

# The Hay Devils

by Colin P. Davies

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**Editor's Foreword:** Never mind my intro—let's just dive right into this great tale...

Every July Dad would put me on the Greyhound, wave a hearty goodbye, and shout, "House'll be hollow without you!" Then I'd clamber up on the seat to hoist my bag onto the rack and listen as he pounded the horn in his rusty old pick-up. This year that parting call sounded more forlorn than ever. To my early-adolescent mind, Dad was becoming increasingly odd and worryingly isolated. Lately, I'd woken at night to hear him talking to Mom. The next day he would confess to me how much he still missed her.

But, for the next month, I could put all that behind me. I was off, a hundred miles to the west, to Granddad's farm; an Illinois retreat for me and my cousins Ray, Suzie and little Sam. It would be a time of picnics and perfect sunshine, of bicycles in the dust and splashing in the cool river.

As the bus moved out of the city, exchanging the squalor of the slums for the lawns and colonnades of the suburban estates, my thoughts were already racing ahead along the road. This holiday would be so much more memorable.

"This year..." I told myself. "This year I aim to catch me a Hay Devil."

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Granddad met me at the bus stop. He sheltered from the afternoon sun under Gran's yellow parasol—I no longer questioned whether this was eccentricity or bravado. He ruffled my hair, picked up my bag, and led me towards his battered red Buick. The pipe never left his lips and neither did he light it. As agreed, not a word passed between us until we were safely in the car. *The fields have ears*, Granddad would say.

The engine coughed to life and the fan began to squeal in a hopeless attempt to suck coolness out of the overheated air. Granddad turned the radio on. Dean Martin...too loud and too slick. I wiped sweat from my eyebrows.

"Can I put the window down, Grandpa?"

He took the pipe and slipped it into the breast pocket of his shirt. A scorch mark revealed that he'd got that wrong on at least one occasion. But my Granddad was a hero; he understood what mattered to us, what made us tick. I knew he had a special empathy with children, and my plan for this summer was in no way intended as a put down. No, it was more a celebration. This summer we would show him that we'd finally grown up, and left behind our childhood fantasies.

"They may be shy in the sun, Johnny... Don't want to be seen. But they sure like listening." He tapped the glass with a knuckle. "So let's save the window till we get moving."

"Are there many about today?" I gazed out at a world of grass—a yellow ocean with only an occasional haystack for an island. "They certainly keep their heads down."

“Like I’ve told you, they listen.” He twisted around in his seat. His teeth were a white blaze against his tanned, grey-whiskered face. That beard was new and untidy, as though he’d only recently thrown away his razor. “Let me see you properly.”

Too much attention made me squirm. “I’m still not shaving.”

“Lord...look at you. I’d swear you’ve put six inches on those legs. Another year and you’ll be taller than your Mom.”

I’d been told my Mom had been a tall woman. I only remembered her as being warm and essential, and one day suddenly not there.

With an abruptness that slapped the back of my head into the hot leather, we were off down the track. The farm was only ten minutes to the north. A cloud of tan dust drifted across the parched fields as we passed.

\* \* \*

Ray, Suzie and Sam had arrived at the farm yesterday and were wedged into the tiny tree house when, in a scatter of chickens, we pulled into the yard. The kids nearly tumbled down the ladder in their haste to meet me.

Ray was the fastest. “Hi Johnny. See any Devils on the way from town?”

“Hi John.” Suzie always called me John. I think it made her feel more sophisticated.

Little Sam, a boy of enormous height but limited intelligence for his twelve years, welcomed me with a bear-hug which left my tennis shoes kicking in the air. “Hello Sam,” I squeaked. He placed me down gently.

Ray edged in closer. “Did you bring the key?” he whispered.

I nodded. “I brought a whole bunch.”

While Granddad ducked back into the car, I took the keys from my jacket pocket and rattled them for Ray. I heard the car door slam and slipped the keys out of sight again.

“Okay kids. Inside for some refreshments. Ray, you fetch the lemonade. Suzie, you cut up some bread. I’ve just got to wash this dust out of my beard.” Granddad carried my bag into the house with Ray and Suzie close in tow.

