

# The Ghost in the Swing



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by

Janet Patton Smith

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The ghost in the swing.

SUMMARY: A twelve-year-old girl visits her aunt and makes friends with

a ghost inhabiting the house.

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This story is for my two favorite girls—Sandra,  
who will grow up someday, and Carole, who did.



JOAN CLAYTON SAT quietly next to her father in the front seat of the car and watched the warm summer countryside whiz by. Now and then a fluffy white cloud covered the bright sun, darkening the patch-work landscape.

Joan hadn't seen a house for miles, and a feeling of loneliness was beginning to creep up her spine. It was a feeling almost strong enough to make her wish her little sister were in the backseat, even if Sara might be blowing bubble gum bubbles close to her ear.

But then Joan remembered a tearful session at the beauty shop. If it hadn't been for Sara and her bubble gum, Joan would have had the longest hair in the seventh grade.

Mr. Clayton was talking, but Joan hardly paid any

attention. Her father was using his "pretend-happy" voice, but his eyes didn't shine and his hands were tight on the steering wheel. No one seemed to smile a genuine smile anymore. The cold metal of her twirler's baton balanced against her leg added a new shiver of apprehension.

There hadn't been much fun for Joan since her parents' separation. She carried sadness inside her as if it had been her fault. Her father had explained that sometimes things happened and it wasn't really anyone's fault, but explanations didn't ease the hurt. Joan thought that perhaps her mother and father got tired of hearing her and her sister squabble. Or maybe it was because Sara always spilled her milk or because Joan would forget to make her bed, on purpose sometimes. Her mother and father quarreled, and she wondered if it was because her father had to travel a lot and her mother was lonely, or maybe it was as he said: Things happen, and she was too young to understand. Joan was beginning to understand something about loneliness. But all she knew for certain now was that her mother and Sara had gone to Florida to live with her grandmother and grandfather until Thanksgiving.

And now it was only the middle of July, a summer

without her own cheerful room and the people she loved best.

"Think of it as an adventure, Joan," her mother had said.

A lonely adventure, Joan had thought, trying not to cry as Sara had done when they had said good-bye. "It won't be long now, Joanie," Mr. Clayton was saying lightly. "See those mountains in the distance? They are the Adirondacks. When I come back in a few weeks, how would you like to take a trip up Whiteface Mountain? We could even take a ride on a ski tow, if you like!"

"In summer? Without any snow?"

"Sure! Some places run them all year 'round. The view would be magnificent! And while we're in that area, we could stop by the North Pole and visit Santa Claus's Workshop!"

"Oh, Dad," Joan said with a click of her tongue. "I'm too old for that stuff!"

"I suppose so," he said, grinning. "That's something Sara would like, isn't it? I keep forgetting I'm going to have a teen-ager on my hands pretty soon! Well, there's always the Adirondack Museum. We could hit that on the way back if there's time."

"That would be great," Joan said, but thinking that

She would truly welcome a rest from snoopy questions like those her friends in Albany had asked. She also would welcome a rest from Sara who was only nine and always cried when she didn't get her way. Sara was always rummaging through dresser drawers of relief and disappointment.

"Oh, that's okay," Joan said, with an odd mixture of relief and disappointment.

"I'm afraid. Needs privacy, she says." "Honest, punkin, I don't know. The nearest house is probably too far to walk to, and the town is at least five miles away. Aunt Margaret's house is isolated, around there?"

"Dad," Joan asked, "does anyone my age live your baton twirling and marching drills, and . . ." "Well, we'll make a day of it, I promise, and in the meantime, you'll enjoy being with Aunt Margaret. Wait until you see her house! It's a huge old place with porches, pantries, and pinacles; and if I remember correctly, there's a winding stair banister that would be mighty tempting to slide down! And out back, there are acres and acres of apple trees as far as the eye can see—fun for climbing, if you're so inclined, but not very productive anymore since Grandmother and Grandfather moved away. You'll have plenty of time to read, write letters, practice your baton twirling and marching drills, and . . ."

