

SCATTER ROAD

The white envelope sits on the curled tail of a puppy with large entreating eyes. A perfect welcome mat, my wife thought. I reach down to pick up the mail with a mixture of hope and trepidation. The date on the letter is the same as it has been for forty years, August 15th. I know the message will also be the same. “God and the devil are one, so sayeth me who knows you and what you let happen to me.” Maybe this year will be different, an aspiring thought I have every year before I slice it open and see the same nineteen words that grip my bowels and render me powerless against horrific memories.

Sunlight streams from my home office drawing me away from the foyer and the contents in my hand. My medieval sword letter opener shimmers on top of a pile of papers on my desk. I bought it thinking it was an ideal implement for a pastor’s study and the scared little boy who sometimes sits behind it. I walk over to my overcrowded bookcase and pull out a carton of collected letters disguised as a scholarly tome. Inside the summer breeze wafting through the open windows is the assuaging smells of lilac and lavender. The mollifying aromas attach to the tension in my neck and shoulders as I sit down in my weathered brown leather chair, close my eyes and pray before opening the box.

Danny’s screams fill the room. I clasp my hands over my ears to block the sound I still cannot bear to hear, but did nothing to stop. The box falls from my lap leaving letters to sprawl across the floor like parched bones.

Squawking seagulls soaring above the glittering green river drown out the screams. Why did I agree to live here? My wife insisted this was the best place in Baltimore County to live, that it would be like a shore vacation every summer of our lives without getting onto the dreaded Bay

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Bridge. So, I signed the papers in smiling silence. I couldn't tell her my river memories. I couldn't share my shame, not even in her arms at night, not even in the forty years we've been married. I keep that part of me closed, except for August 15th, when it all comes rushing back.

No one had wanted to move out to Scatter Road, especially my dad's Great Aunt May. She sat in the back seat of our black Oldsmobile station wagon grumbling for most of the ride, creating a furor for my mother. My cousin Danny and I held our hands over our mouths stifling laughter, while we used our bodies to hold back the pile of boxes from crushing us.

"I don't want to spend the rest of what life I got left listening to the footsteps of trapped souls traipsing up and down this dusty road. I don't care what you say. Ain't nothing but the devil in this place," said Aunt May.

"That's the truth. Never thought I'd be returning to the backwoods of Virginia. Ghosts, dirt and salvation is all you gonna find here," replied my Aunt Delia, Danny's mom.

"Josiah, Daniel, don't ya'll listen to that mess. Nothing gonna harm us because we are "covered by the blood of the lamb," my momma said after turning her head around to give everyone the eye of holy confirmation.

"Like I said, ghosts, dirt and salvation," said Aunt Delia before turning back to wink at us with her olive-green eyes sparked with mocking laughter.

"Delia, you can keep those city thoughts to yourself. You're here now and ain't nothing going to change that but a good job or a good man, either one might get you back to the city. But for now, be grateful for what you got, a roof over you and your child's head, and food to eat."

"I am grateful O-L-I-V-I-A. I just hate it here."

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“We’re almost there. Ya’ll need to save your energy to get these things in the house,” said my dad, trying to quell the fussing he’d often call, “too many hens in the hen house”.

There was no street sign where Daddy turned off the highway onto Scatter Road, just a huge cluster of Bald Cypress trees sitting in the river like hideous monsters waiting to come alive, wade through the water, and pounce on us. The sun was high and strong, scorching the top of the car, leaving us to feel like crammed sardines in a dry can.

We bumped up and down the deeply rutted dirt road that followed the river for a half mile or so until we reached a fork. There the river continued to the left and a small graveyard came into view on the right. Danny and I snickered at the whitewashed tombstones tilted into the earth like crooked teeth. Our new home was further up, partially hidden by a dense grove of pine trees. It was a long ago, dingy gray, two-story house with a sagging roof over the porch and sad lipped windowsills. When we pulled up, the car sputtered, rattled, then died. The engines abrupt shut-off sent boxes toppling onto us as Aunt May growled, “Nothing but the devil”.

