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## My Grandpa and the Haint

BY ERNEST J. GAINES

AT FIRST it wasn't much more than a grunt. Something like—"Un-hunh." Then he was quiet. Then he did it again, twice. "Un-hunh, un-hunh." Then quiet again. Then the third time he did it he didn't even try to hold it back. He just came right out and giggled.

I'll give him twenty, I said. One, two, three, four—I got to twelve, and Pap said: "Guess that's enough for today. Catch 'em all one day, won't have nothing left to come back for."

So we pulled in our lines and went up the bank. I was carrying the string of fish, and Pap was walking in front of me with that little fishing pole over his shoulder. That little fishing pole was bent at the end, but it was strong as iron. Pap had had it ever since I could remember, and I was twelve years old then.

Just before we got to the crossroad I heard that little grunt again. Then about a half a minute later two more little grunts. Then a little while after that, the giggling. Well, that'll be another hour or so, I told myself. And when we came to the crossroad, just like I was thinking we would do, we turned towards her house. Pap was walking in front and me right behind him.

After going a little piece, I could see the trees around Miss Molly Bee's fence. They were tall pecan and oak trees, and they hid the yard and the house from us. You didn't see the house at all till you got right on it.

Miss Molly Bee was sitting out on the gallery fanning. She was always sitting out on the gallery fanning. She was a big Creole lady with a pile of jet-black hair. She smiled as soon as she seen us coming in the yard.

"Thought you might not drop by today," she said.

Pap gave her a little smile, and she smiled back at Pap. People said she had many boyfriends, but I think she liked Pap the most. When she looked at Pap, look like there wasn't nobody else in the world.

"Hello, Bobby," she said.

"Miss Molly Bee," I said.

I laid the string of fish on the bottom step, and sat on the one just above it. Pap sat on the gallery and leaned back against the post. Pap never sat in a chair no matter where he went. At home Mom would try to get him to sit in a chair when they was out on the gallery together, but Pap never would. He said he believed it was the Indian in him made him sit on the floor all the time. But, anyhow, for courtesy sake, Miss Molly Bee said: "Get you a chair, Toddy?" Pap's name was Robert, same as mine, but Miss Molly Bee called him Toddy. She had made up that little name herself.

"Good right here," Pap said. "Ooooo, it's been hot."

"Sure has," Miss Molly Bee said. "Got some lemonade inside. Get you a glassful?"

"That would be fine," Pap said. Pap was always sporty when he talked to Miss Molly Bee.

"Little Bobby?" Miss Molly Bee said.

"Yes, Ma'am. Thank you," I said.

So she went in and got it, and we sat there drinking and keeping very quiet. Then after a little while, I could feel it was a little too quiet. I could feel it was about time for one of them to grunt. I raised the glass and took a swallow. Nothing. I lowered the glass. Still nothing. Nothing but quiet. What the heck's going on? I said.

I was just about ready to raise the glass for the last few drops, when I heard Miss Molly Bee go, "Un-hunh." Pap waited about a minute, and then he went like that too, "Un-hunh." Then it was quiet a while, and then Miss Molly Bee went like that again—twice. Then Pap did it like that twice. Then it was quiet a minute, and then Miss Molly Bee started giggling very softly. And just when she was getting ready to quit, Pap started his giggling.

"Hen still laying up the road?" Pap asked Miss Molly Bee.

And I said to myself, You might as well stand up right now and head on up there, 'cause that's where you'll be going in about two minutes from now.

"Still laying up there," Miss Molly Bee said. "Won't break that habit for nothing."

"Picked your eggs today?" Pap asked.

"Not yet," Miss Molly Bee said.

It was quiet a minute. Then Pap said: "Bobby, why 'on't you go up there and get Miss Molly Bee them eggs?"

"Maybe it's too hot, Toddy," Miss Molly Bee said.

"No, Ma'am, it's not too hot," I said.

I stood up to leave. But before I went down the steps, I looked over at Pap. "One day," I said to myself. "One day—just watch. I'm getting sick and tired of hunting these eggs every time I go fishing."

I left them sitting there on the gallery. But I knowed five minutes later they was going to be back in the kitchen, and Miss Molly Bee was going to have her foot in that basin of water.

