Someone is listening. . . .

SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER

By Joyce Hansen

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All of my life I'd heard stories that Cracke Road was haunted. The road was once part of a plantation in Charleston, South Carolina, back in slavery times and was rumored to be haunted by the spirits of people who had run away from slavery and the plantation.

It was said that on dark moonless nights, these spirits could be seen slipping behind the oaks and magnolias that lined the road. People claimed that the ghosts were always spotted traveling in a northerly direction.

Everybody who lived on the road had a ghost story to tell—except my family. My mother would say to me, "Those stories are nothing but a bunch of silly tales people are making up to entertain themselves."

I didn't believe the stories, either, until Lillian came to live on Cracke Road. I first saw her on a late summer afternoon as I sat on my porch shelling butter beans with my mother. I lived at the end of Cracke Road, where nothing exciting ever happened. Our only nearby neighbors were Miss Mary and her husband, Mr. Ross, who lived in the house across the road from us. I was ten years old and had known Miss Mary and Mr. Ross all of my life and had never seen them smile.

My friend Junie and her family lived at the other end of the road—the fun end where there was light and laughter. Junie called my end of the road the cemetery because it was a dead end.

That summer afternoon I glanced up the road and saw a girl my age and a woman walking toward us. The girl, sobbing pitifully, clutched a doll in one hand and the woman's arm in the other.

Both Mama and I looked, but I guess I stared too hard.

"Mind your business," Mama whispered to me, and went back to shelling beans. They had to be going to visit the Rosses, since we didn't know them. A new face on Cracke Road was always an interesting event. I continued to stare.

When they turned into the Rosses' pathway I .said, "No wonder that girl is crying. Who would want to visit Miss Mary and Mr. Ross?"

"Marilyn, I told you not to talk about Miss Mary and her husband—you're just a child." In 1930 children were not allowed to have opinions about their elders. Poor girl, I thought. But why was she crying so hard? I wondered. A visit didn't *really* last forever.

"The four-o'clocks are open now," my mother said. "I'll finish the beans."

I jumped off the porch and picked the purple blossoms of the four-o'clocks.

As I gathered the flowers, the woman, who I guessed was the girl's mother, left the house without her daughter. Her eyes looked sorrowful.

"That's why she was crying so hard," I said, without stopping to think about whose business I was minding.

My mother, being as nosy as I was, forgot to chastise me.

"Well, Miss Mary must be caring for that child for a spell." Mama stood up. "It's no business of ours. But now you'll have someone on this end of the road to play with." My mother went in the house and I watched the slender woman walk quickly up the road. "Come on in, Marilyn," Mama called from the window. "Your daddy will be home soon."

I cleaned the kitchen table and set out the dishes, all the while peeping out of my kitchen window, which faced the Rosses' house. There was nothing different over there—a dim light behind the lace curtains, two wicker rocking chairs side by side on the Rosses' porch, and several flower pots resting on the porch's railing. I looked toward the dead end and the large oak tree with gray moss hanging like drapes from its branches. Everything was as usual.

After dinner I cleaned the table and helped Mama wash the dishes. I then took my jar for catching fireflies off the shelf over the kitchen sink and made sure that I had a couple of pieces of string in my skirt pocket.

"Mama, I'm going to make friends with the new girl, then I'll take her up the road to meet Junie and them."

"Okay, but she looks like a quiet child to me. She might not like Junie."

When I went outside, Miss Mary and Mr. Ross sat in their rocking chairs as they did every evening. The girl, holding her doll to her heart and her head down, sat on the porch steps. I crossed the road and stepped up to the Rosses' porch.

"Evening, Miss Mary, Mr. Ross," I said, smiling at the top of the girl's head.

"Evening," they both responded at the same time, watching me suspiciously.

"Hello," I said to the girl. "My name is Marilyn. What's yours?"

"Lillian," she whispered, looking up at me with the same sorrowful brown eyes as her mother's.

"Can Lillian come up the road with me to play with Junie?" I asked.

They stopped rocking. Mr. Ross grunted. "No," Miss Mary answered, glaring at me. "Mr. Ross and I are responsible for her. Junie and them ain't nothing but a bunch of ruffians. I don't know why your mother allows you to play with them."