I looked at Sam, who stood there with inane pleasure on his dry lips. Then I turned back to the house. The sight of that white mansion stirred all kinds of memories. Now, however, I could see the paint was cracked and bleached, like skin that had seen too many hard years. That upstairs room, with the little dormer window that allowed only a tight beam of sunlight to crawl across the carpet, that was where I would sleep. Granddad had told me it used to be his and Gran’s room. After Gran died, he’d moved into the room which used to be Mom’s, at the back of the house, where the window looked out over the kitchen lean-to and gave a better view of the chicken shed.

I’d realised some years ago that the kitchen roof and the water butt below provided a negotiable route down to ground—for a man like Granddad: he might be hoarding the years, but he was still lithe as a cougar.

I grabbed Sam's sleeve. "I've got the key. Remember last year? We made a plan."

Sam's eyes darted fitfully as though chasing a bashful thought.

"Well, this year we'll do it," I said. "This is the last year for the Hay Devils."

Sam lowered himself to his knees. He raised his hand, axe-like, then chopped it to the ground. Dust billowed. He remembered.

"That's right," I said. "Granddad's going to learn he's not Orson Welles...and we don't believe in Martians."

\* \* \*

That evening we all huddled around the log fire. A cool wind had started up and Granddad's present tale of siege by winter snow made the flames more welcoming still. I watched flickering reflections on the brass poker handle and was drifting wonderfully when the clock on the mantelpiece clanged its tinny celebration of the hour. Granddad was smiling at me with a warmth greater than anything the fire could offer.

After a supper of home-made crumpets and Granddad's special-recipe chocolate cookies, he entertained us with card tricks and sleight of hand. The fire crackled; we gasped and laughed. We were enthralled. Our Granddad was so amazing!

One year he showed us photos from his time in Europe, in the air force. He displayed scars on his arm from the time he'd had to bail out over marshland, without a parachute.

Another year he set up a tightrope between the oak tree and the porch and, with a pitchfork for balance and his trousers tucked into his socks, mimicked Gravelet's epic Niagara stunt.

Just last year he produced a bow and arrows and proceeded to give a demonstration of skill which lacked only splitting an apple on Sam's head.

For so long now he'd been an inspiration to me, an example of strength in the face of calamity. They tell me that when Mom died he kept Gran from slipping into madness. Then when Gran had followed five years later, he had carried on with great fortitude. At the funeral he didn't cry. He was so strong and in control. I admired that; I thought I understood it.

The following year he'd instituted the summer vacation for us kids and provided us with a wonderland of fun and adventure. That's when we'd first learned of the Hay Devils—of his experiments in Peruvian shamanism and of his foolish mistake which had allowed the creatures to slip through the fracture between their world and ours. He told us he had sworn never to dabble in magic again.

"Tell us about the shaman," I said.

He settled back into his armchair. "Again? How many times do you have to hear it?"

"Tell us something new." I wanted to test his powers of recall...or invention. "Why did he come to you?"

"Actually, I went to him. He was passing through. Everyone was talking. I was curious." He took the pipe from his pocket and tapped the stem on his nose. "I've told you before."

I glanced at Suzie. She seemed troubled.

"That might have satisfied me last year," I said. "But I'm older now. I just don't buy it."

Granddad sighed and stared into the flames.

Suzie threw me a glare, but I didn't regret my challenge.

"I'd heard he could do things," said Granddad. "Meddle with life and death. It was a bad time for me. I'd lost my daughter. I had to know if death was a one-way street."

I leaned forward. "You mean he said he could bring back the dead?"

"He said he knew how...and like the old fool I was, I parted with a large sum of money."

The room was silent except for the crackling of the logs.

Then Ray said, "You mean like...*zombies*?"

Granddad caught my eye and exploded with laughter. After a moment, I laughed too. The others followed.

He was a mischievous old man, full of childish spirit.

But this evening, as he ushered us up the stairs to bed, this evening with the wind gathering and the house creaking and the stars cold and hard through the small-paned windows, I detected a weariness about him, a resignation to something....

I hesitated at the top of the staircase as he went to the parlour window and gazed out. He tilted his head, as though he was watching something.

