
HUNGRY
A Short Story
CAMP
OAKHAVEN
H.B. BOLTON

Hungry

A Short Story

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H.B. Bolton

The fire pops, and sparks go up like a swarm of orange bees.

I've got eleven campers staring at me through the smoke, and every one of them is vibrating. Marshmallows will do that. So will being nine years old and a hundred yards from the treeline after dark.

I'm sixteen. That makes me the junior counselor, which mostly means I'm the one who stays up with them while the real counselors pretend to sleep. I don't mind. Night watch is the best part of the job.

Something moves in the oaks behind the cabins. Probably a raccoon. Probably.

"All right, troop," I say. "Listen up."

Michael's hand shoots up before I finish the sentence. He's the youngest and the loudest and he has never once waited his turn.

"Is it a ghost story?"

"Put your hand down, Michael."

He puts his hand down. He also says, "So it's a ghost story."

"It is *not* a ghost story." I lean back on my elbows and let the firelight do the work. "Ghost stories are overrated. Everything floats, nobody explains anything, and the ghost always loses. Boring."

"So what is it, then?"

"The story I'm about to tell you is a true story." I let that sit for a second. "Which makes it worse."

"Come on, Mr. Kano."

"Don't call me Mr. Kano. That's my dad, and he's not here."

"Fine. *Kano*. There's no way you can tell a story scarier than a ghost."

"We'll see," I say.

Michael flops back against a fallen log and folds his arms like he's already won. Around him, the others go quiet. Eleven faces, all lit from underneath.

Stories are better in total silence. So I wait for it.

Then I start.

"One thing first," I say. "This didn't happen at night. It happened at three in the afternoon."

"So?" Michael says.

"So nothing creepy is supposed to happen at three in the afternoon. It's the safest hour there is. That's what makes it worse."

Michael doesn't have anything to say to that. Good.

"There's this kid named Chris," I say. "He's nine. Normal house, normal family, normal everything. Nothing strange has ever happened to him in his entire life."

I pause.

"Until spring break."

* * *

"Mom," Chris calls from the couch. "I'm *starving*."

"You know where the snacks are," Mom calls back from her office.

"But I'm in the middle of a chapter. Can you get it for me?"

"I could. But you're officially old enough to get your own snacks."

"Mom, my stomach is literally growling."

"Then feed it. And lay off the sweets. There's a plate of blueberry bran muffins on the counter."

"*Bran,*" Chris says, to nobody. The very thought of them fills his stomach with heavy, crunchy dirt.

He peels himself off the couch and drags all the way to the kitchen, because that is the only way to walk when you are nine and have been betrayed by your own mother.

The muffins sit on the counter looking healthy and sad. But the chocolate chip cookies are on the top shelf, in the same bag they've been in since Tuesday, and the bag is calling his name. He knows it's calling his name. He can hear it.

One cookie. One. His mom is in her office with the door cracked. She'd never know.

He goes up on his toes. His fingers brush the bag.

And then he stops, because his mom always knows. It's some kind of mom superpower. He could eat one cookie in a closet in another state and she'd text him about it.

He grabs a muffin and heads back to the couch.

* * *

Here's the thing about Chris: he doesn't just read books. He *lives* in them. Today's book is *The Serpent's Ring,* and he's on chapter five, and the serpent is about to do something terrible.

He vaults over the back of the couch, lands on his favorite pillow, and settles in. Spring break. Cushions. A good book. A "healthy" snack. This is the life.

He reads for twenty minutes before he notices the crumbs.

There's a small pile of them making a home on the front of his shirt. Falling one by one, in no hurry. He doesn't bother brushing them off. Better on his shirt than on the carpet, and he's going to vacuum anyway. Probably. Eventually.

* * *

That's when he hears it.

A growl. Low and slow, coming from underneath the crumbs.

Chris lowers his book and looks down at his own stomach. "You've got to be kidding me," he says. "I *just* ate."

