

“3 True Stories”

A short story

By T.D. Smith

“And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke.”

--Joel 2:30



It was the end of the day in late October, and the leaves fell all around me and my dog, dancing about, swaying and twirling in the breeze as they journeyed down to their final resting places on the road.

They gleamed in bright shades of red, yellow, and orange, as well as darker maroon and brown as the last light of the fading sun struck them. A chill was beginning to creep into the Autumn air. It had been unseasonably warm that day, but nevertheless the Fall season’s coolness before the sharp bite of Winter took hold was beginning to prevail as the sun began to take its rest. A dampness hugged me, chilling my joints and causing goose pimples to rise on my arms and back of my neck, and it occurred to me that we might be in for a bit of rain later.

It had been a long and stressful day at work. I was weary and ready to sit down for a nice, cold beer, and to binge an episode or twelve of whatever sitcom I had recently stumbled upon on Netflix. But, my dog, eager and happy to see me, tail wagging and tongue hanging out over her jowls, had not been out at all during the day and was even more eager for a nice, long walk. I needed steps and exercise, and a good, long walk in the crisp October air always did a soul good, opening the lungs with fresh air and clearing the mind from the fog of post-workday fatigue. So, I donned my jacket and changed from work shoes to sneakers, harnessed up my canine companion, and out the door we went.

I do not recall making the conscious choice to walk the direction we did, but that evening we walked a different route than normal. Instead of going right out the front door, the dog and I turned left.

I had noticed the orange and white U-Haul from far down the street, a half a mile or so, earlier that morning when I left for work, and the frenzied hurry of my neighbors carrying boxes into the back of the truck. Perhaps it was out of curiosity deeply embedded in my mind that I wanted to walk in this direction and see what was going on, to learn why my neighbors were moving. Maybe it was just a whim that caused us to walk by their apparently soon-to-be former residence that evening, I do not know. Whatever the reason, I found myself walking a route I did not normally take with the dog, and growing steadily nearer the old, rather run-down house at the end of the road.

Nobody had lived in this house for long or consistently over the years. It seemed like every few months a new person or couple was moving in and out. The building was up on a raised place, not exactly a hill but not by any means flat, at the end of the street. It stood two stories and a couple of

thousand square feet long and wide. It was a colonial style house made mostly of wood, old, ancient-looking and a deep brown, with a board warped and sticking out of place here and there, and moss growing in this place and that. When one walked by, a whiff of rotting wood could be caught if the wind carried it exactly right. The house was larger and different in construction from any other in my neighborhood, which consisted of mostly brick ranches with a basement.

The prevailing neighborhood story was that this house preexisted any other house on the block, and in fact the current suburban setting that had proliferated all around too, dating back to the days when this Southwestern Virginia neighborhood was still a field. In those days one had to take back country roads to arrive at this small manor. Rumor was that it had changed ownership several times over the last few decades, although all of us were vaguely aware of an elderly resident who lived on the premises in the top story whom most believed to be the longtime proprietor of the property. Several attempts by the city government to either knock down or gentrify the place over the years had failed, though nobody knew any specific details as to exactly why.

I did not know the current residents super well, but we had exchanged pleasantries a handful of times and I had talked to the husband for a few minutes here and there when we would occasionally cross paths checking our mail (the mailboxes for our street were mostly in one spot in the center of the neighborhood) and we had had a conversation for a few minutes. Normal working people, they mostly kept to themselves but always looked relatively happy and healthy and cheerful, if living in a dilapidated house for cheap rent while they saved, a fact I'd learned through one of our few short conversations.

Today they looked unrested and shaken and were hurriedly filling their truck.

"Moving already?" I asked, waving friendly as possible at the man with dark circles under his eyes as he wheeled a stack of boxes on a dolly down the slightly sloping driveway towards the truck.

"Yes. Ready to leave. Now." the man stammered.

I was somewhat taken aback.

I knew that moving involved long hours of toil and tedious work packing, lifting, taping up boxes, purging extra belongings you don't need, and all sorts of other strenuous and exhausting activities. It takes forever, is inconvenient, and tiring. Looking at the man and his wife and noticing the man wore pajama bottoms with sneakers, the woman a pair of weathered looking jeans, and both of their hair greasy, I figured they had not showered in a day, possibly more.

