

MAGGIE COOPER

A Gullah Ghost Story

by

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A long, long time ago, my Precious Reader, Maggie Cooper was a child living on an indigo plantation. Her parents had been kidnapped by Muslim traders in Africa, bartered for cloth and tin plates to privateers, and later sold to the highest bidder in the slave market at Charleston, South Carolina. Her parents first met at the great indigo plantation on what is now Daufuskie Island, a small island separated from the mainland of the United States by the broad Cooper River as it exits its confines of earthen banks and rolls along the South Carolina coast as part of the Atlantic Ocean.

Maggie was born there and after fifteen years of life has never been anywhere else. As long as she could remember she had worked from morning to evening in the great house of the plantation owner as a maid, cleaning and fetching or whatever she was instructed to do. When let go for the day, she always walked straight back to her parents' home, a rickety tabby shack on some high ground about half a mile from the coast of the island and a good mile and a half walk from the great house. The better part of her walk was down a dirt road wide enough for two wagons. On either side of the road were homes of other slaves belonging to the plantation. The road was shaded by an arch of live oaks hung in Spanish moss and alive with tree frogs and lizards. From the road, a narrow grass and leaf covered lane led through the trees to her house that was slow going because snakes liked to rest along this shady lane and strike at the small things that might cross the opening where people walk. Maggie's family jokingly called it "Turtle Pace Lane" because everyone walked on it so slowly and carefully.

One day in late fall Maggie was just starting home as twilight turned the sky gray. She hurried along in an effort to beat the sunset and approaching darkness. There was a cool breeze picking up from the seashore and the tree frogs were starting to call each other in a growing screech of noise. She was about half way home when the inky black of night suddenly obscured her view of the road and made the long moss-draped boughs of the live oak trees seem to reach out for her. As she felt the cool night close around her she slowed her

pace and felt her way down the road. She knew the moon would soon give her enough light to see the turn off to Turtle Pace Lane and home.

“Lordy, Lordy, Lordy”, said Maggie in a low quiet voice, “where be dat moon!”

She walked slowly along shuffling her feet in the dirt to scare away any snakes that might be warming themselves on the road as the cool wind from the shore picked up speed. With a great sigh of relief Maggie finally saw the edge of the moon starting to peek up over the horizon.

“O’ dat moon sure look good,” she thought, “I will just stop now and wait for the moon to come full up before I go on. Stepping on old Mr. Copperhead is the last thing I want to do.”

As she stood there watching the moon come full ablaze in the night sky she felt a sudden chill come across the side of her face and neck and saw, just over the trees, the shadow of something flying by. For a moment she could not breathe and then it all went away. O’ Beloved, Maggie could feel the chill bumps pop out on her arms and neck as the hair on her head seemed to stand straight up. She raced down the road like a mad woman. With every step it seemed like something was about to grab her from behind. She almost ran past the turn-off to her house, and then she flew up Turtle Pace Lane, legs churning, only her toes touching the ground and her knees almost hitting her chin with each step.

“Snakes get out of the way, “she screamed, “I’m uh coming through.”

Her parents jumped back in fear as she almost broke the front door down getting into the house.

“What is it?” Shouted her father as he grabbed for a club he kept by the door.

Her mother held her as all three of them looked at the door. Brave father peeked out of the door and nothing was there, only the night, the moon, and a nice cool breeze.

“What you running from?” he asked.

“It was a Haint,” she replied, breathless.

“What you callin’ a Haint?” her mother asked, squinting her eyes.

“When the moon came clean out I felt a sudden cold chill on my face and when I looked up something flew by and I could not catch my breath. It was like all my air was gone.” Maggie was crying so hard snot ran out of her nose.

“That was no lost soul of a Haint looking to cause mischief and heart break. It was a Haig, maybe a boo Haig on top of that,” explained her mother in almost a whisper, “looking to ride you through the night air and suck out all your breath and energy.”

