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Hooper

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H O O P E R

First time I ever seen Hooper was one mornin' 'fore school. There he sat, a-swingin' as hard an' high as he could. Looked like he was fixing to swing right up over the top bar of the big iron swing set. I wanted to see if he'd make it, so I stopped at the corner while I tightened my braids.

He was laughin' and whoopin' up a storm as he went back and forth. He reminded me of one of them daddy long-legs that comes out from under the porch, he was so long and skinny as he gangled his legs 'round up in the air. Anyways, there he was, a-sittin' and a-swingin' and a-singin' so hard as to wake the Almighty. What in God's name was he doin' there so early? I was there to help water plants and clean blackboards and stuff. But looked like he was there just to have fun. As he swung, I could see his huge cutoff breeches a-fillin' up and goin' down with the wind. How did he ever keep them huge things up? The back of his head was covered with fuzzy black hair in parts, then was almost bald in others. He leaned his head far back as he could, with his mouth wide open so's to let the wind gurggle his tongue round a bit. He seen me then. I musta scared him a good one 'cause he sat up and dragged his bare feet in the gravel, but jumped off while it was still a-goin' and fell to his knees. I got there just 'fore he could run off and started talkin'. He looked scared til I told him I was a terrible mite sorry for scarin' him like I done, and I asked him his name.

"Hooper" he said.

"Hooper what?"

"Jus Hooper."

"Why just Hooper? Don't you got no last name?"

"I don't got no daddy ta gimme one."

I looked kinda odd at him and he just nodded and brushed his dirty ol' red polo shirt. I noticed then how he kept his big ol' pants up. They was held up with a long rope tied in a big awkward knot round his skinny waist. Seemed he couldn't get it quite tight nough so that his pants just kinda hung on his hips. His shirt was stretched cross his chest so's I could see his ribs, and it wasn't long nough, so his

belly-button was left bare. I wanted to poke him there, or tickle his ribs, but figurin' that he was already a bit skittish, I decided to wait to start tickle games.

We just sat there a-lookin' at one nother like we had the scabbies or somethin'. He was first to end the silence. "Don't it bother you, me being a nigger?"

"Hell no," I said. This made me feel extra big cause I heard my big brother Jeb talk that way. He was in the sixth grade, and bein' in the second grade, I figured that's a good way to impress people if ya ever need to, and I felt I needed to. "Well, I better go now so ta clean that gaw-damn board for that gaw-damn teacher." It sounded all grown up a-comin' from my lips, and I decided to start talkin' that way all the time 'sept round my momma and daddy. Hooper yelled somethin' bout seein' me tomorrow, same time. I just threw him our secret club's hi-sign and ran into the buildin'. 'Bout five minutes later, I went to look out the window for him. He was gone. The other kids were beginnin' to fill the playgroun' that Hooper and me had just left.

The next mornin', I got up earlier 'n usual for to go to the playgroun' and meet hooper. I grabbed a san-which for breakfast on my way out and went skippin' to the playgroun'.

When I got there, I coudn't see Hooper nowhere, so I sat on a swing and started eatin' my san-wich. Suddenly he stepped out from behind a tree and walked to where I was sittin'. "Why was you hidin' from me like some rabbit?" I demanded.

"I weren't hidin'," he said. "I was procautionin'."

"What do you mean, procautionin'?" I asked.

"Ever' nigger knows how ta procaution. You ain't no nigger, you don' need ta know."

I could tell he was a mite bitter bout bein' black so's I decided to stay clear of talkin' 'bout things like that. His eyes was mad and mean like Jeb's when he's fixin' to hit me, so I gave Hooper half of my san-which so's to make a truce. I never seen no one ever eat like Hooper et that half of san-which. He like inhaled it in one big gulp. It was

odd---seemed I could hear my san-which a-hittin' the bottom of his empty stomach and sort of vibratin' down there.

Every day after that, I'd go to sneakin' somethin' out of the kitchen for Hooper: toast, biscuits, an apple, always somethin'. He always gulped it down and his stomach always vibrated. I liked his vibrations, and always envied him cause he could make them and no matter how hard I got to tryin' I couldn't.

"Hoop, why don't I wibrate like you when I eat?"

"It's 'cause you ain't on no relief that don't never come, that's why."

I soon stopped my swearin' and carryin' ons like that, cause ol' Hooper didn't swear none, and I thought he was pretty neat. I got to figurin' that you didn't need to swear to get some impressin' done. Ol' Hooper changed me a lot that way. I stopped lyin' too cause Hooper said that it didn't make no matter, people always found out the truth anyway.

Hooper and me had loads of fun messin' round together. We did all sorts of things kids do. We'd play some tag a-hangin' from the monkey bars, and have races 'cross the cat-walk. Once, Hooper even took his rope off so's I could imitate the girls playin' jump rope, a-jumpin' and chantin' away. He looked mighty funny standin' there holdin' up his breeches while I made fun of the silly dainty girls, jumpin' round in them frilly dresses and boppin' curls. I resented them, maybe I envied them, but I had Hooper and he had me, and we was what counted, nothin' else.

Every mornin' for weeks, me and Hooper'd play, but every day, he left me alone there just 'fore the other kids start comin'.

"Why don't cha stay round with me a while after the kids come?" I once asked. "I could show-an-tell ya to my class, and play with ya at noon recess, and you could learn some readin'."

"You think they gonna let any nigger kid set foot in that there school buildin'? "Round white folks' kids? Why you think I set off ever' mornin' so's not ta get cought round here?"

"Procautionin'?" I asked.

"No, so's not ta get caught messin' round with no white kid, that's why. Don't ya understan'?"

"Yah, I understan'," I lied.

Hooper and me met as usual that last day. I 'member it was a real hot one. Me and Hooper just went to layin' in the sade of the big ol' tree in the playgroun' and talked bout all the fun things we'd been doin' the last couple a weeks.

All of a sudden, we heard a shout and we sat up. Hooper froze terrified when he seen Mr. Lewis, the school teacher, a-runnin' towards us, shakin' his fist and cussin'.

"Ain't nothin' ta worry 'bout Hoop. Dogs go ta actin' like that sometimes when it's hot, and they don't never cause no harm."

But I knowed I was wrong when Mr. Lewis grabbed up Hooper and started to shake him. A-cussin' and a-swearin' bout how that damn, black little nigger gonna corrupt a little white girls mind and soul. I kept tryin' to stop him. He was goin' at Hooper so bad and so hard. I was screamin' and cryin' and grabbin' holdt Mr. Lewis, tryin' to explain that Hoop was my friend. He just shook me off again and again til my hands and knees was all scraped and raw from the gravel. Hooper's head was a bobbin' round so's I thought his neck was breakin'. His body was wet and shiny in the sun. I was beginnin' to think that Mr. Lewis was killin' my Hooper, when he throws him on the groun. He tells Hooper to get outta his sight or he was fixin' to kill him. Hooper got to his feet and started staggerin' and runnin' away. I called to him but he never once turned round. Mr. Lewis was standin' over me askin' me what that nigger boy'd done to me. Over and over again, he asks me, but alls I could do was to cry and watch Hooper disappear in the distance.

/Diana Payne/