My momma always said death came in threes. I’d felt sorry for Aunt Delia and Danny having to move in with us after Uncle Joe died in a car accident in Chicago. Right after that, Aunt May’s youngest child, who was seventy-two and her caretaker died, then my dog, Rollo. All within a few weeks of each other. There was no room at our shotgun styled house. Two bedrooms, a kitchen, dining room and living room were perfect for the three of us and Rollo, but not big enough for family needing somewhere to stay. My daddy found a place that was big enough and he could afford five miles outside of my birth town, Capron. Our new home wasn’t any prettier than the one we left, it just had a lot more rooms and a lot more land, and the one thing I loved, it sat near the banks of Blackwater River. There wasn’t much to do in

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Southampton County, Virginia, in town or out in the country, except go to church, go to school, and go fishing.

That summer of our move, July 1, 1962, Danny was nine and I was eleven and although we were sad at his daddy dying, we made a pact to have the best, most fun, summer, ever. Our fun started with sharing a room with bunk beds. He took the top because he was short and scrawny and I took the bottom because I was taller and heftier. After everything was moved in and everyone had lunch, that first day, we were given what would become our daily chore, keeping Aunt May out of the way and out of earshot of momma. We crossed our eyes and rolled them like marbles at the prospect of Aunt May cramping our style. We'd made plans to fish, explore, and per chance find the devil's lair and run like hell.

The next morning, after the move, Danny and I walked Aunt May to the river's edge. She propped herself up under a large weeping willow tree and asked for the bag she'd told Danny to carry. Once she was settled, we took off into the woods at speeds that made the sunlight flicker like fireflies.

I was the first to see it. A skeleton rising from the dirt. Scraps of a burnt-out house with six dirty white columns holding up a roof that looked like a giant monster had bitten chunks out of it. The back of the house was gone, which made the front windows seem as if they were dead eyes, milky white and empty from the glare of the sun. A ragged wood sign with red paint dripping the words, "No Trespassing. Dangerous", with one word scrawled in white paint underneath, "Haunted". The warning dangled from the front doorway that had no door. I'd thrashed my way through the tall grass and tangled vines to a dead stop when I saw the carcass of a house without realizing Danny wasn't with me.

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“Danny?” I turned back and yelled.

“What?” he hollered from somewhere among the shoulder high, overgrown grass and wide, tall, good for hiding trees.

“Come on. Let’s go inside,”

“I’m not going in there. Don’t you see the sign?”

“Stop being a scaredy cat? We might find some treasure or something.”

“We might end up dead too.”

The startling shriek of a large blackbird circling overhead sent Danny running.

When I got to the place where we’d left Aunt May, Danny was sitting on the bank of the river scooping up water and splashing it onto cuts he’d gotten fleeing through the grasp of the thorny woodlands.

I dropped down next to him and Aunt May, exhausted. I gave Danny the stink eye. After a few moments of quietly lapping water, Danny whispered to me that he wanted to touch the smoothed over scar at the end of Aunt May’s eyebrow near her left temple. The slight disfigurement was a scant diversion from her creaseless honeysuckle skin. The only thing about Aunt May that gave any evidence of her age were the gray clouds over her pupils, the two long silver plaits that laid against her back to her waist and her handmade cane that had thick tendrils carved into it, like the heavy creepers draping the dead house we’d found. Both, Danny and I watched as her slender bent fingers intertwined smooth palm leaves into a basket. Her repetitive movements stilled us like frogs idling on a lily pad. It was the beginning of us lounging inside of her stories.

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“We found a haunted house,” blurted out Danny.

“Yeah, but Danny was afraid to go in it,” I said.

“Ain’t no sense in messing around things that’s no longer living,” she said without missing a loop.

“House’s don’t live. People and animals do,” said Danny.

“Then why was you scared to go in it?” I said laughing. Aunt May laughed too.

“So, so what? Anyway, you got a bunch of baskets in your room. Why do you make ‘em?” asked Danny as I got up to get throwing rocks.

“To give to the church,” replied Aunt May never taking her eyes of her task.

“Church? You could get money for those baskets?” said Danny.

“Ain’t everything about money, boy. If you let it be, you gonna end up like them on the road.”

Danny and I looked over at the road, then at each other. Seeing nothing, we started laughing until spit ran down our chins.

“Ya’ll think I’m crazy, but that one right next to you Josiah is all in your face trying to figure you out. Daniel that one’s about to pull your foot.”

