

Halloween Story: 'She Reaps What She Sows'



(You can download an MP3 of this story at voaspecialenglish.com)

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Christopher Cruise.

This Monday night, millions of American children will celebrate Halloween. Dressed in costumes, often as princesses or action heroes, they will go to their neighbors to collect candy by yelling "trick or treat!"

For the past two years our Halloween treats have been scary stories written by our own Caty Weaver. Caty has written another original story. Here is "She Reaps What She Sows."

BARBARA KLEIN: Howell Hall was a big, old house, almost two hundred years old. It was a kind of house called a Victorian. Old Victorians can be beautiful, with tall windows and detailed woodwork. But not Howell Hall. It looked dark and oppressive, not bright and cheerful like the other houses in the neighborhood.

Something else was strange about Howell Hall. It was not nice and straight like other houses. Honestly it looked deformed, like some giant had taken hold of it and squeezed.

Maggie and her friend Matthew stood in the front yard and looked at the old house. The children knew they were not supposed to be there. Their parents told them it was dangerous. They told them some kid once went inside and fell through a floorboard and broke his leg.

Maggie and Matthew were not only disobeying their parents. They were also breaking the law. The house had been empty for years and no one seemed to care about it. Still, it was private property and they did not have permission to be there.

And really who in their right mind would want to go inside a haunted house? Yes, I know what you're thinking -- another Halloween story about a "haunted house." But Howell Hall really was haunted. All the children in the neighborhood knew the story. Something terrible happened there. That was all people in the town would say -- "something terrible."

Whatever it was, it happened long ago. Some said it was back in the eighteen hundreds. Others said it happened in the early nineteen hundreds. Either the details somehow got lost in time, or people chose to forget. Maybe whatever happened was too scary for anyone to want to remember.

What do you think happened at Howell Hall? Yes, you -- listening to my voice right now. What do you think happened? Let your imagination run wild when you go to bed tonight. And then, if your parents come in and ask why you're still awake, you can tell them: it's because of the terrible thing that happened at Howell Hall.

And you can tell them about the blood. Oh, yes, there was blood. Lots of it. That's one detail that survived all these years. And here is another detail that survived. When the police came, they discovered the blood but they found nobody -- what I mean is, they found no body. They found the owner of the house very much alive. Alive and out of his mind. They found him on the first floor in the music room, calmly playing the piano.

Maggie and Matthew and the other neighborhood children had heard all the theories about what happened at Howell Hall. But not all of the children believed the story.

MAGGIE: "OK. Let's go."

MATTHEW: "Go home?"

MAGGIE: "Home? No! In the house. We're here to explore the house. Are you chickening out?"

MATTHEW: "No way, Maggie. I'm not scared of a house."

Maggie and Matthew looked up again at the big, old house. What they did not see was someone in the top floor window, looking back at them.

The children opened the front door and stepped inside. The hallway was covered in spider webs and dust. There were large areas of the walls where the paint had peeled away.

Maggie and Matthew took a few steps down the hall. Suddenly the front door slammed shut behind them.

MATTHEW: "OK How'd that happen? Don't tell me the wind shut the door, Maggie. There's no wind!"

MAGGIE: "Oh, come on, Matt. The door closed because the house isn't straight. It closed because of gravity. It wasn't a ghost."

Maggie walked back to the front door and reached for the knob to turn it. The knob came off in her hand.

MAGGIE: "I guess it would be nice if we could open it, though."

Matthew looked sick.

MAGGIE: "I'm kidding. It's an old house. Things are broken. We're not trapped. We can climb out a window."

Maggie and Matthew heard a piano being played somewhere in the house.

MATTHEW: "Who's playing the piano?"

MAGGIE: "Hello, hello. Is anybody there?"

The children headed down the long hallway. The music got louder.

MAGGIE: "Matthew – there – the music room."

As soon as the kids got to the doorway, the music stopped. A tall piano stood in the far corner of the room. All they could see was the back of it.

The children were shaking as they walked slowly toward the piano. They wanted to see who was sitting at the keyboard. But, what they saw lying on the seat was a pile of bones. Human bones.

MATTHEW: "Is this enough for you, Maggie? Can we go now?"