"What is it, Grandpa?" I said quietly. I think I surprised him.

"Oh, just the wind, Johnny." He returned to the foot of the stairs. His eyes were oddly animated in the dim electric light. "Don't you worry yourself. By the time the Devils come rummaging, you'll be well asleep."

And then I felt better. He was still playing the game; or so I figured it. He was a master at this kind of thing.

Years ago he had explained how the Hay Devils would skulk around the farm buildings at night, to root out the detrius from the human day. They collected, they hoarded, and for what? No-one knew, and no-one had ever seen them. Once, I'd asked him if they were dangerous and his tardy reply had been a silent shake of his head. He'd seemed unsure of his own story and I'd rummaged for another question to unbalance him. But a dry finger had pressed to my lips. "Fear is the danger," he had said.

Now I went to bed, comforted by this return to tradition. I needed a good night's sleep. Tomorrow night I had other things to do.

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The next day was a Sunday and, as always, Granddad trooped us off to church, which was odd for me as Dad had stopped attending and abandoned praying eight months back. Granddad had insisted I wash and brush up. My gums still throbbed from the toothbrush and my sandy hair had never been so neat, brushed back behind my ears and flattened down with a touch of oil.

On the way home, Granddad drove with one arm resting in the open window and sang hymns. Ray was happy to join in, while Suzie scribbled in a notebook; she wanted to be a poet. I stared out of the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of significant movement in the fields, but there was only the gentle

swaying of grass.

Sam and Ray were bundled into the back seat with me, while Suzie got the comfort of the front seat. I didn't mind, but Ray, her brother and younger by two years only, was peeved. He stretched forward and pinched Suzie's bare arm. She yelped, then turned and tried to swat him with her notebook.

"Come on kids," Granddad said. "With my old eyes, it's hard enough as it is to keep this thing on the track."

Ray leaned on me to escape Suzie's swipes. "Punch him for me, John," she said. Ray's elbow ground into my thigh. I yelped and shoved him off.

"Little Miss Sophisticated likes a good fight," he said.

Suzie faced forward again, frustrated, and Ray sat back, smiling. "Granddad?" he said. "Did you hear the noises last night?" I noticed Granddad glance in the mirror.

"Noises? No, Ray." He scratched at his thin beard. "I slept like a new-born."

"What noises?" I asked.

Sweat shone on Ray's forehead, glistened in his cropped black hair. "I thought I heard a dragging noise.... First close to the house, then fading away." He appeared to shudder, though that could have been simply the car hitting yet another lump in the road. "And I think something tried the door."

"Just a dream, baby brother," said Suzie. Her compact, black curls bobbed as she laughed.

"Heard it too. I...heard it too." That was Sam. He didn't say much, but he also had never mastered the art of lying.

I shook my head. "And you slept through all this, Grandpa?"

"If I'd let those Devils keep me from my sleep, I'd have lost my farm, and my mind, years ago."

Sam grunted with what I took to be agreement.

"And what about you? What did you hear, Johnny?" Granddad asked.

"I've heard them before," I countered.

"And remember," said Suzie. "Last year they took all those dimes we left for them."

I said, "When the Devils are on the move in the early hours, you've always been asleep in your room. Ain't that right, Granddad?"

"With the window locked," he added.

Suddenly he stamped on the brake and pulled over to the side of the road. A front wheel found a pothole and the car came to an abrupt, juddering halt. Suzie slid off the seat and hit the floor with a thud. "What was...? Did you see that?" Granddad said.

Suzie scrambled back onto the seat. "I just broke my pencil!"

Granddad threw open his creaking door and almost fell into the field. He jabbed the air with his forefinger. "See that haystack!" It was about a hundred yards away. "I'm sure I saw something move.

There.... To the right.”

Yes, there was something...something dark. Possibly. My heart was racing. My God! He could be right.

“Okay,” said Granddad, without taking his eyes off his target. “Are you ready, kids? Charge!” And with that, he was off across the field, running with head-down determination, arms punching like pistons. We glanced at each other and followed. The race was on. It was not a question of who would beat Granddad—none of us would—but of which kid would be the first to see a Hay Devil.