I hid my anger. There was nothing wrong with Junie and the rest of them. They were just a little poorer than we were. I could faintly hear Big Bob's guitar. Mr. Ross rocked a little faster in his chair and began to sing a spiritual, drowning out Bob's blues.

"You-all stay right here at this end of the road," Miss Mary said, and then joined her husband in song. Every night when they sat outside they'd sing old spirituals. It was their way of praying, my mother had told me.

"Go in the wilderness,
Go in the wilderness,
Go in the wilderness,"

they sang, and I felt uneasy, as I always did when I heard those slavery-time spirituals. That's why I liked to be up the road with Junie when the Rosses started their singing. I held out my empty jar. "Want to catch fireflies?" I asked Lillian.

She shook her head.

"Then I'll show you how to make a necklace out of the four-o'clocks if you don't already know."

She didn't answer but followed me to my porch and sat silently while I pulled a piece of string through the blossoms, making necklaces for her and her doll. The sun had set and the crickets and frogs added their voices to the Rosses' spirituals. I tried to ignore their singing and the way the song seemed to bring deep shadows, especially where the road ended and the large oak tree stood like a guard at the dead end.

When I finished the necklaces, I decided to fill my jar with fireflies. I held the top of the jar slightly open and snapped them up. I'd pretend that they were tiny gold nuggets and imagine all the wonderful things I'd buy with them. When the jar was full I returned to the porch and held the jar up for Lillian to admire, but I could tell that her thoughts were somewhere else.

"When's your mother coming back for you?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders and kept staring at the ground.

"She'll be back soon, won't she?" I asked hopefully.

Lillian finally looked at me, tears brimming on her eyelids. "My mother had to go to New York so she could work. I have to stay with Miss Mary and Mr. Ross until she sends for me. We used to have a lot of fun together." Lillian stared lovingly at the doll. "She gave me this doll before she left."

I'd always lived with my own family and couldn't imagine what I'd do if they had to leave me with Miss Ross and her husband. I suddenly wanted to be with Junie and them, but I couldn't leave Lillian. If anyone needed a friend, she did.

The Rosses started singing

"Sweet hour of prayer,
Sweet hour of prayer
That brought me from a world of care
Meet me at my father's throne
And make my wants and wishes known…"

The screen door squeaked and Mama came out with a pitcher of lemonade. It tasted sweet and cool on that sweltering summer night.

As we drank our lemonade, Miss Mary and her husband finished singing. "Lillian," Miss Mary called. Lillian thanked my mother, walked slowly across the road, and disappeared inside the house. I could hear the radio coming from the living room, where my father sat, and Big Bob's guitar drifting down from Junie's end of the road.

My mother sat on the steps next to me as I freed the fireflies. "She seems to be a nice girl."

I told her about Lillian. She took a long swallow of lemonade. "It's too bad her mother had to leave her," she said, "but I'm sure she'll send for her when she's able to."

The next morning I expected to see Lillian outside so we could play with our dolls. I never called on Miss Mary except if my mother sent me there to borrow some sugar or flour. I was a little nervous as I shouted through the screen door. "Morning, Miss Mary. Can Lillian come to my house?"

Miss Mary came to the screen door, wiping her hands on her flowered apron.

"She's busy."

"Can she come out when she's finished, ma'am?" I asked.

"Maybe."

She left me standing there.

I went back home and Mama was making iced tea. "I thought that you were going to invite Lillian over here."

"Miss Mary says she can't come out. Why is she so mean?"

"I told you about being disrespectful to your elders. Miss Mary's not mean. She never had any children of her own, so she's a little strict, but she's a good God-fearing woman."

I didn't see Lillian until the evening after supper. She sat on the porch steps, still holding on to the beautiful brown doll. This time, however, she smiled when she saw me. The Rosses were seated in their rockers. "Can I play with Marilyn?" Lillian asked.

I was surprised that she spoke up.

Miss Mary nodded. "Long as you stay on this end of the road."