"It seems like you just got here, though," I replied, "Is everything alright?"

"It will be," the neighbor said, locking eyes with his wife, "once we are out of here. We are just ready to move on."

With that, the man and his wife returned to their moving duties, turning away from me and not giving me any further acknowledgement whatsoever. I frowned, thinking it odd and unsettling that such a usually merry couple would seem so suddenly disturbed by whatever was causing them to want to move so suddenly, and by their curt responses.

After a few seconds the dog whined, pulled on her lead, and I shrugged and continued walking her to the end of the street, across a field, a small asphalt parking lot, and then onto a gravel path that led into the woods. Not our normal route, but a path I was familiar with and walked from time to time.

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The dog and I wandered down this path for a little while, covering perhaps half a mile or so. The air was turning colder and damper and the light dimmer by the minute. Our feet and paws crackled over shriveled brown fallen leaves rolled up and lying scattered across the path. We crunched over the thick gravels nearer the beginning of the trail, then eventually our steps turned to a much lighter, more rhythmic clomp-clomp-clomping as the gravel turned into a finer cinder further down. On we went, until the path drew up beside a small creek, and we could hear a gentle gurgle and trickle of water as it cascaded over rocks.

We both paused there. The dog sat at my feet and looked all about. I took it all in, the smell of damp, cold leaves on the ground rising up to greet my nostrils, the babbling brook nearby, the final gleam of twilight penetrating the rapidly disappearing Fall foliage in the canopy and bathing everything beneath in a fine hue of amber that gently danced off the ripples of water just visible past the tree line.

We continued a short distance down the path, which wound away from the creek deeper into the woods and eventually crossed over some barely-still-existing fencing, dilapidated and petrified and ancient. I had not been down this path this far or this deep into the woods before, but it had been a particularly stressful workday, so I decided to walk the dog a bit further tonight.

The path wound several more times before straightening, and the trees became uniform on both its sides, as if planted to hug the path intentionally, though its branches and leaves were overgrown and unkempt, and then led us into a sort of little clearing in the woods. An aged, weathered, old, abandoned church stood in the middle of this time-forgotten courtyard. Many of its stained-glass windows were cracked, broken, and missing. A few were boarded up, as were its front doors. Whitewashed boards poked out or were missing from its outer walls and lay covered by moss and mud on the ground along with its shingles. But the metal cross affixed atop the steeple stood fast, still standing tall and twinkling in the twilight.

The dog and I looked about at this spectacle for a few long moments too, breathing in the Fall air with its hints of the withered wooden Church wafting upon it now.

I sighed.

“Well, old girl, we’d better turn around and get back home before the rain and dark,” I told the dog, who sprang to her feet, whirled round, and began pulling me back up the path.

As we turned to go, something that glimmered in the failing Fall dusk caught the corner of my eye. Bending down, I noticed a sharp metal corner of something sticking out of the ground, covered by a layer of dirt and leaves. I brushed the leaves off it with my foot, dug my shoe into the dirt, and swiping widely left and right across its surface with my foot, cleared off a large portion of a rectangular metal sign buried there. Wiping the remaining muck off with my hands, I made out words in large, capital removable letters, their plastic pegs still embedded in the metal sign, their black paint now eroded and

chipping. Some of the letters were missing and there were no signs of them anywhere about, but I was able to fill in the blanks mentally and make out the message:

WAIL, FOR THE DAY OF THE LORD IS NEAR!

I thought about this sign, which must have sat fixed in that Church courtyard, on a pedestal now broken and gone and protected by glass, long ago, an institution, plausibly the last in a series of warning messages to the faithful. I pondered whether there had been a different one each week, several weeks, every month? I contemplated its words, their meaning, and the fact that they were now buried beneath sod and soot, but not so very deeply after all that I could not still uncover them.

After a few lingering moments, I returned the sign to the spot on the ground where I'd found it, and the dog told me she was insistent that we move on through her pulling and a few anxious whines, so we headed back the way we'd come on the path.

Some minutes later and we exited the woods and left the path, traversing the parking lot, and were back on our road. The sky was a bright orangish red now, and the sun had disappeared behind the mountains. Light was fading fast. Down at the end of the street, a streetlamp had already flickered to life. In fields surrounding the neighborhood and front yards a horizontal line of gray fog was beginning to form in the chilly Autumn night air a few inches to a foot above the grass and here and there was rising toward the sky in patches like columns that dissipated in the waning evening light. We strode onward toward home.

