

THOSE WHO *are* DEAD  
*are* ONLY NOW FORGIVEN

**T**he Shackleford house was haunted. In the skittering of leaves across its rotting porch, locals heard the whispered misery of ghosts. Footsteps creaked on stair boards and sobs filtered through walls. An Atlanta developer had planned to raze the house and turn the thirty acres into a retirement village. Then the economy flatlined.

The house continued to fold in on itself and the meandering dirt drive became rough as a logging trail. So we'll be completely alone, Lauren had told Jody. When Jody mentioned the ghost stories, Lauren told him she'd take care of that. Leave us the hell alone, she said loudly each time they stepped inside. They'd let their eyes adjust to the house's gloaming, listening for something other than their own breathing, then spread the sleeping bag on the floor, sometimes in a bedroom but as often in the front room. He and Lauren would undress and slide into the sleeping bag and whatever chill the old house held was vanquished by the heat of their bodies.

Lauren had always spoken her mind. You're not afraid to show you are intelligent, most boys from out in the county are, Lauren had

told him in their first class together. She'd asked what Jody wanted to major in at college and he said engineering. Education, she answered when asked the same question. Ninth grade was when students from upper Haywood were bused to Canton to attend the county's high school. Unlike the other boys he'd grown up with, Jody didn't fill a seat in the school's vocational wing. Instead, he entered classrooms where most of the students came from town. Their parents weren't necessarily wealthy, but they'd grown up in families where college was an expectation. As Lauren said, he'd not been afraid to show his intelligence, but first only when called on. Then he'd begun raising his hand, occasionally answering a question even Lauren couldn't answer. The teachers had encouraged him, and by spring he and Lauren both were being recommended for summer programs at Chapel Hill and Duke for low-income students.

The boys he rode the bus with no longer invited him on hunting and fishing trips. Soon they didn't bother to speak. During the long bus trip to and from school, Jody saw them staring at the books he withdrew from his backpack, not just ones for class but books Lauren passed on, tattered paperbacks of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, books from the library on astronomy and religion. It was an act of betrayal to some. One morning near the school year's end Billy Rankin tripped Jody in the cafeteria, sent him and his tray sprawling to the floor. Billy outweighed him by fifty pounds and Jody would have done nothing if Lauren hadn't been with him. He went after Billy, driving him onto the linoleum, praying a teacher would break it up quick. But it was Lauren who got to them first. By the time a teacher intervened, Lauren had broken off two fingernails shredding Billy's left cheek.

As he left the blacktop, Jody found the dirt drive more traveled than a year ago. Less broom sedge sprouted in the packed dirt, and fresh tire prints braided the road. What's left of her is at the Shack-

leford place, Trey, Lauren's brother, had finally told Jody. The dirt road straightened and climbed upward. Oak trees purpled with wisteria lined both sides. Dogwoods huddled in the understory, a few last blossoms clinging to their branches. The drive curved and the trees fell away. Bedsprings appeared in a ditch, beside them a shattered porcelain toilet and a washing machine. The debris looked like a tornado's aftermath.

Each time they'd driven here their senior year, Lauren had leaned into Jody's shoulder, her hand on his thigh. Those moments had been as good as the actual lovemaking—hours alone yet awaiting them. Afterward, they stayed in the sleeping bag and made plans for what they'd do once Jody graduated from college. We'll live in a warm far-away place like Costa Rica, Lauren would say. When he said it was too bad they'd taken French, Lauren answered that learning another new language would only make it better.

More debris lay scattered on the drive and in the ditches—beer and soft drink cans, plastic garbage bags spilling contents like burst piñatas. One last curve and the Shackleford place rose before him. Next to the porch, a battered Ford Taurus appeared not so much parked as stalled in the wheel-high grass. The house's front door stood open as if he were expected.

Jody stepped onto the porch but lingered in the doorway. First he saw the TV set inside the fireplace. A rock band filled the screen but the sound was off. Shoved close to the fireplace was a bright-red couch, occupied, three faces materializing in the dusty light. The odor of meth singed the air as Jody stepped inside. Mixed and cooked by Lauren, he knew. In high school Billy and Katie Lynn hadn't attempted Chemistry I, much less the advanced courses he and Lauren passed with A's.

"Come to get the good feeling with us, Mr. College?" Billy asked.

"No," Jody said, standing beside Lauren now. Billy pointed to a

felt-lined church collection plate on the floor, among its sparse coins and bills a glass pipe and baggie.

"Well, you can at least make an offering," Katie Lynn laughed, her voice dry and harsh.

"Come on, buddy, have a seat," Billy said, making room. "We can have us a regular high school reunion."

Jody stared at Lauren. Five months had passed since he'd last seen her. He was unsure which unsettled him more, how much beauty she'd lost or how much remained.