Lillian rested her doll on the porch steps and I handed her an empty jar so that we could catch fireflies together. Miss Mary and Mr. Ross began to sing. Lillian caught more fireflies than I did.

"Here, take some of mine," she offered when we plopped down on the bench under the oak tree. Usually, I didn't play near the very end of the road at night when I was alone. The dead end was only a few feet away from the two houses, but it was scary to me because on a moonless night the open field beyond looked like the very edge of the world. In the daytime it was just a field.

But on the night that Lillian and I chased fireflies, the moon was full and bright and the kerosene lamps from our houses cast a warm dark golden glow on us.

"Look, Marilyn," Lillian said, holding up the jar, "they're sparkling like tiny lamps." Suddenly she looked sad. "My mother and I used to catch fireflies. She'd say that they were tiny chips of sunlight."

"Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer that brought me from a world of care…" Miss Mary and Mr. Ross sang. Deep shadows seemed to suddenly dim our light, and I was frightened. "Let's go back to my porch," I said, dashing away from the shadows. We sat on my porch, admiring our fireflies and then freeing them when my mother came out with a pitcher of ice tea and a plate of ginger snaps for us.

"Lillian," Miss Mary called.

"Can you come out early tomorrow?" I asked her.

"Miss Mary says I can't just eat, sleep, and play. I have to help with chores." Then she ran across the road. Mr. Ross got up and walked stiffly into the house, while Miss Mary straightened the rockers.

Suddenly Lillian turned around and dashed back to our side of the road. "My doll. Did you see it?"

"You left it on the porch," I said.

"No one would take it," my mother said. "Go check the porch again, sweetie, it has to be there."

Tears rolled down Lillian's face and she ran back across the road. I felt sorry for her. "Go on, help her find the doll," my mother said.

I stepped up boldly onto the porch. I even had the nerve to look under the pillows on Miss Mary's rocking chairs. We searched behind the stack of firewood and several empty flower pots. No doll.

The screen door opened. "What're you children doing?" "I can't find my doll," Lillian sobbed.

"You need to learn how to take better care of your things. Go in the house."

My father was still listening to the radio when I followed my mother inside the house. "Miss Mary probably picked that doll up and brought it inside. It'll turn up," my mother said.

The next morning I saw Miss Mary walking down the road, carrying an umbrella over her head to protect herself from the sun. Mr. Ross was long gone to his shrimp boat. Lillian wasn't outside. I called through the screen door. She came to the door with a broom in her hand and big sorrowful eyes.

"Did you find your doll?"

She shook her head, "No."

"Can you come to my house and play? I'll give you one of my dolls. But they're not as pretty as yours."

"I have to clean the kitchen, then I have to pick the okra out of the backyard."

"I'll help you."

"Miss Mary said I can't have company."

That evening when I went outside, Lillian wasn't there yet. I picked the four-o'clocks to make necklaces for the dolls so that they wouldn't look so tacky. I heard through her open kitchen window Miss Mary singing. "Sweet hour, of prayer, in season of distress and grief, my soul has often found relief ..." she sang. I was busy twining the necklaces when Lillian ran down the steps with a wide smile on her face. She raced over to me.

"You found your doll?"

"Yes."

"Where was it?"

"Up in the attic in a trunk where Miss Mary hid it."

"How did you find it?"

"The girl told me."

"What girl?"

"The girl who used to live here."

"No girl ever lived with Miss Mary. I would have known her."

Lillian talked so softly, I could hardly hear her. "It was a long time ago when all of this land was a plantation. The girl was a slave."

"Miss Mary's been telling you them old Cracke Road ghost stories."

"Miss Mary doesn't tell me stories." Her face brightened. "My mother used to tell me stories. Wonderful stories."

"How did the girl look?"

"She had two thick braids that touched her shoulders and wore one of those long, old-fashioned gingham dresses."

I looked in Lillian's mouth to see whether she had a gap in her two front teeth, which meant that a person was a liar. Her front teeth were closed and straight.

"Are you lying, Lillian?"

"No. She led me to where the doll is and she is going to help me get to my mama."

"But your mother is all the way in New York."

"The girl told me that she had escaped from slavery in 1863."