I stopped laughing when Danny started screaming and took off for the house, as if he was on fire. Seconds later, momma came marching down to the river dragging Danny behind her, while Aunt Delia ran to keep up with them.

Momma was mad, but she always seemed to be mad about something. She was made that way, more “piss and vinegar” than “sugar and spice” my daddy would say. Aunt Delia, one day when momma went to town with my dad, told us since my mother was the oldest of the two of them, she had to do everything growing up and she had to do it right. She had the best grades. She sewed the best clothes. She had perfect attendance at church. Everyone told her she was going to be somebody important one day. But my momma never believed them, Aunt Delia said, leastways not in her heart nor her head. Momma was dark skinned and plump, while Aunt Delia was the color of fresh churned butter and thin as a rail. Momma had to hot comb her hair while Aunt Delia just needed to brush her wavy “Indian” hair. Aunt Delia shook when she laughed. Momma never laughed. Aunt Delia told us the older momma got, without one bite of a man wanting to date her, the sadder and meaner she got, even meaner when Aunt Delia married first and left home. She said it was a blessing for everyone when my daddy, a good god-fearing man, asked momma to marry him, that it sweetened her a little. But that day, at the river, there was no sugar coming from momma’s mouth.

“You gotta stop scaring these kids. Telling them about hoodoo mess. Ain’t no ghosts. You hear me Aunt May? Now if ya’ll can’t keep good company down here, you come up to the house and I’ll find you some work to do, which is it?”

“Calm down Olivia. Aunt May doesn’t mean no harm. You always flying off the handle and Danny gets scared if a fly comes too close. We got enough to do without having them around us getting in the way,” said Aunt Delia bent over with her hands on her hips trying to catch her breath.

“I said which is it?” Momma screeched into the hot, almost unbreathable, air.

Water slapping against the big stones in the middle of the river was all that could be heard until Danny and I said we wanted to stay with Aunt May. Well, really Danny just followed my lead by nodding his head when I answered. His eyes were still big as quarters and his hands were slightly shaking, but he stood his ground as momma turned and walked back up to the house. When she was inside, Aunt May continued talking.

“Boy, you nothing but a damn scardy cat! I gave you fair warning that you was about to be touched. You screaming and crying like you crazy,” she said slamming her halfway finished basket to the side of her. “Help me get up. I need to dangle my feet in the water.”

“You know you’re not supposed to cuss?” said Danny finally finding his voice.

“Now you gonna run and tell I was cussing? I’m just telling the truth. You ran crying like a baby. Probably the same way you took off running from Master Deed’s hollowed out mansion,” she let out a laugh so loud that a nearby frog jumped into the river.

“I didn’t feel nothing,” said Danny pouting while shifting fear around in his eyes.

“You gonna add lying to your money wanting and baby acting? I can see you bound for a hard road just like them walking.”

“Whose walking Aunt May?” I asked sitting beside her.

“Them that set fire to that house ya’ll found.”

“Who lived in that house and why did somebody set it on fire?” asked Danny.

“Your momma’s ain’t told you all about Nat Turner’s Rebellion?”

“Whose Nat Turner?” said Danny standing so close to me I could hear his heart muscles pumping.

“Somebody not in your history books in school. That’s for sure. Nat Turner was of the Coromantee people, strong of will and powerfully built.

“What’s cora...whatever you said?” I asked.

“Coromantee, boy. Like a tribe, you know like the Indians ya’ll watch in them westerns on the television. They are from tribes, well so were we, tribes in Africa. Anyway, Nat Turner was a slave that got good and tired of being one and when God, as he said, told him to strike back at his oppressors, he did. He got folks riled up and they joined up with him to get rid of their white masters. The night they went to snatch their freedom back one of ‘em, more afraid for his own life, ran and told on them.”

“What happened to them?” asked Danny.

“After word got out that they were killing white folks and setting land on fire, a posse got together and came after them. They ran down this road and tried to scatter, but here is where most of them got killed, except for Nat Turner and a couple others. They found them later and hung ‘em. Their blood runs underneath this road and the earth is still holding it.”

“I know about slavery times, but I never heard that story before. Is it true?” I asked.

“True as me sitting here at ninety years old with my size tens in the water.”