The first time I went over there with Pap, they started that giggling just like they did today. That was about a year ago. One of them giggle a little while, then the other one giggle a little while. Then one, then the other. Then they started talking about that hen nest way up the road. I said I would go and get the eggs if Miss Molly Bee didn't mind. She said No, she would be obliged if I did, and she told Pap to point out the spot for me. Pap stood up to point it out, and he told me while I was up there I could break me a piece of cane or pick me some pecans since it wasn't necessary for me to hurry right back. I didn't know what he was getting to, so I tore up there and got the egg and tore right back. They wasn't on the gallery where I'd left 'em, but as I started round the house I could hear Miss Molly Bee giggling. I didn't know what she was giggling about, and since I was a little boy, it sure wasn't any of my business. So instead of going back there where they was, I went back to the front and sat on the steps. As I went by the door, I could see her sitting in a chair way back in the kitchen, and I could see she had her foot in a wash basin. I couldn't see Pap at all, but I figured that since Miss Molly Bee was giggling like that Pap musta been somewhere around. I sat on the step waiting for them. Then when they was through doing what they was doing back there, both of 'em came to the front. I gave Miss Molly Bee the egg, and then me and Pap left.

The next time we went fishing, Pap started that giggling at the bayou again. Then a few minutes later, me and him was leaving. When we came up to the crossroad we turned left. Then the same old thing all over. Miss Molly Bee asked us if we wanted some lemonade and we said yes. Then after we had been there a little while, her and Pap started that giggling. Giggle little while, then the hen nest came up. Hen nest came up, then I had to go looking for eggs.

"Get yourself a piece of cane while you up there," Pap said. "You can sit under that pecan tree and eat it. Good shade up there."

But the second day I didn't want any cane either. And when I got

back to the house, both of 'em was back in the kitchen again. I could hear Miss Molly Bee giggling a mile.

The third time I said I was going to find out more about all this giggling. So instead of coming back through the front, I came back the other way. Miss Molly Bee had plenty weeds back there in her yard, so I could hide myself pretty good. I had just got myself settled when they came back in the kitchen. Pap had the basin of water, and Miss Molly Bee had the chair. Pap set the basin on the floor, and Miss Molly Bee sat in her chair and stuck her foot in it. Then Pap went to work. He rolled up both his sleeves and started washing Miss Molly Bee foot. At first he was washing it very slowly, and at first Miss Molly Bee was giggling just a little bit. Then as Pap started working little higher, round the ankle, Miss Molly Bee started laughing a little more. And when he got around the calf of Miss Molly Bee's leg, and started playing with her calf, and making it shake and all that, Miss Molly Bee really started laughing. For a second there I thought she was going to take with a fit she was laughing so much. But Pap stopped just in time, and a minute later Miss Molly Bee had stopped laughing too. . . . But that was only one leg. Pap had to do the same thing on the other one. So again, Miss Molly Bee started giggling real slowly. Then when Pap really started shaking her calf, she started laughing harder and harder. But one thing about Pap, he knew when to stop. He knew how to keep Miss Molly Bee from laughing too much where she might hurt herself.

So after he had washed both of her legs, she gave him the towel, and he dried 'em for her. Then she stuck her leg way out and worked her toes. Then I saw Pap take her leg in both arms, like you take a chunk of wood, and kiss Miss Molly Bee right on the knee. "Well, look at Pap, will you," I said. Then Miss Molly Bee stuck out her other leg and worked her toes on that foot, and Pap took it and kissed that knee. After this was all done with, Pap pitched the water out in the yard.

I thought I'd better get to the front before they went back, and I just made it in time.

This went on and on like this, and after three or four times I got tired of watching 'em. I kept telling myself it wasn't fair to Mom for Pap to be acting like this behind her back. But I wasn't the kind of person to tell. I had to get somebody else to do it for me. For the past couple of months I had been trying to think of a way to let Mom know without Pap thinking I was the one who told her. And that day while I was up there getting that egg, it all came to me.