When we passed by the old manor at the end of my street again, I stopped dead in my tracks. The U-Haul was gone. The windows were devoid of curtains and only a dark, empty old house remained with no signs of life visible within here from the street. It was forebodingly quiet. The man and his wife had finished packing, and from what I could tell, were gone for good.

"So they're gone, then. Packed and moved."

"They are, indeed!" a raspy voice answered.

I started and glanced in the direction of the voice. Looking over I saw an old man at the foot of the driveway I had not noticed standing there moments before. He wore a black bowler cap, a long, dark bathrobe, and stood supporting himself with a cane. The yellow glow of the streetlight that stood at the property's foot that had recently glimmered on was not powerful enough to illuminate his face, and the rim of his hat cast a shadow over it. I could not make out any features other than a gnarled nose, and some heavy wrinkles. The man looked ancient.

"Moved out in a hurry they did." the old man said.

I stood there, transfixed, staring at this old man. My dog sat at my feet in attention, waiting for my command. I could feel the man's eyes piercing back at me from the shadows and as I stood there, I felt a deep unease beginning to rise and slowly coarce through me.



After a second or two that seemed to last ages, I took a shallow breath and spoke to the man.

“Any idea why they moved in such a hurry?” I asked this stranger, jogging my memory to try to think of who he was, and finally guessed he was the alleged owner I’d heard of before but never seen myself.

He let out a gruff chortle that sounded like a mix between a hyena’s laugh and a rusty chain clinking.

“Oh, they think it’s haunted!” the man laughed in a condescending tone, raising one withered, ancient looking hand and waving it dismissively in the yellow streetlamp light. “Just like the tenants before them, and the ones before that, and so on!”

I did not know then if I believed in ghosts. I’d never seen a ghost before per se, but I had experienced some unusual things in life, and knew plenty of folks who swore they’d seen or experienced them or knew stories about them. Being naturally curious, keeping an open mind, and acknowledging that the universe is larger than myself and my comparatively minor, microscopic role in it, I chose to listen to people’s stories when they told them, and accept at the very least that their version of things was a valid version for them. This and my lingering curiosity about my neighbors’ sudden departure and their motives for doing so overcame any instinct telling me not to stay, so that there on that dark and cold night, I proceeded to ask him some questions.

“Do you believe them?” I asked?

The man guffawed again.

“Well, what do you mean? Do you want to know whether I believe in hauntings and ghosts and spirits, or do you wish to know whether I think this particular property in question is, in fact haunted?”

I considered for a moment, trying to shake my distraction caused by his accent (what was it? I could not place it. It seemed old, from another time, almost like how people in old black-and-white films spoke) until I finally answered.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” I asked.

“Well,” the man responded, his tone changing, “I have never seen anything so strange, but a close friend of mine once had a rather odd experience. She swore it to be true. I could tell you about it, if you have the time?”

The chill breeze was beginning to pick up and I shivered. The light of day was nearly gone. Still, oddly fascinated, I wanted to hear what this man had to say.

“G-go on,” I stammered.

The man let out another little laugh, cleared his throat, and told me a story.

*Long ago, not terribly far from here, the man said, before any of the surrounding neighborhood or much of the city that now occupies these lands was built, a woman by the name of Marie was coming home from working a long shift. Her tiny country store was the only outpost for hunters and farmers for*

*miles around. She owned and operated this store with her husband, Claude. They lived right around the corner from the store on a long, winding gravel road in the country. Once a bend in the road near the store was rounded, it was only a short walk to their tiny home.*

*Sometimes, when it was bitterly cold in the dead of Winter, Marie would drive this short stretch of road to and from work. This evening it was early Spring, a cloudless and pleasant day, and quite warm so Marie walked to work. She kept the windows open all day to let in scents of blooming wildflowers and recently pollinated plants, as well as the warm breeze. Her husband was away hunting far off in the countryside somewhere, so she worked a full day that saw few customers before locking up shop at 6 o'clock and venturing home.*