MAGGIE: "Let's get out of here. Run, Matthew, run!"

(SOUND: Door slams)

MAGGIE: "Matt, who closed the door? Matthew, who closed it? I'm scared, I want to go home. Why did I come here?"

MATTHEW: "It won't open, Maggie. We're stuck. I can't believe you got me into this. I should have known better when Jenny and Will refused to come."

Jenny and Will were their friends from school.

MAGGIE: "I'm sorry, Matt. Matt, I'm sorry. I thought it would be fun, especially on Halloween."

(SOUND: Moans)

MATTHEW: "Did you hear that? DO you hear that?"

MAGGIE: "Yes, of course, I hear it."

MATTHEW: "I think it's above us. What does it want?"

Just then the door that had been stuck slowly opened. Matt and Maggie froze with fear. What would they see on the other side? But there was nothing there. Just the empty hallway. And a way out, they thought.

The children ran down the hall. They were headed for the front room where they could climb out a broken window. Suddenly they stopped. Some one -- or some thing -- stood a few meters before them. It wore a dark, hooded robe. It just stood there, holding a sharpened stick of some kind and looking at the children. Or appearing to look at them. They could not really see any eyes under the hood.

They heard a horrible noise. The figure started coming toward them.

MAGGIE AND MATTHEW: "NOOO! Go away, go away!"

The figure stopped and then turned and went up the staircase.

FIGURE: "There's just one way out, Matthew and Margaret. And one chance to make it out. You must follow me."

MAGGIE : "No, Matthew. NO! We can't go upstairs. We have to get to the window in the front room."

Maggie and Matt raced past the stairs. Somehow Matt's foot caught Maggie's feet and the two children fell and slid into the front room. They jumped up and started toward the window. But Maggie stopped and grabbed Matt's arm.

Their path was blocked by something hanging from the ceiling. It was the body of a man with a rope around his neck.

MATTHEW: "I'm not going near that window, Maggie. No way. We're going with that thing on the stairs."

MAGGIE: "Are you crazy? Matt, that thing wants to kill us."

She pointed to the hanging body.

MAGGIE: "It probably killed him. He can't hurt us, he's dead."

And then the man hanging from the rope looked over at them -- and smiled a wide smile.

GHOSTLY VOICE: "Matthew and Margaret. There's just one way out. Follow the Reaper. You wanted to come, against the rules, now death awaits you little fools."

Matthew and Maggie knew there was no choice but to go upstairs. They walked slowly up the steps.

The Reaper stood at the top. When the children got to the first landing, they looked up and saw the Reaper speeding down a long and twisting hall. They followed as fast as they could, but the Reaper was always a few steps ahead.

The Reaper entered a room. There was a greenish light and strange sounds coming from inside. Matthew looked at Maggie.

MATTHEW: "This is it, Maggie."

They walked into the room.

CHILDREN: "SURPRISE!"

Matt and Maggie looked around. There were Jenny and Will -- and Michael and Sophie and Derrick and their other friends from school.

And there was the Reaper. Without the hood.

MAGGIE: "Dad! DAD! How could you. I was so scared. I thought we were going to die."

MAGGIE'S DAD: "But you didn't. And you DID learn a lesson. And we all had a good time teaching it -- including Matthew."

MAGGIE: "Matthew! You knew about this the whole time? You were faking it?"

MATTHEW: "Yep. Took a few days to set it up."

MAGGIE: "Then who was the dead guy downstairs?"

DEAD GUY: "That would be me."

Maggie turned around. The dead man was very much alive.

DEAD GUY: "I'm Mr. Silva. I manage this property and I'm a friend of your dad. And, you know, I think we could have a lot of fun making this place into a haunted house every Halloween."

Maggie's face was red. Her pride was a little hurt, but she was ready to forget about that. She turned to her friends.

MAGGIE: "Well, guys, what do you say? Wanna go trick-or-treating now?"

(MUSIC)

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: "She Reaps What She Sows" was written and produced by Caty Weaver. Maggie was Daisy Bracken, and Jack Goodwin played Matthew. Doug Johnson was Maggie's dad. And Mr. Silva was Mario Ritter. You can find an MP3 and transcript, along with links to our other Halloween stories, at voaspecialenglish.com. Join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.