

Judith (or Handprints)

A Story about Edgar Allan Poe

By Elle Powers

“Marse Eddie, you let Aunt Juju tell you a story now. Go on, scoot.”

I throw more wood on the fire and tuck Eddie in bed, up under my arm, where he like it best, his fine curls tickling my chin. But—*ugh*—he smell like a muddy trout, and I know I ought dunked him in the washtub this evening, but I fear he catch his death a’cold.

Miss Allan will want him scrubbed and scented for getting dressed tomorrow, just like a little prince, so I gone ax Jim to carry me some water from the stove in the morning. If the Missus is thinking flowers, she best be satisfied with soap. This child be fresh and clean come morning, but he ain’t gone smell like nobody’s petunia in this damp cold.

When I washed him last night, I done spy a bite on that boy’s bony shoulder. As God’s in his heaven—a bite!

“Marse Eddie, where you get this bite from?” I axed him.

For the first time in his whole speaking life, that child shut his mouth up tight. Here I be, fretting over dead folk that drink the blood of the living.

Judith, quit your idle imaginings, I told myself, just like the ole preacher. *Eddie ain’t been ’round no dead folk, and he ain’t lacking no blood either.*

“Now, you tell your Aunt Juju,” I says. “That ain’t no possum bite.”

He splashed water in the tub and rolled his eyes, like he do. He a smart child, that Eddie Allan. He already be reading and writing, which is more than I can say for myself.

“William did it.”

“Willem? Who that?”

“William Shaw. A boy at school. He’s a right good fighter, Juju.” Eddie roll his r’s like Massa Allan do—*“rrright”*—and his eyes growed big and bright as stars.

“Is that right,” I says, shaking my head and pressing my lips to keep from cursing this boy Willem to damnation.

“Mm-mmm...this here...nasty...abomination...” I scrubbed Eddie’s back, maybe with a bit too much zeal, not to be touching the swelled red skin near his scrawny neck with naught but water. Even so, he quaked like a cattail in a breeze.

“God made you a boy, Marse Eddie. You’s no critter,” I says, lifting his chin to mine with the wash rag.

“No, Auntie.”

“Critters bite, and you’s no critter, Eddie Allan. But you got to beat that boy.”

“Ma says not to fight at school—”

“I tell you to listen to Aunt Juju.” I washed his ears real good so he hear me. “You got to find this boy after school and you got to hit him and you got to hit him hard. That the only way he learn. I know boys like this Willem Shaw, let me tell you.”

I thinking, I know *mens* like this Willem. Them don’t bite so much, but them touch to show them’s in charge, even if it be real soft. A hand here and a tickle there. Massa Allan be like this Willem all growed up. But what can I do about it? He the massa. As Scipio done told me a hundred times, “Ain’t nothing I can do about it. Ain’t nothing you can do about it neither.”

But that ain’t so. I handle Massa Allan’s hands just fine. Scipio be sore to see it, but Massa Allan done sold him to some plantation up the river, and I ain’t seen him since. The father of my childrens, sold for six hundred dollar!

I like to see me fetch that many dollar on the block, but I ain’t no strong man like Scipio. I be a breeder, but I ain’t giving no more babies, thank the Law. To the white folk, my babies be more hands to grow they tobacco or shine they silver or cook they cornbread. Or them like me, who feed and raise the white babies and make more my own babies to work or sell.

My own babies growed up—not mine no more. Not like this little boy be mine.

When Massa Allan get into the “nappy ale,” he real friendly with his hands. And I be older than he! “Judith,” he says, “don’t you look fit for a frolic.” I just laugh, twist side-aways from him, and says over my shoulder, “Yes, sir, thank you, sir!” and offer him more drink. I know he don’t do me no harm if he keeled over. Then, when he not looking, I put ash from the wood stove in his pipe tobacco, and worse than that in his food.

He don’t want none of me anyways. And he shore as shooting don’t want no black baby. (*If I giving anymore babies, which I ain’t.*) Scipio won’t hear of it, but I feel sorry for the man. Maybe he happy to see a real behind for once. Miss Allan so skinny, she ain’t keeping nobody warm at night. But I blame her twice because if she hit him upside the head once or twice a time, maybe he behave better than this. Miss Allan ain’t no Judith, that for shore.