“I don't never put no truth in Haints and Haigs”, her father added, “but just to be safe though maybe we ought to paint the ceiling of our porch and the shutters on our windows blue. Lots of people swear by that to keep Haints and Haigs out. Haint blue they calls it. I'll make some whitewash in the morning and blue it up with indigo. When the sun comes out in the morning we will all feel better! Now let's go to bed.”

Even though it was still a warm night, when his family was finally asleep, he got up and closed all the doors and windows and laid a broom or colander in each one before he could sleep. Even then he kept one eye open, after quietly hanging the blue glass eye he had found in the sand at Bloody Point over his bed. “A blue eye will cover an evil eye every time”, he whispered as he dropped off to sleep.

Three months later the porch ceiling and shutters at Maggie's home were bright Haint blue but her memory of the cold passing of the Haint or Haig, whatever it might have been, was almost forgotten. Maggie was happy because today was a special day. No one at home knew what day or even month Maggie had been born but it was about this time of the year so a birthday party was planned for that evening after she got home from the great house. She was excited because she was going to be sixteen, fully grown and ready for a life of her own.

As she walked along she was thinking about her birthday and being sixteen, but, at the same time, thinking about the time she had carried a message to the Great House on the other side of the island. They grew special Sea Island cotton on that plantation and the boys working there had all cut their eyes her way and talked aloud to each other about how she looked and other things. She heard what they were saying but she kept her head down and scurried along holding her skirt close to her legs with one hand. She had always wondered if she was pretty and judging from what she heard those boys saying she figured

she must look real good. She remembered thinking, at that time, "Well, I be sixteen soon, better get used to it," as her face flushed with excitement.

She was having fun thinking about what those boys had said and fantasizing about other things as she walked along the dirt road toward Turtle Pace Lane and home. Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye she saw an old woman sitting on the ground and leaning up against one of the olive trees that grew between the big live oak trees that shaded the road right next to where she was walking. Maggie stopped dead in her tracks and her heart jumped right up in her throat!

"You scared me half to death just sitting there like that. Why didn't you say something?"

"I was having too much fun listening to what you were thinking. Funny how sixteen year old thoughts all sound the same". The old woman let out a raspy laugh that sounded to Maggie a whole lot like a screech owl trying to scare out a mouse from under a tree root.

"You don't know what I was thinking. You just an old woman trying to scare someone for fun. What you pick'in on me for?"

"Membur dis, all de ooman wut wlk dis rode nebbuh leb me. oonh min wen I wot oonuh!" The old woman growled in Gullah.*

** (If you do not speak Gullah, the language of the slaves that lived on the sea islands, or have never read "Uncle Remus" stories, what the old woman said was: "Remember this, all of the women that walk on this road never leave me. You are mine when I want you!")*

Maggie felt weak in the knees as she listened to the old woman. It was starting to get dark and as the light faded she could see the skin on the old woman start to slip just slightly away from her shoulder giving Maggie a small view of the red meat and blue veins.

Maggie swallowed hard to keep from screaming. "I got to go home", she finally said, as she started walking as fast as she could, her feet causing puffs of dust as they hit the road. She was afraid to run because the Haig might sense her fear and follow her.

Maggie's party was a good one, but not for her. Everyone had a good time telling stories about Maggie and trying to decide what would become of her as she grew older. Her mother named off all the children she might have and her

father bragged on what a good worker she was. Their friends all laughed and hollered about what a nice person she had always been. Maggie listened and smiled and even laughed one time but deep inside she was quivering with fear and apprehension. What did the old woman mean when she said, "You are mine when I want you?" That question swirled around Maggie's head all evening.

After the party was over Maggie and her mother were cleaning up when she went to the side yard to throw out a pan of water. As the water left the pan, sparkling in the air with reflections of the moon, Maggie felt the old sensation that had always remained in her mind: the soft smooth flow of icy cold across the side of her neck and face. She looked up quickly, and there, riding a sweat-covered horse in the air above her head, was the dark silhouette of the old Haig against the silver light of the moon. She rode without her skin; just warm red meat with blue veins standing out and wide round eyes looking into the night. In her mind Maggie could hear the cracking creaking croak of the Haig's voice, "your mine when I want you – you're mine when I want you".