WHEN I GOT BACK, I gave Miss Molly Bee the egg, and me and Pap told her good night and left for the quarters. We got home just before sundown. Mom cleaned the fishes and fried 'em, and we sat at the table, the three of us, and ate in silence. Nobody ever talked at Mom's table; she didn't go for that. I looked over at Mom. I loved her very much. I loved Pap, too. I loved both of 'em. And since I was their only little grandchild, I thought it was my duty to see that nothing ever separated 'em. Death, maybe; but that was all.

So the next day when I finished all my work, I went down the quarters and told Lucius what I wanted him to do.

"Listen, Lucius," I said. "This is what. You come up home round two o'clock. By then Mom ought to be through with her work and ought to be on the gallery cooling off. Somebody'll probably be out there with her—Aunt Lou, Miss Olive or somebody. But you come up there round two. And we'll play little bit, and then sit on the steps. Now we'll wait till they're quiet. Remember, wait till they're quiet. Then I want you to say this, and I want you to say it plain. I want you to say: 'Didn't I see you and Pap going towards Miss Molly Bee yesterday?' That's all I want you to say. 'Didn't I see you and Pap going towards Miss Molly Bee yesterday?' I'll take it from there. Now, can you remember that, Lucius?"

"Uh-huh."

"Say it."

"Didn't I see y'all going—"

"I didn't say 'Y'all,' Lucius. I said, 'You and Pap.' Remember Pap. You got to say Pap. Now say it."

"Didn't I see you and Pap at Miss Molly Bee—"

"I didn't say 'at' neither, Lucius. I said, 'going.' 'Going' make her wonder little bit. Now say it."

"Didn't I see you and Pap going towards Miss Molly Bee yesterday?"

"That's right. Say it again."

Lucius said it again, and I made him say it about ten more times. After a while he had it down so pat and could say it so fast, even I couldn't keep up with him. So I slowed him up till he got it at just the right speed. I even told him how to hold his head and how to look at me when he was saying it. You had to really work with Lucius to make him get things the right way.

Sure enough, round two he came up there; and sure enough, Mom was sitting out on the gallery fanning and talking to Miss Olive Jarreau. Me and Lucius made a ring on the ground and shot marbles all

the time Mom and Miss Olive was talking. Then when I seen the conversation began to slow up, I told Lucius let's sit on the steps. We sat there—I don't know how long—ten, fifteen minutes—and then I looked at Lucius. Old Lucius was waiting.

"Hey?" he said. "Didn't I see you and Pap going towards Miss Molly Bee yesterday?"

"Me and Pap?" I said.

Lucius looked at me, and didn't know what to say. We hadn't rehearsed nothing else, you see.

"Oh, yeah, it was you and Pap," he said. "You and Pap. You and Pap. Uh-huh. You and Pap."

"I doubt it," I said. "We went fishing yesterday. There ain't no fishing pond by Miss Molly Bee house."

"I'm sure it was you and Pap," Lucius said. "You and Pap."

I looked at Lucius to make him shut up, 'cause I knowed Mom had heard and Miss Olive Jarreau had heard, too. It was quiet after that—what you call a dead silence. I had my back towards 'em, but I could feel Mom looking at me. Miss Olive was probably looking down the quarters, since that's the way her chair was faced. Then after a while I could feel Mom looking out at the tree in front of the house. And Miss Olive looked somewhere else, too. And then Mom looked at me again, 'cause I could feel her eyes on the back of my neck. And Miss Olive musta looked somewhere else, 'cause I could feel that, too. Then a little later she said she had to be going. And soon after she said it, Lucius said it, too. I reckoned Lucius thought I was going to get a whipping, and he didn't want to be anywhere around.

But nothing like that happened. Mom didn't even say a word. She just kept looking at me. I had my back towards her, but I could feel her eyes. You can feel it when people are looking at you. Especially old people.

Pap showed up not too long after Miss Olive and Lucius had gone home. He took a seat on the gallery and leaned back against the post.

"Ooooo, it's hot," he said.

"It sure is," Mom said, like nothing had happened.

"Think I'll go fishing tomorrow," Pap said. "Woulda gone today, but it was too hot."

"They biting out in the river right smartly," Mom said.

"They biting better back in the field," Pap said.

"Talking to Aunt Lou this morning," Mom said. "Told me she caught a big mess few days back."