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So I ran. I ran as if everything depended on running. I ran to prove I was right and in the childlike hope I was wrong. The sharp, dry grass crunched under my feet and, as the warm wind flapped against my cheeks, I ran back...through all summer...through all the summers, until finally I tumbled to the ground, a giggling, gasping city-boy on his first holiday in the countryside.

I was coughing with laughter when Granddad looked back at me.

Suzie’s pretty forehead folded into a bemused frown. “You’re covered with grass, Johnny.”

But I didn’t care.

We circled the haystack. Our prey was surrounded. Nothing had come out.

“Do you really believe it’s in there, Grandpa?” I said.

A good fifteen paces around, the haystack was half as tall again as Granddad.

“Of course it is,” said Suzie.

Ray began to tear at the wall of hay. “Not for long.”

Suzie sneered. “Another brilliant plan from baby brother. Granddad...do they bite?”

Abruptly Ray stopped and edged away. He placed his hands on his hips and pouted. “It’s in there, I know it. We can’t let it get away.”

“What should we do, Grandpa?” I asked.

He took the pipe from his pocket and placed the stem between his teeth.

“How about we make a lot of noise,” said Suzie. She began to clap and yelp whilst charging at, and retreating from, the haystack.

Sam joined in, making thunderclaps with his giant hands.

I began whooping and Ray let out a scream so piercing it raised the birds from the riverside trees a quarter mile away.

This lasted all of thirty seconds, then faded into embarrassment.

No terrified, or terrifying, creature had emerged from the haystack.

“What now,” said Ray. “We can’t let it get away. We might never get another chance.”

“If it’s even in there,” I said. I was beginning to feel foolish.

“Oh, it’s in there,” said Granddad. “I have an idea.”

We watched as he patiently took out his tobacco pouch and filled his pipe. He struck a match and drew the pipe to life.

Then he threw the match onto the haystack.

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As we drove away down the bumpy track, I gazed out of the rear window at the diminishing plume of grey smoke. I had hardly regained my breath since the mad rush for the car. That had been wild, ridiculous. I was dumbfounded and, at the same time, touched with admiration. I had to hand it to Granddad; just when I’d thought I had this game figured out, he’d raised it to a new, and totally unforeseen, level.

No way would we ever know if there had been a creature trapped in that inferno. We could hardly stick around to find out. By the morning, there would be only wet ashes, a clueless calling card from the local firefighters.

When we arrived back at the farm, Granddad hurried us out of the car and announced, “Okay kids. That’s enough fun for this morning. Now we’ve got chickens to feed.”

For the rest of the day, Granddad was much more sprightly than usual. He whistled and cracked old jokes. He was obviously pleased with his performance. He was back in control. In this crazy game of poker, he’d called our bluff, and now he figured the game was his.

But I still held an ace.

I had the key.

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That evening the wind was cool and stiff. No clouds obstructed the moon’s eerie light.

From my bedroom I could see the outlines of the barn and the oak with the tree house. Closer to the farmhouse, that gargoyle shadow was the rusty old tractor, abandoned now for a year, since Sam blew out the tire with Granddad’s shotgun. Even then, Granddad had been calm and understanding; I couldn’t see why I now needed so desperately to defeat him.

Ray crept into the room. “Granddad went to bed an hour ago. Something should happen soon.”

We met Suzie and Sam on the landing and, together, we carefully negotiated the staircase, avoiding the steps we’d already identified as creakers. The thin curtains in the parlour appeared luminous.

“Can’t we have some light?” Suzie asked quietly.

“No,” I said. “Use the moonlight, what there is of it, and walk carefully.”

In the fireplace, embers still glowed.

Ray could have found his way to the pantry blindfolded and he soon emerged with a bottle of cool lemonade. It was drinks all round for the conspirators. Sam located a jar of cookies. I wondered if John Wilkes Booth had shared a secret supper like this before heading off to the theater.

“Listen...” said Sam. “Johnny...I hear...”

He was right. A dragging sound. It came from beyond the front door. I rushed to the nearby window and peeked around the curtain, but there was nothing to be seen.

“Over here,” said Ray, a little too loud. He was at the opposite end of the parlour, by the kitchen. We froze...and listened. Yes, a gentle sound, like a rat gnawing wood.