The growl gets faster. Louder. Like something behind a door, waking up.

And then the crumbs start to bounce.

They jump off his shirt one at a time, pop-pop-pop, like popcorn nobody put in a microwave. Chris watches a muffin crumb leap off his chest and land on the carpet. He looks at it, then at his stomach, then back at the crumb.

"Okay," he says. "That's new."

His stomach twitches. Under his T-shirt, something pushes out and then pulls back, quick, like a fist. Then again. Harder.

Then the growl turns into a word.

"*Hungry,*" says his stomach.

Chris doesn't move. He has run out of reactions. There is nothing left in his brain to do about this.

Slowly, with two fingers, he lifts the hem of his shirt.

His bellybutton is gone.

In its place is a mouth.

A real one. Lips, slightly chewed-looking. A dark, wet hollow where his bellybutton used to be. And when it

opens the way a mouth opens when it's about to say something, a row of teeth shows.

A lot of them.

"Mom," he says, very calmly. "MOM."

* * *

Mom does not come running. Mom is not even in the house. There's a note on the counter that Chris is going to find later, and the note says she ran next door to help Mrs. Vanderdoodle with her taxes, and the note says *Back in a bit,* and the note is the most useless piece of paper in the history of the world.

So it's just Chris and the mouth.

The mouth works its jaw. It looks around the way a new pet looks around a room, that is, if mouths can look at anything. Then it spots the muffin crumbs on his shirt and makes a sound Chris has only ever heard from his dog at dinner.

Then it lunges.

The mouth snaps up every crumb on his shirt in about a second and a half, lips smacking, and Chris feels every single bite. He feels the teeth close. He feels the crumbs go down. It is the weirdest and most disgusting thing

that has ever happened to him, even counting the time he watched his cousin eat a worm.

"Hungry," the mouth says again. It licks its lips. "Hungry. *Cookies*."

"You want... cookies," Chris says.

"*Cookies*." The mouth does something with its corners. Chris is almost sure it's smiling.

* * *

Here is where an actual nine-year-old's brain does something strange, and here is where Chris's brain does it too. He does not call a doctor. He does not call the police. He does not run screaming into the woods. He thinks: *if I feed it, maybe it will stop talking*.

Because a mouth that's chewing is a mouth that isn't asking for anything.

He walks to the kitchen. The cookies are exactly where they were. He reaches up and takes the whole bag down, and only *then,* holding it, does he look under his shirt to see if the mouth is still there.

Yep. Still there. And it has turned all the way toward the bag like a dog watching a car pull into the driveway.

"Okay," Chris says. "One. Then we're done."

The mouth does not wait for one.

It stretches out, longer than Chris thought a mouth could stretch, and *shrieks,* and bites straight through the plastic. Cookies go everywhere. The mouth chomps and chomps and chomps, and crumbs rain down the front of Chris's shirt, and Chris catches himself actually feeling proud, the way you feel when a dog finally learns a trick.

"Good," he says. "Good… thing."

The mouth finishes the entire bag, aims at the ceiling, and produces a belch that rattles the light fixture.

"More cookies," it says.

"There are no more cookies. You ate them all. The whole bag. That was my mom's."

"Hungry."

"You're *not* hungry. You just ate forty cookies."

"Hungry."

Chris rummages through the pantry and comes up with a sleeve of cheese crackers. He holds one out like you hold a cracker out to a parrot.

The mouth takes it. Chews. Takes another. Chews.

Here's what Chris notices, and this is the important part, standing there in his own kitchen holding a cracker in one hand and his shirt up with the other: *the mouth isn't swallowing*. It's chewing. That's all it wants to do. Chew and chew and chew, and the second there's nothing left to chew, it comes back for more.

It isn't eating. It's *being fed*.

And a mouth that always wants more is never, ever, going to be full.