I don’t know if my mama name me that or my mama’s massa, but I ax the ole preacher who I named for, and he told me about Judith, from a torn-out book of the Bible. That Judith done save the

Hebrews—them the people of God—by cutting the head off the massa! She cut the head clean off, in two strokes, with the man’s own sword. But did them bother to keep her story in the holy scripture? No, sir. She left out like cutting the head off the man ain’t no big chore.

If this Judith be Massa’s mammy, she don’t stand for no nonsense, and she gone give him a piece of her mind, if not his sword. This how I know how to handle them mens and boys like Massa Allan and Willem.

“That the only way this boy learn, Marse Eddie. You do him a favor.” *And all the world too*, I thinking. “So, when you go to school tomorrow, I gone ax you if you hit him, you hear? You better do as I done told you.”

“I’m gonna hit him hard.”

“That’a boy.” Law know I like nothing better than to do it myself. I think I forgot the bath tonight not to see that god-awful mark of the devil again. This child need to be bit like he need another pair of legs. After all he come through. He tough on the outside, shore enough, but his heart be tender as a boiled cabbage.

I’m told his mama and daddy was actors in the the-ate-ter—the one that burned down to ash with near a hundred folk in it the December Eddie come to live with us. We used to run this house on Massa Allan’s word. But after that baby boy come from his mama’s still-warm corpse, this house spin ’round Eddie like he the sun.

Miss Allan buy him the best clothes you ever seed. She make Massa Allan pay for it all. And he do. Clothes and shoes and hats...and doctors. Law, Eddie always sick, and that be what scare me to death. What after the Cunningham baby girl caught the fever one night and never woke up the next morning. That baby I feed at my own breast. Nobody care that she be my baby too.

After that trouble, I come here and work in the Allan kitchen. Then Eddie come, and he catch the croup and the ’hooping cough. Give me apoplexy. Oh, and the measles too.

Law. Too many baths, I says, but Miss Allan just laugh at me. “Oh, Judith, baths be good for childrens,” she says, but I bet she ain’t never dress a dead baby for. Even then she may say, “At least that baby gone smell good for the coffin.”

This baby boy never sleep neither. His nurse done dose him every night with bread soaked in gin. And Eddie ain’t sleeping unless he get his “medicine.” He ax me for it. “Please, Auntie, please!” He cry and beg. But I know it bad, and my heart break with his bawling. So’s I rock him, he squeezing my neck with all his might, and we soaking my apron with our tears.

But he growed out of all that now. Thank God, because he wear me out in other ways, him running willy-nilly through mud and snow all the livelong day.

It gone take a story to get him down to sleep, especially on this long night, when the sun go down for supper. His new mama and daddy out at a party, even though the Missus ain’t feeling no good,

and she be in bed all day. Them's got places to go, and Eddie Allan got run of the house—inside and out, which be why he so filthy.

“What’s wrong, Aunt Juju?”

“What you mean, child?”

“You moaned.” Then he moan too, just the same.

“Did I now? I just sore. I getting old. But don’t you mind me. I still got a story for you.”

“Is it a ‘haint’ story, Juju?”

“You says you don’t believe in no haints, Marse Eddie.”

“I don’t,” he says, his eyes rolling up to them soot stains on the ceiling. “But I don’t mind them either.”

I chuckle, but not too loud. It hurt his feelings when I laugh after he say something. Oh, Law, how this child make me laugh!

I careful of what story I gone tell him. None of them slaves killing they’s massas and they’s massas’ ghosts coming back to haint them. Or them slaves beaten to death or hanged in a tree coming back to haint the massas. No, he like the ghosts that says where buried treasure be. Ghosts without they’s heads. Mischief-making ghosts that play tricks.

But tonight, I think I gone tell him about a different haint.

“This one about a boy whose mama done die.”

He twists his head up to look at me with worry, but then he settle back under my arm when I smile. “This boy be taken in by a massa and missus with no childrens, who take care of him good, but who ain’t never gone love him like his mama done love him.”

“Was she a beautiful mother?”

“Oh, Law, was she! She be so fine, with long, dark, curly hair and big dark eyes—”

“Like yours.”

“Not quite like mine’s. More like *yours*.” I know this how Eddie’s mama look because I seed her. Not at the the-ate-ter, mind, but after she dead. I done hear her voice too.