"They still biting better back in the field," Pap said. "Know a spot where they really biting back there."

"Well, go where you want," Mom said.

"They almost jumping out the bayou back in the field," Pap said.

Now I could feel that Mom was looking at Pap. Pap didn't know that Mom knowed, so he was looking over in the garden, probably thinking about Miss Molly Bee. And Mom, who knowed, probably also knowed what he was thinking about, and so she just sat there watching him.

"When you get through with your work, there, tomorrow," Pap said to me, "dig us up a good cup of worms."

"He can't go with you tomorrow," Mom said. "Want him to go somewhere with me."

"Yes?" Pap said. "Where at?"

"Ohhh, just somewhere," Mom said.

"Well," Pap said. "Guess I'll have to make it all by myself."

"Yes," Mom said. "You do that."

So the next day, right after dinner, Pap went out in back and dug him a cup of worms. He hollered in at us he was leaving, then I saw him going out the gate with that little bent fishing pole.

"Get your hat," Mom said.

I put on my hat and went on the gallery to wait for her. After she had closed up all the windows and doors, we left the house. At first we started out the same way Pap had gone, but after a little while we turned down another road. We walked and walked. Neither one of us saying a word. If there's anything I'm not supposed to ask Mom, that's, Where we going? If she wants me to know, she tells me. If she don't tell me, I'm supposed to wait and see.

So we walked and walked. Passing patches of cane after patches of cane. Then patches of corn, then patches of cotton. We went farther and farther back in the fields.

Then we came up to a house. I had heard plenty about this house, but I hadn't ever come there. Madame Toussaint, an old hoo-doo lady, lived in it, and none of us children wouldn't go nowhere near it.

The house was old and leaning to one side, and the fence and the gate was all broken down. They had a big pecan tree right in front of the door, and the yard was covered with weeds.

I pulled the gate open for Mom, since she couldn't jump over it, and we went in the yard.

"Stay here," she told me.



I sat on the steps and Mom went up on the gallery and knocked three times. I heard a dog bark three times. He musta been a big dog, 'cause I know he had a heavy voice. Then I heard Madame Toussaint ask who it is. Mom said it was her, and Madame Toussaint unlocked her door, and Mom went in.

I felt a little scary out there all by myself, 'cause I had heard the people say Madame Toussaint could do all kinds of strange things. C. Hugh said one time he passed by here and one of Madame Toussaint chickens spoke to him. The chicken said: "What you know, C. Hugh?" C. Hugh said he looked over his shoulder and there wasn't nothing standing there but that chicken, grinning at him. C. Hugh said that's the last time he seen that chicken, the last time he seen that house, and the last time he ever passed by here day or night. C. Hugh said by the time he reached that road that took you to the quarters, he was running so fast, he ran over in Montemare cane field. Said he knocked down almost a whole row of cane 'fore he got on the road again. Said when he hit that road, he started praying. Said he said, "Lord, don't let me meet up with nothing, 'cause anything I meet up with go'n have to die. Mule, horse, cow or tractor, I'm going over it." But said he didn't meet nothing, thank God, till he got home.

The dog barked again and made me jump. That dog had the loudest voice I ever heard on a dog. Then after he had barked, Mom came out and told me let's go. I was sure glad to get away from the place.

THE NEXT TIME Pap asked me to go fishing with him, Mom said I couldn't 'cause she had something for me to do. Pap said that was too bad, and he went outside and dug his worms and got his little bent pole and headed towards the back. I watched him go, and I felt a little sad. Eggs or no eggs, Miss Molly Bee or no Miss Molly Bee, I liked fishing with Pap.

After he had gone, Mom took me by the arm and led me on the gallery. She told me to sit on the steps and keep my eyes on that woodpecker in our mulberry tree. We had a mulberry tree right in the front yard, and, sure enough, there was a woodpecker up there pecking.

"What for?" I said. "I wish I had my slingshot. I'll keep my eyes on him. I'll—"

"Boy?" Mom said. She looked at me in that mean way she got of looking when she wants me to pay attention. She glanced at the woodpecker, and looked at me again. "When he fly away, you count to thirty and let me know."