O' Brothers and Sisters, poor Maggie had her last good restful sleep on that night; the night of her sixteenth birthday when she was plump, full of energy and bursting to step out into life as a full grown woman. The Haig had her way! She, at last, found a soul that she could suck the spirit from and lay herself to rest forever in the sweet by and by.

Maggie woke every morning as tired and worn out as she felt when she went to bed. She tried to scream out for help as she slept but the Haig would sit on her chest and swallow her voice while she rode her through the night and sucked out her energy. The clouds would roar by and the wind would howl each night as Maggie flipped and flopped and fought trying to push the Haig off of her chest. Young as she was she began to look old as she grew thin and hollow eyed with brittle hair and dry wrinkled skin. Soon no man could look at her without turning his head to the ground. Poor soul, even her mother had a hard time looking at her.

"Eat an extra helping of pone with honey on it, child", her mother would say.

"Have another bowl of red beans and rice", her father would cajole.

But it was to no avail. The Haig rode her every night and Maggie just kept wasting away. Soon people, even her friends, shied away from her like they

were scared of something. Maggie did the best she could; she even took up clay Makin' and came up with some real nice little statues. One she liked especially, it was four little figures holding hands in a circle, like they were dancing around together. They turned out to be the only friends she had left, so she kept that clay figurine by her bed and talked with the four little figures at night when she was doing her best not to go to sleep. They were her children she would never have. One night after the Haig rode her especially hard and long Maggie just never woke up. The old Haig took all of the life left in Maggie and went happily on her way to the ever after with a cackle that seemed to weave her last words like the sound of a screech owl through the trees, "I'm free, I'm free."

Maggie was buried at the end of Turtle Pace Lane not far from where the house she grew up in was. Her mother and father gave her a good burial in the old Gullah way. As soon as she had passed, a three-foot deep hole was dug, big enough for her to lie down in. The diggers sang a sad song in beautiful harmony as they dug:

Come quickly, let us work hard; the grave is not yet finished; her heart is not yet perfectly cool and at peace.

Come quickly, let us work hard; the grave is not yet finished; let her heart be cool at once.

Sudden death cuts down life and the remains disappear slowly.

Sudden death cuts down the living, let death be satisfied, let it be satisfied, at once.

Sudden death cuts down the living when a voice speaks from afar.

Maggie's mother was moaning and calling her name over and over, "Maggie, Maggie", while she rocked back and forth on the ground next to the hole being dug by the singers. Her father and friends carried Maggie's body in a wooden box to the grave and opened it for one last look. They all stared in disbelief at the transformation they saw.

“God almighty”, her father exclaimed as he jumped back while everyone else rushed forward to see.

O’ Dear Reader, Maggie had changed from the dried out old woman that died in her sleep to the plump young woman she really was; she had grown younger in death and her skin had more life dead than it had when she was alive; except for a little corner of t skin that was pulled back so all the mourners could see the warm red meat with blue veins. Her relatives and friends all gathered around whispering to each other, some totally afraid while others gave a painful gasp at the sight.

“She now a Boo Haig” the old women of the gathering all agreed. “She going to live in that grave till she find someone to take her place”.

The singers quietly dug her grave another two foot deep, just to be safe, but they buried her as usual. Her mother placed the little figure of the four people holding hands in a circle on her chest to comfort her in the grave. After the hole was filled with dirt and she was covered completely, the little group broke a cup or two on the grave to help Maggie rest easy before they all slinked silently, fearfully back to their homes.

The next day her father crept back to the grave just as the sun was coming up and buried his loaded pistol a good foot deep in Maggie’s grave.

“There”, he said to himself, as the sweat ran down his face and stung his eyes, “that should keep her from coming out, everyone knows a Haig will not go past gun powder”. Just for good measure he added the blue glass eye he had found at bloody point.