*No sooner had she rounded the corner on the gravel road than she heard the light sound of horse hooves tramping down the road some distance away behind her. Marie thought nothing of it at first, having grown up in a generation where most travel was done via horseback or horse and cart. As the hoof falls grew louder and nearer, however, she paused and realized how odd this was, for she and nearly everyone she knew within a certain circumference of miles now owned and operated predominantly automobiles, and normally only used those on this stretch of road.*

*Suddenly, around the bend there came a dark horse bearing a black-cloaked rider. It sped toward her. She stepped off the road and out of its way.*

*Calump-calump-calump! Went the horse's hoofs as they pounded into the gravel.*

*The air all around Marie grew heavy and cold as the mysterious speeding rider approached, like a winter's day, one of the season's first truly chilly ones. An unexplainable feeling of dread filled the pit of her stomach.*

*In an instant the rider was upon her.*

*Marie glanced upward at the stranger, and her heart skipped a beat.*

*Where his head was supposed to be, the rider had nothing.*

*Nothing at all.*

*The horse snorted loudly as it roared past and Marie jumped, then in a dash it was beyond her.*

*Calump-calump-calump! The hooves thudded against the ground. The headless rider and his horse continued down the road, into the distance, and disappeared in the growing dark. When it had gone, the warmth instantly returned to the air.*

*Marie quickened her pace, made her way inside her home, locked the door, and turned on all the lights in the house as well as the radio.*

*For years to come, she would tell her husband, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren the tale of the headless rider. Some would believe her, but most would not. They would speculate as to the tale's veracity, wonder why she told it, and guess that she was trying to entertain. She would always remember this experience, long after the country store burned down and she eventually moved and Claude passed, like it was yesterday. The fearful apparition of this headless rider, the sudden chill in the*

*air, and the trepidation it would stir in her soul each time she relived them in her mind she would take to her grave.*

The man finished his tale and stood silent. The temperature of the air around me had plummeted and now I was shivering. The breeze was picking up to a blustering wind, blowing treetops around here, simmering down momentarily there. It was now entirely dark except for the dim yellow glow of the streetlamps, which seemed eerie in the presence of this storyteller.

"Is it true?" I asked. "That story?"

Though I could not see his veiled face, I felt the hidden eyes piercing me, studying me with scrutiny. He lifted his head somewhat and I could see a wrinkled mouth grinning, illuminated by the streetlight.

"Life's most terrifying tales often are the truest ones, boy." said the mysterious man. "It's truly one I heard. Told by a friend. Long time ago. Whether the subject matter and every detail is entirely true? Who knows."

"What do you think?" I inquired.

"Well, life is certainly strange. And it is a wide world. Full of mystery and vast things we do not fully comprehend or truly understand. Reminds me of another story about a different friend. But you probably don't want to stand out here any longer in the cold with an old man and hear it?"

"Please, tell me!" I said, anxiety building in my gut, but eager for more from this person.

"Very well." he said, and with that, began another story.

*Haywood lurched awake from sleep, panting. He had had the worst dream. TJ, his brother-in-law and a close friend he cared about very much, had died in it, and in the most unusual way.*

*TJ was a war hero. Out of a strong sense of honor and duty, he'd left home before he was 18, fibbed about his age in order to enlist early, and entered the U.S. Armed Forces, going on to serve his country in a conflict that eventually became known as World War 2. He was stationed in Pearl Harbor, and one Sunday, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, to be specific, TJ was awoken early in the morning to cries of terror and pain as planes from Japan bombed the base in a surprise attack. Leaping to his feet, TJ rallied with his fellow soldiers to stave off the invaders and bravely defended the country they loved from an attack on United States soil. He went on to fight in other battles, too. He was a strong man and in good physical condition on into his middle-aged years. Growing up near the coast, he was always a great swimmer.*

*Which made Haywood's dream, in which TJ had died drowning, being found floating face down off the dock in the lake his family frequented for boating and fishing, incredibly odd.*

*Later that morning, Haywood dialed his sister in Virginia Beach and asked her if everything was okay. He did not tell her about the dream, because Haywood did not let on about such things or like people to worry. He did ask about TJ though. He was fine and healthy and thriving, his sister told him.*