"You talked to a ghost?" "Yes."

"You weren't afraid?"

"No, she's very nice. Whenever I want to see her, I sing 'Sweet Hour of Prayer' or 'Go in the Wilderness.' "

Nobody else ever said in their ghost stories that they spoke to the spirit. I thought that maybe Lillian was a little "teched" in the head, as the old people used to say. In other words, she was crazy.

Lillian smiled and her eyes shone. "The girl said she would help me run away to my mother. She said that when she escaped from the plantation, those same songs Mr. Ross and Miss Mary sing now were signals the slaves used back then when they made plans to meet somewhere or run away."

I peeped at the oak tree and the dead end. "Where is the girl now?"

Lillian shrugged. "I don't know. But she also told me that the night they all left the plantation, the signal that it was safe to leave was when some of the people who were too old or sick to run away sang 'Sweet Hour of Prayer.' " Lillian pointed to the oak.

"The girl said she hid behind that tree with her mother and when the old people sang, she and the other runaways took off and headed north."

Only the light from the kerosene lamps lit our end of the road. I didn't know what to believe. Maybe Lillian just liked to make up stories. "I don't believe in ghosts," I said. "I think you just made all of that up."

"But I didn't," she insisted. "There is a girl who told me all of this. She was in the house with me and showed me where the doll was."

"Did Miss Mary see her?"

"No. Miss Mary was in the kitchen singing, like she does sometime when she's cooking."

"Where does this girl live now? And if she ran away, why is she back here?"

Lillian folded her arms. "I guess she lives wherever spirits do and she can come back whenever she pleases." She reached for one of my dolls. "Can I play with your doll? Can't let Miss Mary find out that I know where my doll is. I'll take her back when I leave with the girl."

I handed her a doll. But the ghost talk was making me nervous.

"Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer,
That brought me from a world of care . . ."

Miss Mary and Mr. Ross sang from the porch.

I felt as if someone were there watching me and Lillian. I jumped off the porch step. "I'm going up to Junie and them," I said, and dashed up Cracke Road as fast as I could.

Big Bob's blues drowned out "Sweet Hour of Prayer."

The men sat in front of the grocery store like they did every summer night after work. Junie and the other kids played tag. I ripped and roared with them until my mother called me home. As I ran back to my end of the road I felt ashamed for leaving Lillian. I realized that I'd only imagined someone was watching us because of Lillian's story. Lillian was still sitting on the bench under the oak, playing with my dolls.

"Hi, Marilyn." She waved and seemed so happy. She stood up and handed me the dolls. "Thank you," she said, and followed Mr. Ross and Miss Mary into the house without waiting for them to call her. I was glad that she wasn't angry with me for leaving her.

The next day I didn't look for Lillian, since she couldn't come out anyway and I didn't want to hear about ghosts. I picked peaches with Junie and spent the rest of the afternoon on her end of the road. While me and Junie sat on her porch and ate peaches, I saw my mother and Miss Mary walking quickly toward us and—I knew something was wrong. "Is Lillian up here with you?" my mother asked excitedly.

"No," I said.

Miss Mary wrung her hands. "That's why I don't like to be responsible for other people's children."

"Seems like Lillian ran away," my mother said.

I couldn't believe it.

"Did she say anything to you?" Mama asked me.

I hesitated. Who would believe what Lillian had told me?

"Well?" My mother put her face in mine. "What did she say?"

"She said the spirit of a girl who used to live here was going to help her get to her mother."

Miss Mary put her hands on her hips. "Did the girl also tell her to go in my attic and take that doll which I was just keeping safe for her since she was so careless with it?"

"Yes, ma'am, she said that the girl told her where the doll was."

Junie and them crowded around us, soaking up every word.

My mother grabbed my arm.

"Marilyn, come on home. This is no time for playing."

She turned to Junie and them. "If you see a little girl named Lillian, let me or Miss Mary know."

Miss Mary threw her head up in the air and started back down the road. Me and my mother followed.

I told them everything. Miss Mary narrowed her eyes as she stared at me. "Your mother needs to give you a decent beating for telling them foolish ghost stories."