Time flew by as Maggie lay in her grave trying to figure a way to capture someone to take her place. Her parents died and their old house fell into ruin. The Civil War came and went and the plantations grew up in trees. On the low hill at the end of Turtle Pace Lane just at the head of Maggie’s grave a live oak took root and grew. Most of Maggie’s relatives moved to other places to live but a few remained and turned to digging oysters for a living. When that died

out the loggers came and cut the big trees down to make paper. The live oak by Maggie's grave was spared and as it grew bigger, its roots started to inch their way through Maggie as she lay in her coffin and she gradually became one with the tree. She enjoyed the birds and the squirrels and the spread of the land around her. People were coming back to old Daufuskie and she could see houses being built and hear the hum of people around her. "Now", she thought, "maybe I can catch someone to take my place". Her howl of laughter sounded like soft wind through the moss hanging on the great tree.

One fine morning she woke to the sound of hammering and realized a cabin was being built not far from her grave. A woman started raking and cleaning the ground around the tree.

"Look over here", the woman called to her family, "There are some broken cups just under the leaves and dirt. It looks like they are really old."

The rest of the family put their hammers down and looked at the broken cups.

"Looks really old", repeated one of the young men, as he turned the piece of cup with the handle still on it over in his hand. His wife agreed as she picked up still another broken piece to look at.

"Let's dig around here and see if there are any more things. Maybe there was a house here a long time ago". Another of the group suggested.

They all stopped digging at the sound of the shovel hitting metal.

"I found something," the daughter shouted. Her husband dug with his hands and came up with a lump of rust and sand.

"Get a brush to clean it off with", someone suggested.

"What was that sound?" Their father asked, looking up into the tree.

"Sounded like a breeze blowing the moss hanging in that tree", answered one of the children.

“That is odd, nothing is moving and there is no wind.”

“Look, it is a pistol”, they all said, almost at the same time. “An old black powder pistol and it looks like it is still loaded”.

Maggie laughed again and the sound of her voice surprised her as it spread through the tree like a soft cold breeze in the hanging moss. After all she had only laughed twice before in the last two hundred years.

The gang building the cabin decided over wine that night to call themselves “Four Oaks”, an oak for each branch of the family; Kristina and Josh, BJ and Leisha, John and Renai, and Mom and Dad. The four oaks of Daufuskie Island

Maggie suddenly knew how she would capture one of the women to take her place. Soon a new Haig would be born, and Maggie would be free at last to let her soul rest in the hereafter forever. The new Haig would shed her skin on the rise of the moon and find victims to ride through the night to suck out their energy and eat their soul. A damned thing destined to roam the earth and sky for eternity or until she could find a suitable victim to take her place.

That very night Maggie pushed her roots through the deep cool earth where once the old loaded pistol had blocked her way and placed the four dancing figures from her chest on the ground under one of her long low hanging limbs.

O’ Dear Ones, that tree shook with glee, until the hanging moss swayed in happy rhythm, as Maggie set her trap. “When a woman touches the figurine and the tree at the same time they will at that instant become interned as the soul and spirit of a new Haig and I will be free”.

Late the next afternoon Kristina found the figurine by the tree and carried it, ducking under the low hanging branches, to the porch of the cabin.

“Look what I found she called to everyone inside. It is an old clay statue of four people holding hands”.

“Where was it?” asked Leisha as Renai turned it over looking for a mark of some kind.

“By the tree where we found the pistol. It must have been there all the time and we just did not see it.”

“Let me look at it”, Mom said. “It is a beautiful little figure. It looks like they are dancing as they hold hands. Bring that little table we found over here, BJ, and set it under this low branch and I will put the little figures on the table so it will look like they are dancing under the tree.”

John grabbed a handful of moss from another branch and wrapped it around the base of the statue. There, it looks like they are dancing in some soft moss,” he said

“Let's go to the beach”, Josh suggested, “and watch the moon come up”.

As the Four Oaks walked, laughing and talking, down Turtle Pace Lane toward the sea the moss swayed back and forth on the long low branches of the tree and the dancing figures smiled at each other with glee.

THE END

(Or is it just the beginning)