*Two weeks later, TJ was out for a day of fun sailing with his youngest daughter, Maureen. TJ, healthy as a horse, was out on the water all day with her until the early evening, when he dropped Maureen off at the dock. She began drying herself with a towel and headed inside while TJ docked the*

*boat. Minutes turned into an hour and a half and TJ had not come inside yet. A family member finally stepped outside and went onto the dock to look for him.*

*To their horror, there in the water near the dock was TJ, face down, floating dead in the water.*

*In a whirlwind Haywood found himself receiving distressed phone calls from family members informing him of the tragedy, in a car driving to the coast, and sitting in the family section in a Church at the funeral for one of his best friends and family members.*

*TJ was a God-fearing man and a devout Catholic. He would attend Sunday mass every single week and instructed his children in how to be good people. He loved his wife Janie Mae dearly, as well as his five daughters. The pain of this loss hurt Haywood deeply. In those days, it was still considered mutilation to have an autopsy performed by the Church, so Janie did not have one performed on TJ. The doctors were never able to say for certain what had caused his sudden death, a heart attack, a heart-related incident or stroke and subsequent drowning, or some other cause. But whatever the physical reason, Death came for TJ that afternoon, unexpected, like a thief, and bore him away from his loved ones.*

*Sitting in the funeral mass, Haywood remembered his dream from two weeks prior. What did it mean? Had it been some premonition? What would have happened if he had told someone about it? Could anything have been done? Would the outcome have unfolded any differently? Haywood pondered all these things in his heart, and they deeply troubled him.*

*Haywood missed TJ dearly for the rest of his life. Often late at night he would remember his dream, the horrors of that day when he got that fateful phone call, and the days of sorrow following it. These memories and the uncertainty of what killed such a strong man would haunt him for the rest of his earthly life.*

I stood there shivering in silence again, listening to the now howling wind. The moon had risen, a pale thumbnail, and was eclipsed now and then by swiftly rolling dark clouds. A drop of cold rain hit me here and there. The air now had a bite to it.

"It really makes you think, that story." I finally remarked.

"It does, indeed." the old man rasped.

"It's not exactly a *ghost* story, though."

"Not exactly." said the man. And then, "I do have one of those, though if you'd like."

My dog was whining now and pulling at the leash some. She was cold and wanted to go home.

"Okay," I said. "But just one more!"

"As you wish," the man uttered, and began one final story:

*George Smith loved his wife Stella Virginia dearly. She loved him too, all the days leading up to their wedding, having and raising two children with him, and for several years thereafter. For reasons George would never understand, however, she eventually grew cold to him and had wandering eyes after so many years of marriage. The married couple had a bitter falling out after which his wife took a lover, a miscreant of a man who was always finding new and creative ways to cause and fall into trouble.*



*Devasted by their separation, George suffered a near nervous breakdown and left home for a little while to live with other members of his family, unable to deal with the pain and grief in front of him alone. He felt like his warm home was no longer a place of refuge and comfort but had become a den of tumult, causing him constant anguish. He picked up and moved for a time from Edenton, N.C. to Roper and lived near his sister Agnes and her husband John in the home of his niece, Jo An, and her soon-to-be husband Gordon.*

*The day that George arrived at Jo An's house, a white bird appeared and came to roost atop the front door on the eaves.*

*Nobody had ever seen the bird before. Nor were they sure what kind of bird it was, a cockatoo or some relative thereof. But it was bright white in plumage, calm, and came each morning and rested there on top of the front door of the home. George and his sister and relatives who would drop in from time to time guessed as to what type of bird it was and where the stranger came from, but nobody ever determined a definitive answer to these questions. An odd occurrence, the bird's appearance and existence would quickly fade from their minds, as it would fly off away from the home until the next day and out of their minds entirely until they saw it again.*

*Several weeks passed and finally George and his wife reconciled by phone and agreed to get back together. George packed his things and bid his sister Agnes, John, Jo Ann his niece, and Gordon all goodbye. He left the house, got into his car, and drove back to Edenton. The moment he left, the strange, white bird spread its wings and flew away, too.*

*The bird never returned to Jo Ann's house after that day and was never seen again.*