Joan was well aware that Aunt Margaret was the author of quite a few adult novels and her books were on display on the shelves back home, the top shelves, one?"

Joan turned her head and faced him, balancing her baton across her knees. "Will I be allowed to read this be a sensation."

she has gathered some startling information on her European tour. And most likely, her new book will "I doubt it. At least she pretends not to believe, but believes in ghosts?"

"Oh, Dad," she said, "do you really think she guarantee she has some dandy stories to tell."

searching famous ghosts and haunted houses. I'll Margaret ought to be interesting. She has been researching famous ghosts and haunted houses. I'll "Besides," her dad went on, "getting to know Aunt much.

she wouldn't mind being lonely—at least, not as of vacation. If it could turn out to be an adventure, then and there, Joan decided to enjoy this odd kind twirler's outfit hanging in the closet. Anyway, right park, family picnics, and the inspiring sight of her other hand, she would miss riding her bike in the but diaries were supposed to be personal. But, on the because she hardly ever remembered to write in it, ers, trying to find her diary. Not that it mattered,

and she wasn't supposed to read them, not until she was grown-up. She was curious about Aunt Marga-ret, only vaguely remembering seeing her when Sara had been born—and during a few quick visits be-tween her rounds of tours and hermitages into the country to write. She seemed to spin like a colorful, musical top in Joan's memory and then was lost in time. But some of the things imbedded in Joan's mind were her aunt's high-pitched, excited voice, tinkling laughter, and her use of delightful flower-scented per-fume. Pleasant memories, at least. In fact, Aunt Mar-garet had given her the link bracelet she wore on her wrist and the initial charm, a silver book signifying her first sale.

Joan looked at her wrist and fingered the bracelet, now full of jangling charms, each tiny object a memento from a vacation or a special occasion. Of course, the one she liked best was the miniature baton twirler because it had taken a lot of practice and time to earn the right to wear one. And she liked the book-charm because its pages opened to reveal Aunt Margaret's name engraved inside. Many people knew Miss Margaret Millford, and Joan was certain her aunt was a celebrity—perhaps not as famous as a T.V. star, but she had been interviewed on television once. She was a little famous, anyway.

Joan shuddered and thought that the house did  
pents tossing their green heads into the sky.

on either side by gigantic trees looking like sea ser-  
clipper ship on the crest of a grassy wave, surrounded  
ering, multigabled house standing like a white-sailed  
"Right," she agreed, her eyes glued upon the tow-

be brave, especially now. Right?"  
Okay? I'll miss you very much, but we both have to  
Then I'll take you home, and we'll get organized,  
mer is over, I just may be through traveling for good.  
know I'm very proud of you, Joanie, and when sum-  
He reached across and patted her hand. "You  
*different* story," she said.

Joan caught his wink and smiled. "Well, that's a  
"What about math?" he inquired.

way that crunched like peanut shells under the tires.  
pulled off the black-topped road onto a gravel drive-  
stories, too," Joan said, refreshing his memory as they  
grade reading level, and I can write some pretty good  
"My English teacher told me I was up to twelfth-  
flipped on the turn signal.

Mr. Clayton's foot touched the brake, and he  
vocabulary!"

punkin, if you can wade through her extensive  
you won't be able to read Margaret's latest book,  
Joan's father chuckled. "I can't see any reason why

look like an abandoned ship. She thought that it was the kind of a house that could be haunted—if there were such places.

How different it was from their cozy little brick house on Elm Street where Joan knew every corner, every closet, every cupboard so well. Home, on Elm Street, was a place where if she worried about a math test or had a nightmare she could take Ruggles, her ragged, one-eared stuffed bunny into bed and hug him in secret like she used to do when she was a baby. But she had left Ruggles home under her pillow so Sara wouldn't think she cared about anything so silly anymore. Now, seeing this tall, scallop-trimmed house, she wondered if she had made the right decision. Surely no *real* children ever played on that porch or cut out pictures from magazines in the living room or roller-skated through the kitchen. The house looked so stiff and white and strict it almost seemed to shout *no* from its many window-eyes and big, black door-mouth.