"I think he's still sweet on you, girl," Katie Lynn said. Lauren looked up, her eyes glassy.

"You still sweet on me, Jody?"

He studied the room's demented furnishings. A couch and TV but no tables or chairs, the floor awash with everything from candy wrappers to a tangle of multihued Christmas lights. In a corner were some of Lauren's books, *The World's Great Religions*, *Absalom, Absalom*, a poetry anthology. Her computer too, its screen cracked. An orange extension cord snaked around the couch and disappeared into the kitchen. A generator, Jody realized, now hearing the machine's hum.

"Get the fire going, Billy," Lauren said, "so it'll be cozier." He changed the disk in the DVD player and orange flames flickered on the screen. Billy's linebacker shoulders were bony now, his chest sunken.

"Want me to turn up the sound?" Billy asked.

Lauren nodded and the fireplace crackled and hissed.

"We got room for you," Katie Lynn said, patting a space between her and Lauren, but Jody remained standing.

"I want you to go with me," Jody said.

"Go where, baby?" Lauren asked.

"Back home."

"Haven't you heard?" Lauren said. "Bad girls don't get to go home. They don't even get prayed for, at least that's what Trey says."

"Then go with me to Raleigh. We'll get an apartment."

"He wants to save you from us trashy folks," Katie Lynn said, "but we ain't so bad. That collection plate, we didn't break into church and steal it. Billy bought it at the flea market."

"You ought to save us from Lauren," Billy said. "She does the cooking around here, and just look at us. We're shucking off weight like Frosty the Snowman."

"Save us, Jody," Katie Lynn said. "We're melting. We're melting."

"Come outside with me," Jody said.

Lauren followed him onto the porch. In the afternoon light he saw the yellow tinge and wondered if they were using needles too. Hepatitis was common from what he'd read on the internet. Lauren's jeans hung loose on her hips, her teeth nubbed and discolored.

"No one would tell me where you were," Jody said. "At least you could have."

"This is the land beyond the cell phone or internet," Lauren said. "Isn't it nice that there are a few places left where that's true?"

"You could have called from town," Jody said. "Didn't you think about what it was like for me, not knowing where you were, if you were okay?"

"Maybe I was thinking of you," Lauren said, averting her eyes. "But you've found me. Mission accomplished so now you can move on."

"Why are you doing this?" Jody asked.

The question sounded lame, like something out of a book or movie Lauren would mock.

"Oh, you know me," Lauren said. "I've never been much for delayed gratification. I find what feels good and dive right in."

"This feels good," Jody said, "living out here with those two?"

"It allows me what I need to feel good."

"What will you do when you can't get what you need?" Jody asked.

"What happens then?"

"The Lord provides," Lauren said softly. "Isn't that what we learned in church? Has being around all those atheist professors caused you to lose your faith, Jody, like Reverend Wilkinson's wife warned us about in Sunday school?" Lauren moved closer, leaned her head lightly against his chest though her arms stayed at her sides. He smelled the meth-soured clothes, the unwashed skin and hair.

"Does being here bring back good memories?" Lauren asked.

When Jody didn't answer, she pulled her head away. Smiling, she raised her hand to his cheek. The hand was warm, blood pulsing through it yet.

"It does for me," Lauren said, and withdrew her hand. "You know I would have called or e-mailed, baby, but out here there's no signal."

"Come with me right now; don't even go back in there," Jody said. "You don't have to pack a thing. I've got money to buy you clothes, whatever else. We'll go straight to Raleigh right now."

"I can't leave, baby," Lauren said.

"Yes, you can," Jody said. "You're the one who showed me how to."

Katie Lynn came to the door.

"We need you to do some cooking, hon."

"Okay," Lauren said, and turned back to Jody. "I've got to go."

"I'll be back," he said.

Lauren paused in the doorway. "You probably shouldn't," she said, and went on inside.

Jody got back in the truck and drove toward town. If we make good enough grades, we can leave here, Lauren had told him. For the first three years of high school, he and Lauren made A's in the college-prep classes. They shared the academic awards, though Lauren could have won them all if she'd wanted to. Their junior year, she made the highest SAT score in the school. That summer Lauren cashiered at Wal-Mart while Jody worked with his sister and mother at the poultry plant. He used the money for a down payment on

the pickup. They'd pile it with belongings when he and Lauren left Canton for college.