*George made up with his wife and they decided to move back in together and be a family again. He was alarmed to learn of some of the things that the man she'd been dating in the meantime had been involved in, multiple convictions for crimes such as assault with a deadly weapon and escaping jail being among his misdeeds in the past. He implored her to immediately break off her relationship with this man and to never see him again. George's wife agreed, promising to do so the next day after they had reconvened under the same roof.*

*The boyfriend was irate. He did not accept the terms of the breakup. George's family cannot be certain, but they believe the man might have threatened Stella Virginia and her children's lives. Even so, conspiring with this man was voluntary on her part. Maybe the woman could not overcome her physical passion for the man. Maybe she simply adored his "bad boy" ways. Whatever the case, whether out of fear of this criminal or fatal attraction for him, she did not break up with her boyfriend, as she'd promised her husband.*

*On the night of April 30<sup>th</sup>, a week or two later, after a hard day's work, George stopped by a local pool hall to enjoy a refreshing beer and a game of pool before heading home for the evening. Minding his own business, George engaged in a game with some friends. Around 10:30 PM a man who was not a regular entered the pool hall, asked a bystander if he knew George Smith, and proceeded to sit in the corner of the room and watch George after the man pointed him out. George took no notice, finished his game, paid his tab, and left the bar for home a little while later.*

*Walking down the sidewalk away from the pool hall, George heard a man shout his name. He turned around and came face to face with his wife's boyfriend. A heated discussion, in which the man*

*revealed himself as the man who'd been dating Stella Virginia, ensued, and that fast transitioned into a violent exchange. Blows were traded and both men came away with bloody lips and noses.*

*Far down the lane, a police officer on routine foot patrol in the town that evening heard a loud cry.*

*"I AM GOING TO BLOW YOUR GOD DAMN HEAD OFF!!!"*

*Alarmed, the police officer ran around the corner, down the street toward where he had heard the shout, and then, when he heard gunshots ring out, he sprinted.*

*George had run inside the pool hall for refuge when the man had threatened him. He grabbed the bartender around his collar and pled with him, telling him his wife's lover was after him with a gun.*

*"Please, help me! He's got a gun and he's going to kill me!"*

*The bartender tried frantically to calm his regular.*

*"George, you are a good guy, cool it! Nobody would want to kill you."*

*BLAM! BLAM!*

*No sooner had the bartender uttered the words, then shots rang out and bullets ripped through the screen door of the pool hall, one of which struck George Smith, who fell gurgling to the ground, in the neck.*

*Outside, the police officer and his partner who'd also been patrolling a different street in the vicinity arrived at the pool hall, guns drawn on George's wife's boyfriend, who was trying desperately to reload his gun and fire more rounds into the establishment.*

*"Drop it!" they told him. The man complied and set his weapon on the ground. The officers cuffed him and took him away.*

*A few minutes later an ambulance arrived and took George to the local hospital in Edenton and treated his wound, which had severed his esophagus, jugular vein, and the carotid sheath. He was transferred by ambulance thereafter to another hospital in Elizabeth City, 28 miles away, where he succumbed to his wound and blood loss, and died.*

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*Forty-four miles away from Elizabeth City, where George drew his final breaths, his niece Jo Ann, whom he'd briefly lived with just weeks before, was swaying back and forth on a patio swing next to her boyfriend Gordon on the porch of the clubhouse her family held a reunion ever summer, enjoying the warm night in early Spring. They both gazed into the dark across the backyard of the property toward the large barn that stood some ways off, away from the house.*

*Suddenly, Jo Ann saw a pale woman in a long, flowing white gown burst from the woods at the foot of the backyard. The air around Jo Ann grew chilly. The woman ran across the backyard, letting out a shrill, cold shriek as she went. The figure crossed the length of the yard running on foot, never losing breath, her shriek never wavering, until she reached the side of the barn and disappeared right through its wall.*

*Jo Ann sat trembling and clutched her boyfriend's arm.*

*Frowning, he asked his darling what was wrong.*

*"You mean you didn't SEE it?" Jo Ann asked, incredulously.*

*Gordon answered her saying that no, he had not seen this apparition.*

*The phone rang inside. Gordon rose to go answer it, thinking it highly unusual to receive a call this late at night. On the other end of the line was one of Jo Ann's mother's siblings, informing him that George Smith, Jo Ann's uncle who'd lived with her until just weeks prior, had just been shot to death.*