"Suppose he don't fly? I want go shoot marbles."

"If he peck there all day, you stay there."

"Suppose he stay there all night?"

Mom looked at me again in that mean way.

"Yes, Ma'am," I said.

"I hate what I'm doing," she said. "But I can't help it. Letting that yellow woman make a fool of him like that."

She went inside, and I sat on the steps watching that woodpecker. Then when I got tired sitting, I lay back and looked at him. Then when I got tired lying there, I sat up again. When Lucius came by and asked me to shoot marbles with him, I told him I had to watch that woodpecker. Lucius asked me what I had to watch a woodpecker for. I told him for Mom. Lucius didn't know what I was talking about, but he sat there and watched him with me. Then after a while, he got tired and left. That doggone woodpecker was still up there, pecking and pecking away. Once he stopped for about a second, then he started all over again.

Then round five thirty he gave it up and flew over the house. I counted to thirty right fast and ran inside to tell Mom.

"Get your hat," she said. "Let's go down to Mr. Etienne."

We went down there, and Mr. Etienne was in the back just getting ready to unhitch his mules. Mom asked him could she borrow his wagon for a while, and Mr. Etienne looked at her kind of funny-like. But when Mom promised to take good care of the mules, he said all right.

She told me to get in the wagon and take the lines, and she went and opened the gate. When I drove out in the road, she made me turn right. She locked the gate, climbed in and we headed into the field.

Mom didn't say another word to me. Every time I asked her which way, she pointed her finger. I'd pull the lines, and the mules would go in that direction. The mules were tired and didn't want to go at all, so every now and then I had to give 'em a little pop. Mom didn't say anything to me, but I could feel she wanted to.

We went on and on, and then I seen we was headed towards Miss Molly Bee's house. I looked at Mom 'cause I still didn't know what was going on. But she just sat there quietly and looked straight ahead.

When we came up to the gate that took you in the pasture, Mom stood up in the wagon and started looking around. She looked right, she looked left. Then as she was getting ready to look right again, she jerked her head back the other way.

"There he is over there," she said.

I stood up to look, and, sure enough, there was Pap lying over there all tangled up in the wire fence. Mom opened the gate, and I drove over where Pap was. Pap was mumbling something to himself, but he wasn't moving. Mom told me to get down and help her get him in the wagon. We had a hard time untangling Pap out of that barb wire, but we managed to get him free. Then we got him in, and I gathered up the line and the string of fishes and laid them beside him. Pap was mumbling so much, Mom had to sit in the bed of the wagon and hold him in her arms.

"It's all right," she kept whispering to Pap. "It's all right."

When we got home, the sun had gone down. I helped Mom get Pap inside, then I took the mules back to Mr. Etienne. When I got back home, Pap was really mumbling. Over and over—"Get him away from me. Get him away from me." Pap mumbled like that all night. "Get him away from me. Get him away from me."

When Pap was able to talk, about a week later, he told us what had happened. He really got excited when he told us about it. I had never seen Pap get so excited before.

"My way home from fishing—" he said.

"From where?" Mom cut him off.

"Fishing. My way home from fishing—"

"From where?" Mom said.

Pap started to say he was on his way home from fishing again, but he stopped and looked at Mom.

"You know?" he said.

"I know," Mom said.

Pap looked at her a good while, then he shook his head.

"You right. I was on my way from her house. I was walking slowly, walking slowly. Then all a sudden I heard this cissing. Didn't know what it was at first. Never heard nothing like it before—hope to never hear nothing like it again. Looked over my shoulder, couldn't see a thing. Soon as I start walking, could hear it. Cissing, cissing. Coming from back in the woods. Look back; nothing. Go little farther, then it get closer, and I hear it plainer. Look back. They got a snake there ten foot long. Never seen one like that before. Crawling on just half his belly. Head part straight up in the air. Looking straight at me—just cissing. I start running. Thing cissing—coming after me. I stop. He stop. I start walking. He come little bit, too. I stop. Thing stop. I break at him. Thing break back. I stop. He stop. I look at him. He look at