Somebody’s quick on their feet, I thought.

But the dragging was at the front door again. Something scratched against the heavy wood. I tried to imagine how the old genius could have rigged that.

Suzie had her face through the curtains. “Oh Lord,” she whispered. “Look, look...*oh Lord!*”

I swept the curtains aside. Dark shapes, small, a multitude, darting about the shadowed farmyard. I counted twenty, no, thirty of them. I could feel my heart protesting. A cold unsteadiness threatened to topple me. Then I became aware of the familiarity of the sounds from outside. That couldn’t be the sound of Devils, surely not...they were chickens!

I eased my clamped fingers from the window cill. “Someone’s let the chickens out.”

“Quick,” said Ray. “Into the kitchen.”

We raced across the parlour. I crashed into a table. Pain flared in my hip.

It was darker here. Ray directed our attention to the back door knob. I couldn’t see well, so I took hold of the polished wood. Something turned the knob, something stronger than me. The door shook against the top and bottom bolts.

Then the front door rattled violently.

That scared me. That really scared me. Any remaining doubts I had about exposing the old fraudster were swept away in a conflagration of anger. I clutched the keys in my pocket. One of these keys would end this nonsense for ever.

“Okay,” I said. “Follow me.”

I charged up those stairs. The others followed.

I arrived at Granddad’s bedroom. I produced the keys and put my hand gently to the door. “Put the light on! It doesn’t matter anymore.”

Ray flipped the switch and a bulb glowed.

I took a key at random and inserted it into the lock.

I’d borrowed the keys from my Dad’s drawer. He’d shown them to me once and explained that they were Mom’s, and included a duplicate to her old bedroom at the farm—the room Granddad now occupied. Dad had said he couldn’t bring himself to throw them out.

The first key failed. I tried the second key and the lock shifted. I turned the knob and slowly opened the door. My cousins bunched up behind me.

It would be safe right now, as Granddad could not yet have scaled back up the kitchen roof and in



through the window, not with all those noises continuing outside and the whole ensemble being louder and bolder than ever.

It did not surprise me that a dim tablelamp was on. With the door opened fully, I could see that he was not in the bed—that it had not been slept in tonight. Then I noticed the walls, the framed photographs, dozens of them...and they were of Mom. Some, Dad had shown me, while others were new to me; but that little girl with the big eyes and straight, black hair was clearly my Mom.

I moved to the window and tore open the curtains.

The window was locked...from the inside.

I pressed my nose to the cool glass. The tin roof of the chicken shed was pale with moonlight and dotted with scuttling shadows.

Suzie was crying.

I ran to her and grabbed her elbow. “What is it?”

She was staring down into the corner of the room, but Sam and Ray were in my way and I couldn’t see. I pushed between them.

Granddad was kneeling on the floor, rocking back and forth, and weeping.

“Grandpa!” I yelled. “What is it? What’s happening?”

“I...I think they know,” he cried. “They know it was me that burned one of them.”

My stomach clenched. I thought I was going to throw up. How could my Grandpa be...crying?

He put his wet face in his hands. He was terrified

I realised then that he had always been terrified. That was why he locked his room.

“I’m sorry, Grandpa. I’m sorry. I didn’t believe...”

“Johnny,” he said. His voice was lean, tired. “I tried to bring back your Mom.” He shook his head and gazed at the floor. “I’m sorry.”

I dropped to my knees and grasped his gnarled old hand. My eyes misted.

“She was so young,” he said. “How could God take her away from us so young?”

I sat back on the floor and strained to suck in breath; the air was resilient. The others stared at me, but I had nothing to offer. What did I know? What did I understand about anything?

“It was the Devils killed your Gran. She went out to see to the chickens one night. It was December...cold. They surprised her—her heart couldn’t take it.”

Glass smashed downstairs. It sounded like a window. I ran to the doorway, but Sam beat me to it. “Get back, Sam.” I grabbed his arms and moved him aside and ventured out onto the landing.

Something was shuffling in the parlour.

I don’t know where I found the courage—perhaps I was simply numb—but I stood at the top of the stairs, with the lamp bright above my head, and spoke to the shadows.