One night, when Eddie still sleeping in the crib Massa Allan pay for, I done hear singing, and I waked up to that rocking chair—that one right there—just a’rocking. The hair on my arms liked to stick straight up and my blood run cold. And I knowed it her. I knowed because I seed my mama too, up from the grave a time or two. That just how mamas be.

So's I crawl out my bed—because I know spirits, and I know you can scare them away, and I ain't trying to. When I done creeped 'round the rocking chair, that beautiful white ghost missus smile at me. She smile, but she be sad. So's she put a finger to her lips, like to shush me, and she done vanish. Quick as a humming bird.

“She be dainty, but her song so sweet, it make growed mens cry like babies.” He laugh at that. “As that boy growed, his dead mama ghost watch over him. She set by his bed when he sleep. She keep him safe from them who like to harm him. See here, Marse Eddie, that be a love no fever gone kill.”

“Is she scary? With a cut throat and bloody clothes?”

“No, she just white. But everybody know her a ghost because she a famous actress in the the-ate-ter, and everybody love her singing and dancing, and everybody remember when she done die.”

“Did the boy ever see her ghost?”

“Shore enough. When somebody treat her boy bad, she scare them away with a holler that chill to the bone.”

Now this be where Eddie gone tell the rest of the story. I let him because he be good at it. He set up and look at me, likes to ax me if he can. I nod.

“Once, when the boy was at school, another boy named William bit him on the shoulder and scratched his face with his dirty fingernails—”

“Wait right there. That boy Willem done scratch you too?”

“No, Auntie. I'm making the story better. Just listen, Juju.” I nod, trying not to crack a grin.

“That night, the boy's dead mother saw the scratches and the bite, and she wept over him. But the next day at school, when the boys played in the yard, they heard a wail come up the street from where the old theatre burned down.”

By now, he standing up, all wobbly on the quilt, making a shrilly wail behind his hand. I try to pull him down for he fall, but he jump to the foot of the bed, far away from my aching hands, and I swat nothing but air.

“The children huddled together, frightened, at the ghostly woman in a gray, tattered dress who drifted into the schoolyard, but when the boy saw his mother, he felt happy. She floated towards him and hovered between him and the other boys.”

Here, Eddie make his voice high and trembly, just like a ghost. “‘Which one is William?’ the ghost mother asked.

“The boy pointed at William, and the other children scooted away, leaving him alone, with a ghost between him and the boy he bit. William screamed and looked like he would faint when the

dead mother turned towards him. She flew at him so fast, he didn't have time to run, and she slapped him hard across the face and disappeared as William started to cry.

“When the schoolboys came back, they saw a white handprint on his cheek, and they all pointed at it and laughed. His face was red all over from crying, except for the white handprint, which always appeared ever after, whenever he thought about being mean to other children.”

At that, I laugh so hard it near split my side. “You right, Marse Eddie! That just the way it be. She jerk a knot in that Willem, and he be sorry. Now come back here. This bed be for lying in.”

Eddie plop down again and set back with a grin and a big yawn, remembering after to cover his mouth. “Aunt Juju, will you sing to me now?”

“What you want me to sing, child?”

“A song my mother would have known.”

I know he mean his ghost mama, and I know just the one to sing, and I do: “Lavender's blue and rosemary's green...”

Eddie sigh real big and lay his warm head on my bosom. I know this song because I hear his ghost mama sing it most nights, even when I don't be seeing her.

She know me now too, and we ain't scaring each other no more. We's different, to be shore—she be dead and I be breathing. But that be the only difference. We both love the same child.

Eddie's ghost mama know it be me who feed and wash and train her boy. My handprints be all over him too, but them's gentle. Them ain't white, and you don't be seeing them. At least, the Massa and Missus don't. Me and Eddie know them's there. I think ghost mama see them plain as day. And I think she be fine with that.

She ain't like most white folk, who look at me and see a *thing*, not a mama. A thing that them know's there—under the bed, behind the curtains—and them need it every day, but them don't wanna look at it. Like a chamber pot. Though I suppose I be more like a cow or a goat—too ole and shriveled up for milking but good for keeping the pasture.

But Eddie's ghost mama know I be a mama too. She know what these white folk don't—that when I feed a child, he be *my* child. And *this* child, he gone be fed on my stories.