Chris feeds it the whole sleeve of crackers. Then a bag of pretzels. Then a banana, which it eats without peeling, and that nearly makes Chris throw up. Every time it finishes, it looks at him with those teeth and says the same word.

"Hungry."

"You're a monster," Chris says.

"Hungry."

"I said you're a — fine. Fine. Fine."

He stops feeding it and walks back toward the couch, because a kid can only do so much, and he is nine, and he is tired, and at this point he mostly wants to sit down.

* * *

The mouth does not like the couch.

It starts biting. Just little bites, at first, tugging at his shirt the way a cat kneads a blanket. Then bigger ones. It chews a hole straight through the front of his T-shirt and looks out at the living room with those awful, pleased teeth.

"Hey!" Chris shouts. "That's a *new* shirt!"

The mouth looks around the room. It finds the TV remote sitting on the cushion beside him.

"Don't," Chris says.

It eats the remote.

"MOM!" Chris screams at the ceiling. "I NEED YOU, AND I'M NOT KIDDING, AND IT'S NOT A JOKE!"

The mouth grabs the throw pillow next and swallows it whole, feathers and all, in a way that should be physically impossible and mostly just looks impressive. Then it reaches out and bites a lamp. Then a vase. Then it gets a grip on the corner of the bookshelf and drags the whole thing sideways, which is when Chris decides he has seen enough.

He bolts for the front door.

He gets his hand on the handle, and the mouth leans out and bites the handle clean off.

Chris stares at his own empty hand. The doorknob is gone. The door is not going to open, ever again, because its knob is currently being *chewed*.

"Okay," he says. "New plan."

* * *

The garage.

He runs the length of the house with his stomach growling and snapping behind him, grabbing at everything it passes, and it is honestly a miracle the family portrait on the wall survives, because the mouth takes a very obvious swing at it and stops about an inch short.

He gets to the garage door. Turns the knob.

Nothing.

He turns it the other way. He jiggles it. He puts his shoulder into it. The whole time, the mouth is reaching back over his hip, stretching, snapping at the air behind him like it can smell the garage through the wall.

Then Chris remembers the door sticks, because it has always stuck, because this house is old and his parents keep meaning to fix it.

He shoves it with everything he has. It gives.

He runs through the garage. He is nearly out, nearly free, the side door is *right there,* when the mouth lunges out sideways and takes a bite out of the handlebars of his bike.

"That's my *bike!*"

"Hungry," the mouth says, chewing.

He bursts through the side door into the yard.

* * *

Mrs. Vanderdoodle's porch light is on.

Chris sprints across the grass, hammers up her steps, and slams both fists into the front door. "MOM! MRS. VANDERDOODLE! ANYBODY!"

The door opens. His mom stands there with a cup of coffee and an expression that says she was in the middle of a sentence. Behind her, Mrs. Vanderdoodle is peering around her shoulder.

"Chris. *What* is the matter?"

"Look." Chris yanks up his shirt.

The mouth is not there. The mouth is *gone*. His bellybutton is exactly where it has always been. A perfectly normal bellybutton, on a perfectly normal stomach, on a perfectly normal kid.

No teeth. No lips. Nothing.

"Chris," his mom says slowly. "Are you showing me your stomach?"

"It was *there*. I swear it was there."

"And what was there?"

"A mouth! My bellybutton turned into a *mouth,* and it started eating, and it ate the remote, and the pillow —"

"It ate the pillow."

"Yes!"

His mom looks at him for a long moment. Then she looks at Mrs. Vanderdoodle. Then she looks back at her son, standing on a stranger's porch at seven in the evening, holding his own shirt up, shouting about furniture.

"Chris," she says. "Where is your shirt?"

Chris looks down. The mouth is gone. The hole is not. There's a big, ragged, very obvious hole chewed straight through the front of his shirt, right where the mouth had been biting.

"I know how this looks," Chris says.

"You'd better."

