

AMY SAYRE-ROBERTS

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*FLOOD*

The flood raises the haint. Stories gain speed with the swirling Mauvaisterre current. Every tongue in town reminisces.

“Ancient skinned, hollow-eyed haunt from a hundred years ago rises up with the swell.”

“So old he barely floats, he keeps on coming, just skin and bone, those rotten fingers working like fins cutting through the surge.”

“Old stretch of skin is all that’s left of him. You wanna look at him, get down there by the edge, close now, and don’t fall in, but you’ll see him. You sit long enough, you’ll see him.”

The spring-fed Mauvaisterre creek swells its banks at least once a year, usually at mid-summer. July rains provoke a cold rush of water powerful enough to knock out electricity. The overflow cuts people off, and shuts down the town life, though the majority of homes sit up high enough to avoid damage. Most folks have the sense to stay out of the tide, but one or two will test their luck and lose their car or their life, depending on the whim of the water. Farm lands are consumed, crops spoiled and livestock drowned. Unmarked cemeteries give up their dead as the water table rises and pushes the remains to the surface. The flood is a slow breathing lung that washes life in and washes life out. Navigating isolation is a native skill.

Off the Poor Farm road, down a one-mile lane, a house is built into the hill that overlooks the drowned bottomlands. A woman sits on the front porch in a wicker back chair, braiding a small girl’s hair.

“Have you seen it, Grandma?” the child asks the woman.

“Starla, you been listening to fools again?” her grandmother answers. “They don’t know nothing ’bout the haint. Just trying to scare you with superstition. Give a flat rock enough of your mind and it’ll move just to please you.”

The child is unconvinced.

“You wanna know the truth?” the woman asks, tying off one of the girl’s braids with a bread tie, being short of a rubber band.

“Yes,” Starla says, twisting around to look at her grandmother, “Tell it.”

“Truth is the haint is too old for skin. His rotten hide dried up and blew away at least fifty years ago. I don’t think he have skin since I was a girl.” The woman adjusts her silver-framed glasses with a steady hand.

“No skin,” the girl says softly and turns one palm over to study her thoughts there.

She picks up a small mirror and watches her grandmother separate three strands of hair. If she turns the mirror to the left, her grandmother's face disappears from the reflection.

"No ma'am, no skin. That's why he goes looking. All eyes that one, looking for a new skin to crawl up into." Her grandmother's breath tickles the back of her neck, "Haint wants something warm."

A blue pickup with two men inside pulls to a stop in the driveway. Starla runs down the steps to meet the man that climbs out of the cab.

"I'm all ready, Jeb," she says, clapping her hands together, then waves to her daddy as he eases himself out of the passenger side crutches first.

Groves of willow, ash, and oak circle the twenty acres now underwater. Jeb and Starla drag a silver canoe down the embankment away from the pickup to the flood water's edge. Just three days ago the field had a decent stand of corn. Now the land is a lake, a silver tabletop burnished under the moonlight with slim-fingered corn tassels that break the surface and point at the sky. Jeb stops to listen to the night and let the cool air level his thoughts. His wife, the child's grandmother, will be long asleep when he returns, and he will rest a few hours beside her, then rise with the dawn and take to the water. He lays a frog gig across the back seat of the canoe and considers how the next hours need to go. He loves the tender taste of meat from the leg. The top of the thigh where the two legs come together is a pocket of flesh on either side, tender and juicy. He always took the first bite there.

"Jeb? You ever worry about seeing the haint out here?" Starla asks as she rolls up her jeans to keep them dry.

"Oh, I got worries, but it ain't nothing to do with those crazy old tales. I get out here and I think, how are you gonna pay the 'lectric bill this month when everyone's been sick and needing this and that that costs three times more that you figured? Or I think, how you gonna keep food on the table? That's scare enough for me."

"Caleb said that haint's just a stretch a hide. I never seen nobody built like that. He said the haint's gotta nose for the dead, can smell 'em even better than a snapping turtle."

"Caleb Beaumont? Caleb Beaumont told you that?" He stops sharpening his Bowie knife on the whetstone in his hand. His voice rumbles deep over the name "bowmahn" and knocks the "t" off the backend. Waiting for her answer, he stands still as a river crane before it strikes a fish.

"Not to me, but I heard him say it." She looks down at the toe of her scuffed brown boot pushing around the loose rocky soil.

"And so you know it, truth or not. Well, I ain't seen no such thing neither, and you don't need to worry about it cause there's nothing out there but a few bluegills and bullfrogs that just got a new home from the washdown. Stretch a hide he said? 'Member this, Starla, a giant's got no need of tall tales. That Caleb's a nickel short on brain and body."

She likes when he talks disgusted in the face of others' fears. Like when he described

the cottonmouth curled up on the porch step, “Nothing but a snake, no need for commotion,” as Grandma tried to fan it to death with the willow-handled broom. People laughed when Jeb talked like that, being’s they were half fearful themselves and if someone like Jebediah Guidry didn’t scare for it, his words gave them extra steel in the spine. He wasn’t one of their own so to speak; he was raised up south a town, over at Lynnville. His people were from some part of Louisiana they said. And came north looking for work. The Guidrys did all right. Three girls and three boys all on the right side of the law up to the day they left home. Except for Jeb’s youngest brother Jimmy, caught fishing without a license on the Illinois River; they kept to themselves and out of trouble. Jeb married a local woman, Mary Fortado, a Portagee’ from the hill. The union was the kind of joining their neighbors described as “sure to keep.” Mary had her ways but wasn’t the type to be told about them. Her people, the Fortados, worked hard, did good business hauling grain and junk and didn’t ask for nothing that was not theirs to begin with. [continued]