In the fall of their senior year, Lauren completed the financial-aid forms Ms. Trexler, the guidance counselor, gave them. Lauren and Jody continued to work afternoons and Saturdays, making money for what the scholarships wouldn't cover. Then one day in November Lauren told him she'd changed her mind. When neither he nor Ms. Trexler could sway her, Jody told her it was okay, that an engineer made good money, enough for them both. All Lauren had to do was wait four years and they could leave Canton forever, leave a life where checkbooks never quite balanced and repo men and pawnbrokers loomed one turn of bad luck away. Jody had watched other classmates, including many in college prep, enter such a life with an impatient fatalism. They got pregnant or arrested or simply dropped out. Some boys, more defiant, filled the junkyards with crushed metal. Crosses garlanded with flowers and keepsakes marked roadsides where they'd died. You could see it coming in the smirking yearbook photos they left behind.

Soon after he'd left for college, Lauren got fired for cursing a customer and took work at the poultry plant. Jody drove back to Canton once a month. Though phone calls and e-mails kept them connected, it seemed forever before Christmas break arrived. That first night back home, he'd picked Lauren up at her mother's house and they had gone to a party. Jody expected alcohol and marijuana, some pills. What surprised him was the meth, and how casually Lauren took the offered pipe. When Billy asked if Jody wanted to try it, he shook his head. Once back at school their e-mails and phone conversations became fewer, shorter. He'd seen Lauren only once, in late January.

She'd lost weight and also lost her job. At spring break, Trey told him Lauren was in Charlotte and could have no visitors. Then Jody

had heard nothing. When Jody entered Winn-Dixie, Trey was helping a customer. He finished and came over to where Jody waited. Trey offered his hand after wiping it on his stained green apron.

"So you've finished your semester?"

"Yes," Jody answered.

"I bet you made good grades, didn't you?"

Jody nodded.

"Maybe you'll inspire some kids around here to have a bit of ambition," Trey said. "What about this summer?"

"The school offered me a job in the library, but I think I'll live with Mom and slice up chickens."

"Why the hell do that?" Trey asked.

"Tuition's up again. Even with the scholarships, I'll have to get another loan. No rent and better pay if I stay here."

"They don't make it easy for a mountain boy, do they?" Trey said.

"No," Jody said.

"How's your sister?" Trey asked.

"Okay, I guess, considering."

"I heard they got Jeff for nonsupport," Trey said. "What a worthless asshole, always was. When Karen started going with him, I told her she was setting her sights way too low. You and her both tended to do that."

Trey turned to see if a customer lingered in his area.

"I went up to the Shackelford place," Jody said, and Trey grimaced.

"I knew I shouldn't have told you. I thought you had sense enough not to."

"I hadn't heard from her in over two months," Jody said.

"So now you've seen her and know not to go back," Trey said.

"Can't you do something?"

"Like what?" Trey said. "Talk to her? Pray for her? I did that.

I'm the one who went out there and got her in February, drove her to Charlotte. Three weeks, five thousand dollars. I paid half and Momma paid half."

"The law, they've got to know they're out there," Jody said. "I'd rather see her in jail than where she is."

"Six months, since they aren't dealing, Sheriff Hunnicut said, and that's with a so-called tough judge. Soon as she got out she'd be back out there."

"You can't know that," Jody said.

"Yes I can. She might have had a chance in February, but stay on that shit long as she has now and it ain't a choice. Your brain's been rewired. Besides, Hunnicut's got his hands full rounding up the ones so sorry they let their own babies breathe it, them and the ones selling to the high school kids."

"So you've given up on her, you and your momma both?" Jody asked.

"Sheriff Hunnicut told me he used to wonder why he never saw any rats inside a meth house. I mean, filth all over the place you'd expect them. Then he realized the rats were smart enough to stay clear. Think about that."

"What happened to your father at the power plant, the way it happened . . ."

Trey's face reddened.

"If she's using that as an excuse, then she's even sorer than I thought. Momma and I had as hard a time with Daddy dying. We hold down jobs, act responsible."

"Lauren didn't say it," Jody answered. "I'm saying it."

"She had a daddy a lot longer than you did and you're doing good as anyone around here," Trey said. "That Trexler woman always put on about how smart Lauren was, such and such an IQ, such and such an SAT score. But I never saw much smarts in the decisions she

made. I figured her to end up pregnant before finishing high school. Look, she'd have gotten where she is now a lot quicker if it hadn't been for you. You and me both, we've done more for her than she deserves." A customer called for Trey to weigh some produce. "Stay in Raleigh," Trey said. "This place is like a spider's web. You stay long enough you'll get stuck in it for good. You'll end up like her. Or me."

As he pulled out of the lot, Jody remembered the afternoon before he left for college, the last time he and Lauren went to the Shackelford house. After they'd made love, Lauren took his hand and led him upstairs, where they'd never been before. In a back bedroom were a bureau and mirror, a cardboard funeral-home fan, and a child's wooden rocking horse. Lauren had asked Jody if he knew why the house was supposedly haunted. He didn't, only that something had happened and it had been bad. As they went down the stairs, Lauren had turned to him. When I've dared them to show themselves, she had told him, I always hoped they would.