“Where did you read it?” asked Danny.

“Didn’t. My momma told me and her momma before her. That’s the way it’s been since forever, until now. Now, if it ain’t in a book, it didn’t happen. You gotta be wary of who tells your story ‘cause they bound to leave a whole lot out to suit them,” she said while wiggling her toes up into the sunshine before dropping them back into the water.

“Well, I don’t believe it,” said Danny standing up in defiance.

“Well, there is snakes out here, everywhere. Just ‘cause you don’t see ‘em don’t mean they’re not there.”

That first story about Nat Turner kept Danny and I plugged in for the whole summer. She told us about Deed’s Plantation and how she remembered walking through the woods near the house with her grandmother as they looked for herbs to use for healing people. Aunt May said her grandmother could pull things out of the earth everywhere, but never near the house or the path leading to it. She’d told her that was tainted ground, blood sucking land that could steal your soul if you had a bad thought or an evil disposition. One day, Aunt May said, she wandered away from her grandmother and saw a patch of dandelions and when she went to pluck one, something tugged at her hand, but no one else was there.

Each day we went to the water, she told us stories, some horrible and some beautiful. Sometimes we reenacted her stories. Other times we laid next to each other trying to figure out how much was true and how much was Aunt May’s imagination. We kept her stories to ourselves, since most of them were about a ghost, a devil, or some other incantation of evil that we knew would set my mother off.

Around the end of July, we started seeing Aunt May slow down. More and more, she lay in the bed talking to people we couldn’t see. I started praying for her at night. Not just for her to get well, but for the devil to leave her alone. She’d made a convert of me. The preacher on Sunday morning shouting fire and brimstone had nothing on Aunt May’s stories. On her good days, she would let Danny and I prop her up to tell us a story until she got sleepy and nodded off. Once she told us about the fire at Deed Plantation. She said you could see it burning from miles

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away and how people swore they could see ghost floating inside the smoke and flames. Aunt May said it was a fitting end to the place, except for all the souls that were trapped, left to endlessly wonder this earth. She said that's why no one with good sense lives out here on scatter road cause sooner or later they gonna know the devil owns Scatter Road. We asked her why she only told stories from long ago. She said because she was from long ago and because we needed to know where we came from if we wanted to know where we were going. And then she was gone. The sweet scent of jasmine blew through her bedroom window mixing with her last breath. It was August 15th. Summer ended that day for me and Danny. Winter came early.

After her death stranger things began to happen on Scatter Road. Squalls of dirt swirling up into the air with no wind to propel them. Rushing sounds, as if a million joggers were running a marathon under our windows. And Aunt Delia took on a cough that wouldn't go away. Mommy blamed it on her chain smoking cigarettes. Aunt Delia blamed it on the burdens of life. Danny and I blamed it on the devil.

Danny and I started seeing spirits walking on the road, sitting on gravestones in the cemetery and sometimes in the house. They weren't gray or faded like the ghost in the movies. They looked like regular people who were there one moment and gone the next. We tried to tell momma when they were sitting in the kitchen by the stove and how they sometimes woke us up at night by pushing books off the desk or snatching covers off us. At first, she fussed out Aunt May's soul for telling us all those stories. After that she would tell us to read the Bible while she went to the whipping tree to pull off a branch, clear it and snap it. She was whooping on Danny the day Aunt Delia fell to the floor after trying to stop her. She never got back up. It was two weeks to Thanksgiving and a month before my daddy would die in a freak accident at the mill, leaving his pension and our house, which he'd paid for in cash. The year ended with me, momma

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and Danny sitting inside of sadness without holiday lights, a Christmas tree or any markings of the festive time of the year. Death and Scatter Road had claimed us. What we didn't know was by the next summer, Danny would be gone, too.

Maybe evil soaks into the ground like gasoline desecrating the earth for centuries to come. Maybe it starts from a trickle of blood from a body coursing with unendurable pain, a drop so heavy it cannot be moved, like Aunt May said. The only thing Danny and I knew for sure was that Scatter Road was the only possible reason for my mother turning into a full-blown monster.