There must be a dozen rooms and only one Aunt Margaret, Joan thought. Why, I could get lost in there, she thought. She gripped her baton tightly, feeling more secure. I'm glad I brought this along, though. It's hardly a life raft, but it does offer a little more protection than Ruggles.

Meadows flowed past in swells and troughs, and when the car curved up the drive toward the house, Joan saw clusters and clusters of gnarled and time-bent apple trees shrinking off into the blue foothills miles away. Her father stopped the car in front of the many-pillared porch. Stately pine trees, some of them higher than the porch rail, stood like trusty soldiers guarding the entrance to an ancient castle.

Mr. Clayton unhooked his seat belt, gave a long stretch with his arms, and said, "Well, Joanie, we made it. It's about time we limbered up our legs, wouldn't you say?"

But Joan wasn't listening. A slight movement in the hedge to the left of the porch had attracted her attention. At first her spirits rose.

A dog, she thought. I would like a big frisky dog that would bark and chase sticks and make noise on all those rooms. A dog would be much more fun to have around than Sara. He wouldn't talk back or ask stupid questions or mark crayon all over good books. Joan's thoughts ended abruptly. It wasn't a dog. It was someone huddled by the side of the house, half-hidden in heavy shrubbery, a creature-someone so frightening it took her breath away, and she could hardly open her mouth to let words tumble out.

"Dad! Daddy!" she said, clutching his sleeve and waving her baton toward the sight she had seen. "What is it—over there in the bushes? Look! A face—a terrible, wrinkled face!"

Her father turned just in time to glimpse the remarkable face, a shriveled, cross-stitched face, aged, battered, and with tiny licorice-dot eyes sunken deep into dark, hollowed wells. The creature seemed to smile fleetingly, like a split in dry leather; then he ducked away in a hunched-over, arm-swinging lope and was gone into a clump of thick lilac bushes, knocking dead blooms to the ground as he went.

"Well, what do you know!" Dad murmured with mild surprise. "Anton Cree. I had no idea that old fellow was still around." And he got out of the car, shaking his head.

## 2

JOAN SLID OUT of the car, blaming the tremble in her legs on sitting so long and not on the fact she had been frightened. She steadied herself with her baton for a second, then hurried to her father's side. She stood close, her eyes on the place where the shriveled old man had vanished. Dad took her arm and led her toward the house. Joan felt better because her father was big and strong and she had never even come near beating him at Indian wrestling, except when he let her.

The front door opened, and Aunt Margaret bounced across the spacious porch and down the steps like a bowl of liquid sunshine. Her arms, from elbows to wrists, were circled with a rainbow assortment of bracelets. They jingled and clinked together

as she reached out in greeting. Instantly, Joan was seized and smothered beneath a barrage of resounding kisses and rib-denting hugs. Under normal conditions, Joan would have been mortified by such a grand show of affection, but it happened fast and then was over before she could summon a blush.

Roses, Joan thought, catching her breath, that's what I remembered about Aunt Margaret. The smell of roses and peppermint!

Aunt Margaret stood back, beaming happily. Joan gathered her wits and was amazed to see that her aunt looked almost like her mother, only her aunt was definitely plumper. And her hair, instead of being short and blond, was lighter and longer than her mother's and was twisted up and around the top of her head like an oversized cork.

"Well, for goodness sakes!" Aunt Margaret said, each word a little laugh of its own. "How you've grown in the past few years, Joanie." She winked at Mr. Clayton. "We have a young lady now, don't we, Randall? A few more inches and she will be as tall as I am. She's blossoming!"

Joan wondered what was so great about blossoming if you weren't a flower. And again she would have been embarrassed, but her aunt's smile was so sincere and friendly that Joan couldn't help smiling back.

"For a minute I thought you were ready to clobber someone. Believe me, dear, Mr. Cree has always been a gentle lamb compared to his wife, but, of course, she died years ago. Anton used to play games with us when we were small—hide-and-seek in the orchard, croquet on the lawn. He even made us a swing and hung it in the big apple tree near his cottage in the hollow at the bottom of the yard. And a handsome baton."