me. I move my head one way. He move his head. 'Lord have mercy,' I say. 'This the devil? This the devil?' Thing just look at me, going, 'Ciss-ciss.' I start walking. Here he come. I stop. He stop. I break at him and swing my pole at his head. Thing duck. I swing the other way. Thing duck again. Musta hit fifty times at him, ain't hit him, yet. 'This ain't no real snake,' I say. 'This ain't no real snake. This must be a haint.' And when I said that, I headed for home. Me, that haint, and that road. Faster I run, faster that haint run. Haint right behind me, going 'Ciss-ciss.' Getting close to the gate, haint get right side me, going 'Ciss-ciss.' Then I see that haint making me run cross the pasture—towards the fence. Come to the fence, didn't even think, just went in. Haint knowed what he was doing. Got me all tangled up and tried to beat me to death. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. You ain't been beaten by a haint, you ain't been beaten. When I woke up, I was home. Don't know nothing. Don't know nothing. Nothing but that haint."

Pap musta told that story about fifty times, and every time he told it he told it the same way, so it had to be the truth.

But that was a week later. The night we brought Pap home, Pap twisted and turned and mumbled all night. Mom sat up with him, bathing the cuts on his back, and feeding him soup. I wanted to stay up with her, but she made me go to bed. When I woke up the next morning, there was Pap again—mumbling and groaning. People heard Pap was sick and they came by to see him. But Pap didn't recognize a soul. Just sweating and mumbling. People told Mom she ought to get him a doctor, but Mom said Pap was her man, not theirs, and she knowed how to look after him. People wouldn't argue with Mom; nobody ever argued with Mom. But they kept on dropping by to look at Pap. Everybody dropped by. That is everybody but Miss Molly Bee. She passed by the house couple times and peeped in, but that was all. One time I met her in the road and she asked me how was Pap feeling. I said he was doing pretty good. She smiled and told me to tell Pap she said hello. I told Pap. Pap didn't say a word. He just gazed at the ceiling. Then he started talking about the haint again. That haint just stayed in Pap's mind. Nothing else. Just the haint. And everything led up to the haint. If you said berry, Pap would put berry with bush, bush with pasture, and pasture with haint. If you said post, Pap would put post with fence, fence with pasture, and pasture with haint. If you said dirt, water, sky—anything; it all added up to haint.

But after about a week or so, Pap was able to get up. His legs were

still wobbly, and he couldn't do much, but he could at least go out on the gallery and sit in the sun. And the first day Pap went out there, Pap surprised me. Because that was the first time I'd ever seen Pap sit in a chair on the gallery. He set right by the door across from Mom. And Mom was some proud of it. You could see it and you could feel it.

Not too long after we had been sitting out there, Lucius came by. Me and Lucius played marbles a few minutes, then we sat on the steps. I waited till Mom and Pap were quiet, then I looked at Lucius. Lucius said: "Passed by Miss Molly Bee house yesterday, and Miss Molly Bee was laughing to kill Caesar."

I could tell Mom and Pap was looking at Lucius, and I said: "What was she laughing about?"

Lucius said: "Don't know. But she sure was laughing. Back there in her kitchen, laughing to beat the band.

A week after Pap was up, he was able to go fishing again. I dug a big cup of worms, and we left the house. Just as I was turning down the quarters, Pap stopped me.

"Where you going?" he said.

"Ain't we going fishing?"

"We going," he said.

"Well, ain't . . . ?"

"That's the only fishing hole you know?" he said.

"You mean we going to the river?"

Pap didn't say anything, and started walking. I ran and caught up with him.

"Ehh, y'all sure think you smart, huh?" he said.

"Who, Pap?" I said.

"Madame Toussaint. Who else?" he said.

I didn't say anything. I liked old Pap. I liked Mom, too.

"What a haint," Pap said. "What a haint."

✿ Novelist ERNEST J. GAINES, is the author of *Catherine Carmier* issued by Atheneum in 1964 and of *A Long Day in November, Just Like a Tree*, and *The Sky is Gray*, novellas published by *Texas Quarterly*, *Sewanee Review* and *Negro Digest* respectively. He lives in San Francisco and devotes his full time to writing. In 1958 he was the recipient of the Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship at Stanford and in 1959, the Joseph Henry Jackson Literary Award.