Supper was ready when Jody got back to his mother's house. Karen had come over with Jody's niece, Chrystal. His sister's hands were red and raw from deboning chicken carcasses and when she spoke to the child, there was harshness even when not chiding her.

"Have some corn, Jody," his mother said, lifting the bowl more with palms than fingers. When Jody was growing up, there'd been evenings after work when his mother could barely wring a washcloth. Her fingers froze up and pain radiated from her hands to her shoulders and neck. After she'd had to quit the poultry plant and became a waitress, the pain lessened, but the fingers still curled inward.

"Hard to believe it's already May," Jody's mother said. "Just three more years and you'll be a college graduate."

"And then gone from here for good," Karen said. "Little brother

always knew what he wanted. I thought I did, but I confused a hard kick for love."

"Don't talk like that," their mother said, "especially in front of a child."

"Why not, Mom?" Karen answered. "You made the same mistake." Their mother flinched.

"Too bad you didn't knock up Lauren in high school," Karen said to Jody. "You could have taken off like Daddy did. Kept up the tradition."

"I wouldn't have done that," Jody answered.

"No?" Karen said. "I guess we'll never know, will we, little brother."

"Please," their mother said softly. "Let's talk about something else."

"Lauren didn't last long at the plant," Karen said. "A good thing. High as she was half the time, she'd have cut a hand off. Still flaunting how smart she was though. At breaks she always sat with these two Mexican women, learning to speak their jabber, helping her 'madres' fill out forms."

Chrystal reached for another biscuit and Karen slapped the child's hand. Chrystal jerked her hand back, spilled her cup of milk, and began wailing.

"See what fun you've missed out on, little brother," Karen said.

Three more years, Jody thought as he lay in bed that night. More loans to pay back and, in such an uncertain economy, perhaps no job. He remembered the Friday afternoon Ms. Trexler sat in the house's front room and explained how coming from a single-parent family would be an asset. Your son deserves a chance at a better life, Ms. Trexler had told his mother, then explained the financial-aid forms she'd brought. The guidance counselor hadn't let her gaze linger on the shabby furniture, the cracked windowpane sealed by a square of blue tarp, but her meaning was clear enough. All the while his mother had tugged nervously at her dress, her Sunday dress, as she'd listened.

Sleep would not come, so Jody pulled on his jeans and a T-shirt,

went outside and sat on the porch steps. The night was cool and silent, too early for the cicadas, no trucks or cars rattling the steel bridge beyond the pasture. A quarter moon held its place among the stars. Like a pale comma, Lauren once said, and spoke of phases of the moon. That Friday afternoon, after all the forms had been signed, Ms. Trexler asked Jody to walk outside. Lauren has let both of us down, Ms. Trexler had said as they'd stood by her car, but don't let that keep you from achieving what you want in life.

Jody went back inside and opened his laptop. His mother didn't have internet, but he'd downloaded before-and-after photos. He watched the faces wither like flowers in time-lapse photography. Each year appeared a decade. Deceased was slashed across several of the faces.

After his mother left for her shift at the diner, Jody packed a suitcase and backpack and headed into town. He went to an ATM and emptied his account, then drove on to the Shackelford house. He parked beside the Taurus and stepped up the rotting porch steps and opened the door. They were all on the couch.

"I want you to go to Raleigh with me," Jody said, and stepped closer to take Lauren's hand in his. "Please, I won't ask again."

As she looked up, something sparked deep in her pupils. Something, though it wasn't indecision.

"I can't, baby," Lauren said. "I just can't." Jody went back outside and returned with the suitcase and backpack. He set them in the center of the room and took the money from his pocket and placed it in the collection plate.

"Turn on the fire, Billy," Katie Lynn said as she filled the pipe. "This boy's been a long time out in the cold."

## THEIR ANCIENT, GLITTERING EYES

**B**ecause they were boys, no one believed them, including the old men who gathered each morning at the Riverside Gas and Grocery. These retirees huddled by the pot-bellied stove in rain and cold, on clear days sunning out front like reptiles. The store's middle-aged owner, Cedric Henson, endured the trio's presence with a resigned equanimity. When he'd bought the store five years earlier, Cedric assumed they were part of the purchase price, in that way no different from the leaky roof and the submerged basement whenever the Tuckaseegee overspilled its banks.

The two boys, who were brothers, had come clattering across the bridge, red-faced and already holding their arms apart as if carrying huge, invisible packages. They stood gasping a few moments, waiting for enough breath to tell what they'd seen.

"This big," the twelve-year-old said, his arms spread as wide apart as he could stretch them.

"No, even bigger," the younger boy said.

Cedric had been peering through the door screen but now stepped outside.