"Oh," Joan said, not realizing she was wielding her shiny baton like a defensive weapon. "It's just my you're holding so tightly, Joan?"

Aunt Margaret paused and added, "What's that she chased us around. Good grief, could we run!" carried a broom, a rolling pin, or a baseball bat when trembling in our socks most of the time. She always housekeeper when we were youngsters and had us should have known his wife, Mrs. Cree. She was our frightened you, dear. If you think he's scary, you reassuringly. "But, I'm sorry the poor old fellow "Nonsense," she said, touching Joan's shoulder start. Doesn't he frighten you, too?"

ing about the premises. He just gave Joan quite a surprise, Margaret. I see old Anton Cree's still lurk- he said, "You're not the only one who has had a Mr. Clayton's face broke into a half smile, too, and

Joan's father opened the trunk, removed the suit-cases, and walked up the porch steps with Joan and Aunt Margaret. He paused on the porch and said, "I should think he'd give you the creeps, Margaret, never saying one word and popping up here and there And he does want to please me with his work."

up by the highway in the fall. He's harmless, really. excellent apples from a few of the trees and sells them lawn and gardens and even manages to coax some feel he still is useful. He putters and fusses with the and the mountains in the distance. He only wants to part of the scenery, just like the house, the orchard, Mr. Cree's appearance bother you. He has become "But," Aunt Margaret went on, "you mustn't let ready tell that her aunt would be easy to like.

Joan's insides tingled warmly, and she began to feel happier about visiting Aunt Margaret. She could al-laughed jovially.

please, no picture-taking if you catch me at it." She and jot notes, I go down and relax on that swing. But mit even today, when I need a peaceful place to think twenty-fifth wedding anniversary! And I have to ad-grandmother and grandfather in that swing on their there's a picture around here somewhere of your rest, and can hold two or three people at once. In fact, swing it is to this day. It's wide and big, has a back-

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Ancestors, Joan thought, mostly elegant ladies and gentlemen, but stern and prim in their old-fashioned clothes. One picture in particular arrested her attention. It was the largest and seemed fairly modern compared to the others. It was a heavy, ornately framed painting of three sunny-haired girls, and it hung all by itself in the center of the wall opposite the front door. All three wore identical ankle-length dresses of the palest pink linen with bodices underlined by rows of tiny pearl, heart-shaped buttons.

The oldest girl in the picture was standing and looked about sixteen years old. She was Joan's mother. And the chubby girl, a few years younger, seated in a mushroom-cushioned straight chair, could be none other than Aunt Margaret. Both of them smiled, but the third girl, sitting stiffly on the floor between them, stared out at Joan with mischievous eyes, and a pouting expression hooked down the corners of her mouth.

That's funny, Joan thought. She looks so familiar, but I don't remember hearing about having another aunt. I wonder who she is?

Joan was just about to direct her question to her father when recognition struck her with a thud. Her head whirled dizzily.

Why, she could be *me*, she thought with mounting

confusion.

The revelation forced Joan back a step, and she tripped over her sneaker lace, touching her straight, shoulder-length hair, her turned-up nose, so much like the girl's in the picture. So many questions bounced through her head at once that she couldn't construct one into a sentence, and while she was trying to sort them out, Aunt Margaret caught her hand lightly and led her through the archway into a narrower hall and into the living room.

She asked, "How about some lemonade and homemade cookies before your father has to leave, Joanie?"

"Sound okay?"

"Yes, yes, sounds fine, Aunt Margaret," Joan stuttered, her eyes drifting back into the hall and the foyer beyond, deciding to save her questions until later. "I'm kind of starved." It seemed like ages since she and her father had stopped for lunch along the highway, and her stomach was beginning to make empty growls.

One thing became certain in short order. Aunt Margaret knew how to bake cookies. They were delicious chocolate chip with loads of chocolate, the kind Joan could have kept eating forever. And the lemon-