*The Smith family could never prove it, though they tried, but witnesses that evening saw George's wife's car sitting parked outside of that very pool hall. Was she there when it happened, planning to carry her lover away in the getaway car after he'd done it? Had she sat there, hands clasped over her face in grief and horror over taking in the scene unfolding before her eyes, sitting in the passenger seat of her car? Had she watched, coldly, coolly, with no emotion? Had she smiled? Did she simply allow the boyfriend to borrow her automobile? Nobody ever knew, but the Smiths felt that she had helped conspire in her husband's murder.*

*The boyfriend spent the rest of his few short years left on earth in prison. This murder did not prove fruitful for him, as he and Stella Virginia did not wed or remain in a relationship while he was in prison. He tried futilely to contest his conviction, even getting himself a second trial where he pleaded that he was tried unfairly the first time because it was in the town where George had resided and worked for years, and the jury was biased. The judge ultimately ruled against him, saying he must finish his sentence. In complete, total misery one day, George's murderer finally took his own life, hanging himself with his bed sheets in his prison cell.*

*A few days after George's untimely death and Haywood, his heart heavy, found himself traversing the highways from Virginia's Blue Ridge mountains, down into its Piedmont with its gently rolling hills, and finally crossing over into North Carolina's flat, sandy coastal plain. It was a trip usually filled with joy and anticipation of time spent with family and fun now bearing him toward a house of sorrow where he would mourn for not the only time in his life the loss of a brother, and on this occasion, one related by blood.*



The rain was falling steadily now, and the cold drops hitting my skin felt like needles. The wind was bitter and smacked me in the face and my teeth chattered. My dog whimpered with discomfort.

"These stories, th-they're all t-true?" I asked, through the involuntary rattling of my teeth.

"The ones who told them swear them to be so." the man, who seemed unaffected by the elements unfolding all around, rasped.

I stood silent except for my titter-tattering jaw, contemplating the dark tales. Then, I finally turned toward home and prepared to walk to hearth and warmth. Right before I stepped away from the

property for good, I turned to the man, still standing there and addressed the strange storyteller one final time.

“You never answered my question! You still haven’t told me if you think this place is haunted!”

The man grinned and I saw his teeth, crooked and a pale yellow, gleam in the glow of the streetlight.

“*THIS* place?” he said, motioning to the old house with his thumb. “No way! Why, I’ve lived here for nearly 190 years, and I’ve *never* noticed anything!”

He rolled his head back and let out a roaring, gravelly, howl of a laugh that shook me to my core.

My dog barked uncontrollably in fear. The streetlight flickered for a moment, then illumined his entire face from that angle, and I saw gaunt, wrinkled skin stretched across pointed cheek bones. The eye sockets were dark and empty, with no eyes in them at all.

The cold rain poured down in full force at that moment, cascading down in buckets.

I turned and ran away from that place as fast as I could, the entire half mile back to my house, the dog keeping pace right beside me. The rain whirled about us, as did the leaves, gray and black now in the dark and being battered all around by the wind, along with twigs and small branches.

We reached my house and entered the front door, which I slammed and locked behind us. I turned on every light in the house, changed my sopping clothes, wrapped myself in a blanket, and lit the gas logs in my fireplace.

An hour or two passed that I spent on the couch in front of the fire, my dog lying there beside me. My heartrate had fallen and I’d stopped panting, but I continued gazing blankly into the flickering flames, and every time I thought about the events that had just transpired, the neighbors moving, the Church in the woods, those words, WAIL, FOR THE DAY OF THE LORD IS NEAR, the old man, his stories, that house at the end of the lane, and the eyeless, empty sockets on the face illumined under the streetlamp I shuddered, and butterflies fluttered in the pit of my stomach.

Eventually my wife came home from working a late shift that evening. Her entrance caused me to jump. When she saw the state I was in, she asked me if I was okay. I told her I was fine, then, reaching for my laptop lying on the coffee table, I pulled up my browser and called up a search engine.

Much later, I would tell her the entire story. I would write it up, I would say their names, I would tell Marie’s story, and Haywood’s, and poor George Smith’s. But tonight, on that terrible, fateful night, I would find myself typing the words “houses for sale,” looking for a home, any home, away from that neighborhood and that ghastly old, ramshackle house.

THE END