Momma's descent began with her always telling Danny to do things and never me. He had to take out the trash. He had to clean up the kitchen. He had to turn off the television and go to his room to sit in silence, while I had to incessantly read the Bible. Once, we realized a pattern had been established, I asked momma if she hated Danny. It was the only time she hit me. It was the only time I asked. I'd whisper to Danny that she'd get better because I was praying as hard as I could. She whipped him until the welts on his legs from her previous beatings would burst open again with fresh blood. She tied him up when we went to town or to church and never once flinched at her actions in the house of the Lord. Momma told the school people that Danny had to be home schooled because he was grieving so bad. No one came to check. No one wanted to come out to Scatter Road.

I remember with pristine clarity all that she did and all that I didn't do. I told no one. I put salve on his wounds, but did not look in his face. I cried with him at night, but I did not cry out when she hit him again and again. Evil had crept into momma's holes and hollowed out a place inside of her that fueled her rage towards Danny until he couldn't take it anymore

The following Spring, Danny took off to escape Scatter Road and momma. I watched him from our bedroom window as he walked down the crooked dirt road like an arrow on its way to a bullseye. Tufts of dust, he didn't even know he was kicking up, flew into the air as dense as a flock of startled birds fleeing for the safety of the skies. He was beyond mad. He was resolute. He hadn't told me he was leaving. Why should he? Since all I did was pray. He watched me get ice cream and praise while he worked like a male Cinderella. I hated receiving, but I didn't want momma's wrath to turn to me.

I knew that Danny was going to carry his anger his whole life because he carried the marks of madness on his legs and arms and back. I watched each stomping foot fall knowing, in his mind, they were landing on my momma's face. I watched as he stopped by a sycamore tree, took out his pocket knife and repeatedly slashed at it. As he began to fade from my sight, there was a flash of movement under my window. It was my mother running down the road. She was going after Danny.

I reached them at the river just as Danny was coming up from the water gasping for breath. I could see his chest heaving and momma trying to push him back into the water.

"Momma. Momma. Stop. You're going to kill him," I screeched at her contorted face, while wading towards them. She hesitated for a second before turning back to Danny.

When she reached out to push him down again, Danny rose from the water with his lips closed in a determined line. Light twinkled by his side, as he lifted his arm. In his hand was his pocket knife. Before I could grab my mother, he slashed at her several times in rapid succession, with all his might. Momma stumbled back nearly knocking me over. He'd caught her in her

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stomach. I helped her to the banks where she collapsed on the ground with blood seeping into the already saturated earth. When I looked up, Danny was coming towards us with the knife raised.

“Danny, don’t,” I said, almost in a whisper.

He stopped and stood in front of me in a sopping wet ragged red checkered shirt, faded jeans full of holes, and bare feet, then he slowly bent down to swish the blade clean in the water, never taking his eyes off me. He stood up, closed the pocket knife and said, “She wanted to kill me”, then walked past me, down the road, until he was out of sight. I knew I would never see him again. I tried to yell out, “it’s Scatter Road, Danny. Not momma”, but he was gone.

Momma was gasping and crying when I ran from her to call for help. Blood was pooling beside her. I knew the ghosts were waiting to welcome another soul. They did not get her that day.

A few months after the incident, we moved back to town. For the next six years, until I left for college, momma and I never spoke about Danny or our time on Scatter Road. It became our secret. I remember, on warm summer nights with windows open to catch the slightest of breezes to make sleep possible, hearing my mother cry. I never knew if it was because of the loss of daddy, Aunt Delia, or what she’d done to Danny. I never asked. Momma stayed in Capron until her death fifteen years later. A year before, I was ordained and the year I got married. It was also the year I started getting letters from Danny.

From the California State Prison in the mid 70’s to his current address, San Quentin, I have watched Danny’s entrenched rage explode again and again. When I got the first letter, I researched why he was in jail and did the same for each new return address. Robbery. Armed Robbery. Manslaughter. And now murder.

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In this last letter, he includes a newspaper clipping of himself in an orange jumpsuit with his hands and feet in chains leaving a courtroom. I explore the picture for a glimpse of the cousin I once knew on a sunny river bank in the backwoods of Virginia. The only things that remain are his keen green eyes and his sideways smile. These I remember with a returning smile.

I have forgiven myself and my mother. It was and is an uneasy forgiveness. One I stoke every Sunday from the pulpit, my refuge.