She hands him a pack of gum, which is what she always does when she doesn't know what else to do. "Chew this. And go home. I'll be there in one minute, and you and I are going to have a very long conversation."

"Gum?"

"Chew it."

Chris shuffles home across the grass, poking at his stomach the whole way. "Are you trying to get me in trouble?" he mutters. "Because it's working."

The mouth doesn't answer. The mouth is gone.

He's halfway up the driveway when he walks past his mom's car, and the mouth comes *back* — snaps out sideways, quick as a snake, and takes the driver's side mirror clean off the door.

Chris doesn't even hesitate. He rips open the pack of gum and shoves the whole thing in, wrapper and all.

The mouth chews. And chews. And chews.

Chris stands there watching his own stomach work, gum wrappers and all, and something occurs to him. It's still chewing. It has been chewing for a while now, and it hasn't asked for anything.

Because it doesn't want food. It wants something in its teeth.

The gum will run out of flavor. And when it does —

"Okay," Chris says, backing slowly up the driveway. "Okay. I'm going to go read now. You just... keep chewing."

He backs through the front door, backs to the couch, sits down very carefully, and picks up *The Serpent's Ring* with both hands.

Under his shirt, the mouth chews.

Chris turns the page.

He does not finish the chapter.

* * *

"Wait." Michael sits straight up. "Wait, wait, wait. *No*."

"No?"

"There is *no way* any of that actually happened."

"No?"

"A *bellybutton mouth monster?*" Michael looks around at the whole troop for support. "That is the dumbest thing I have ever heard."

The laughs start small, one camper at a time, and then all of them at once. The fire's died down to coals and everybody's face is doing that thing where they're trying not to laugh and failing.

Which is exactly what I wanted.

"Would any of you like to know how I'm so sure it happened?" I ask.

"Sure," somebody calls out of the dark.

"Okay." I wait, nice and slow, until the laughing runs out. Then I say, "But first — this is my favorite part."

And without any warning at all, I stand up and yank my shirt up.

A mouth. Right there on my stomach. Lips, teeth, the works.

Two campers scream. Three jump off their logs. Michael falls *backward* off the end of his.

I lift my face to the moon and holler, "MEET MONSTER-MOUTH!"

And then I have to turn away, because I'm laughing so hard I can't breathe.

When I look back, my stomach is blowing a giant bubble out of Monster-Mouth's lips, and it bursts across my shirt. A couple of kids are still giggling. Most of them are frozen. That's the correct reaction, and I take a little bow, which makes it worse.

"Okay, okay, settle down," I say. "That's enough. I've got one more secret."

"We don't *want* any more secrets!" Michael shouts from the grass. "Your last one was horrible!"

"This one's worse. Watch."

I reach around behind my back, find the tab on the Velcro belt, and pull.

The whole thing comes off in my hand. A rubber monster mouth on a strap. Teeth painted on with some kind of white goop. Lips that look, now that they're not on my body, exactly like what they are: something you'd buy in a store.

"See?" I say, grinning. "Puppet. You should have seen your faces."

The troop loses its mind. Michael is on the ground. Somebody's laughing so hard they've gone quiet, which is the worst kind.

I sit back down, happy, and the fire pops, and for a minute everything is perfect.

Then Michael gets up, dusts himself off, and says, "All right, Kano. You had me." He sits back down on the log. "But I've got one for you."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. It's a ghost story."

"Ghost stories are overrated."

"This one's different." Michael looks at me across the fire. "Because this one really happened."

The whole troop goes quiet. Every face turns.

And I notice that Michael isn't smiling anymore.

Neither am I.

Because I know how that story works. I know it because I've been telling the one about the kid named Chris since I was nine years old, and everyone always assumes I made up the name.

They assume it because it's a story.

It isn't.

I reach down and put my hand flat against my stomach. Just to check.

Nothing there.

Probably.

Michael takes a breath and leans forward into the light.

The troop leans in with him.

Perfect.

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