“Leave him alone! He’s just an old man.”

More shuffling and the tinkling of glass. I imagined other creatures were coming through the window.

A shadow detached from the blackness and drifted to the foot of the stairs. The creature was small and squat, like a hunched, fat child and it was featureless black. Its knees and elbows were angular and sharp, like no natural flesh.

I gripped the handrail. I was trembling and cold.

The Devil put one foot on the stairs, then the other. It was coming up.

Ray called to me, “Johnny. Get back in here...we’ve got to lock the door.”

But I couldn’t move yet. There was something else about the creature.... Then I realised that its head was down. Its face was hidden.

The Devil continued up towards me. I prepared to run, if my legs would carry me.

Then the creature raised its head and my Mom was looking at me. No...not my Mom, but a mocking parody of her face. Her eyes were never bottomless black, her smile never so wide.

My head pounded with suppressed screams. I ran for the bedroom, slammed the door behind me and locked it.

We all backed away.

First there was nothing, no sound at all. Then the door shook and the knob turned. The creature began to hurl itself at the door, but the wood held.

“Granddad?” I said. “Why is this happening now? They’ve never attacked before—never broken in. It was only ever noises and things going missing.”

“I raised the stakes...the level of aggression,” he said. “It’s my fault. They’re only a reflection of my mind.”

Whatever he meant by that, it was certain that the Devils were determined to get to us—or him.

“The window!” I said. “Check the window.”

Suzie ran across the room. She gasped. “They’re on the roof, right outside. Oh Lord, Johnny...the faces!”

“I know,” I said.

Suzie screamed as glass shattered. Shards fell across the carpet.

“Johnny...the photographs.” Granddad was talking, though his eyes were not on us. “It’s the photographs they want the most...they’ve always wanted them.”

I grabbed the framed photographs of my Mom from the wall and tossed them, one by one, out through the broken window. There was no sound of impact—they never hit the shingles. After a minute I approached the window. The photographs and the Devils were gone.

I dropped down beside Granddad. I leaned against him; he didn’t move away, but he would not look at

me. "You've lived with the Devils for years, Grandpa. You knew what they wanted. Why didn't you just give them the photos?"

I watched a tear fall from his chin to land on his aged hand.

"One day..." he said. "One day you'll understand."

He slipped into silence then and there was nothing we could do to bring him back. He had suffered the grief and fear for too long. His eyes were open, but they appeared focussed on a different time.

For hours we huddled together listening to the shuffling, the scratching, the collecting—an occasional crash from downstairs would bring a whimper from Sam—until finally the sky became peach and we were alone.

\* \* \*

The next day, Sam and I walked into town and I telephoned home from the post office. My Dad arranged for a local doctor to call to the farm and Granddad was admitted to hospital.

The sheriff came round to the farm to help us pack and lock up. He explained that arrangements had been made for the chickens, then drove us to the bus stop. We sat on our bags, but talked little. Eventually the westbound bus appeared in the distance. My bus would be some time yet.

"I guess this is a long-time goodbye," I said to my cousins as we stood up. "I'll see you...." I couldn't swallow. "Sometime."

I shook hands with Sam and Ray and hugged Suzie briefly. "Bye, Johnny," she said.

As I watched them bundle their bags onto the bus, I thought back over our plan. Well, it had been mostly my plan. Perhaps if I had not driven Granddad so hard in my attempts to prove he was a benevolent trickster.... I stood there, limp with guilt.

Then Suzie ran up, kissed me on the cheek, whispered, "Don't," and dashed back to the bus.

Yes, she was sophisticated; I was not to blame.

Granddad never returned home. The furniture was sold and the chickens were acquired by a neighbor. The white mansion stood hollow, blind to the windblown dust and deaf to the night-time scuttling. Stories spread of how, over a matter of weeks, the farm was slowly dismantled, board by board, nail by nail. Soon no-one would go near.

Today the land is pristine, except for a solitary, boney tree and the lonely carcass of what used to be a tractor. A mass of corroded metal too solid to be dismantled, it remains as a last memory of a man who was too good to be true and of a farm which was collected.