wake my parents from sleep.

It was as though the sound woke up my brain. "Don't scream," it told me. "You'll use up your air." It was hard to listen to myself. The screaming had drowned out the rustling sound that kept getting closer and closer.

My mind ran faster than my legs, trying to find a legitimate answer to what was happening. But it couldn't find one. Then it started thinking of insane things, like "Maybe you could hide in a haystack and make it come alive and scare the haystack that was chasing you." I know it sounds stupid, but at the time I actually considered it.

Just when I thought I could run no further the haystack gave me more energy.

"Toooooobyyyyy," it wailed in a long, drawn out rustle, sounding almost like a far away child.