"I'm telling you what Lillian told me," I protested.

My mother turned to Miss Mary. "Maybe Lillian has an overactive imagination, Miss Mary. You know children do make up imaginary friends—especially lonely children."

Miss Mary folded her arms. "She didn't hear those stories from me. But I'm remembering something now." She sat down on our porch steps. "My grandmother was born into slavery. And she had a sister who escaped from this very same area when it was a plantation. And the slaves used to sing spirituals as secret codes and messages when they were making plans to escape." Miss Mary turned to me. "You say the ghost comes when we sing the spirituals?"

"Yes, ma'am."

My mother looked confused. "You didn't tell Lillian that story?" she asked.

"Absolutely not. I forgot it myself, until just now." Mama stood up. "Well, it's just a coincidence. Lillian will come back when she gets hungry and tired. In the meantime we'll help you find her. How far can a little girl go by herself? She's just missing her mama, that's all."

I felt awful and wished I'd been a better friend to Lillian. Maybe she wouldn't have run away then. There was a big search on for Lillian. Everyone who lived on Cracke Road looked for her. When my father came in from work he joined Big Bob and the other men in the search. No Lillian.

When the men returned from combing through the city and nearby woods Daddy sat with my mother and me on the porch.

"This is a mystery." My mother fanned herself.

"It's no mystery. The child just ran away is all," my father said. "Miss Mary probably forgot that she told her that story," he added.

I gazed over at the Rosses' house. Though my parents didn't say so, I knew that they were waiting, like I was, for Miss Mary and Mr. Ross to come out and sing their spirituals so that we could see the spirits in the dark. My father rarely sat outside with us in the evenings.

The crickets and frogs and Big Bob's guitar made their night music. The stars filled the sky, but Miss Mary and Mr. Ross did not come outside that night.

My mother poured herself a glass of lemonade. "Guess they must be upset about that child. But you know, I got used to hearing them sing every night. I miss it."

I was disappointed too. Since I was sitting safely between my mother and father, I wasn't afraid to see this spirit.

"Do you and Daddy know the words to 'Sweet Hour of Prayer'?" I asked.

"Of course," my mother answered. "Your father and I have been singing that spiritual every Sunday since we were children."

She began to sing.

"Sweet hour of prayer,
Sweet hour of prayer
that brought me from a world of care"

My father joined her.

"Meet me at my father's throne
And make my wants and wishes known"

Then I joined them, because I'd heard the spiritual so much I knew the words by heart too. And as we sang together I did not feel uneasy or afraid as I used to.

"In seasons of distress and grief
My soul has often found relief
And oft escaped the tempter's snare
By thy re—"

I leapt off the step and pointed toward the oak tree. "Look! There she is!"

"Who?" My mother craned her neck. "Lillian?"

My father stood up quickly. "You-all didn't see anything. Just the power of suggestion. I'm going in to listen to Fats Waller on the radio."

My mother stood up and nervously wiped her hands on her dress. "We're getting just like these other foolish folks round here, conjuring up ghosts. Come on, Marilyn, let's make some more lemonade. Sure is hot tonight."

I followed my mother and father into the house and said no more about the ghost. But I knew on that summer night that I had seen a girl, with two thick braids touching her shoulders, wearing a long gingham dress, slip behind the oak tree. I knew my parents had seen her, too, but they didn't want to believe what they'd seen.

Miss Mary and Mr. Ross went to the police the next day.

"Children run away all the time," one of the policemen told them. "That little gal is probably okay."

The people on Cracke Road, however, continued to search for Lillian for the rest of the week. But there was no trace of her.

I knew that Lillian wouldn't be found in South Carolina and I was the only one who wasn't surprised when two weeks later her mother wrote Miss Mary a letter saying that Lillian was safe and sound with her in New York City.

People were shocked. "It's amazing—it's unbelievable—how did that little girl get all the way to big New York City by herself?" they exclaimed. I knew how.

I never saw Lillian or the ghost again, and since that summer in 1930 I have moved far away from Cracke Road. But now in my old age I, too, sing the old spirituals and feel the kindly spirits of my ancestors watching over me.