



Ghostly Tales of Mississippi

Jeff Duke



Ghostly Tales of Mississippi

Dedication:

To my mother and father who always believed.

And to my wife, Angelica.

You still mean everything.

And finally—to Brett Ortler for the fantastic editing job and Emily Comer Beaumont for not only her amazing editing skills but also for recommending me for this project. Who knew that when we met in elementary school that we'd go on to work on a book together? Crazy.

In some instances, names and locations have been changed at the request of sources.

Content Warning: This book contains several references to suicide and may not be appropriate for all audiences.

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Ghostly Tales of Mississippi

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Rosehill Cemetery

Brookhaven, Mississippi

Larry sat in his truck for a moment and finished his breakfast, basking in the warm air that was blasting from the old truck's heater. He was not looking forward to being out in that bitterly cold air today. He enjoyed taking care of the cemetery in Brookhaven. He wasn't confined to some stuffy office and constantly having to deal with coworkers or the public in general. With this job, he was mostly on his own. As long as he didn't give his boss something to complain about, he rarely saw him. But, on days like this, Larry wouldn't mind being stuffed into a warm office somewhere.

As he sat and washed the last of his Egg McMuffin down with coffee, he noticed that one of the office lights was on. He was sure he'd turned it off before he left late yesterday afternoon. In fact, he was positive he'd turned it off. The door to the office was still shut and sealed with a padlock and the windows looked intact,

so it was doubtful that anyone had broken in. And it's not like there was anything to steal in there anyway. Maybe he'd simply forgotten to turn the light off. He'd noticed that the older he got, the more he forgot the little things.

Thinking nothing more of it, Larry tossed his breakfast wrapper on the floorboard of the truck and stepped out into the chilly morning. He immediately zipped his jacket all the way up and pulled his knit cap down farther so it covered his ears. It was definitely colder than when he'd left the house. He found himself hoping that it would rain. If it did start raining, he could either go back home or hang out around the little space heater in the office. Either option would be better than working outside today.

The early morning fog was still hugging the ground as Larry grabbed some tools from the back of his truck and made his way to the office door. Out on the cemetery grounds, the tips of tombstones peeked out through the low-hanging fog like little bleak mountaintops. Somewhere in the distant darkness, Larry thought he heard the low rumble of thunder.

"Come on, rain," Larry said to himself as he fumbled at the office padlock with numb fingers. With the lock open, Larry stooped to pick up his thermos of coffee from where he'd set it on the ground when something out in the cemetery caught his eye and caused him to stand up straight.

Out among the tombstones and the fog was an old man. From what Larry could see, he was dressed in a neatly pressed suit, which was odd, considering the horrible weather. The old man's hair was slicked back, and he had a large bushy mustache that looked well

groomed and cared for. He stood perfectly still between two tombstones and stared silently at the office. If the old man saw Larry, he didn't acknowledge him. He just stood there perfectly still, his face completely emotionless.

"We ain't open yet, sir," Larry called out to the old man. And then he muttered under his breath, "At least wait until the damn sun is up."

If the old man heard Larry, he didn't show it. He continued to stand perfectly still, with his eyes fixed on the office. Larry wondered if maybe he was one of those elderly people you see all the time on the news whose mind isn't what it once was and who had wandered off. Maybe the guy had dementia?

"You . . . you need some help, sir?" Larry yelled as he started walking toward the man. "Hello? Sir, can you hear me?"

As Larry approached, the old man's head turned ever so slightly, as if he'd just noticed the caretaker walking toward him. And then he vanished. He didn't turn and walk away into the fog. He didn't back into the fog. He just slowly faded away until he was gone.

Larry stopped in his tracks and tried to process what he had just seen. He was completely alone in the graveyard now. There was no trace of the old man who had just been standing there. In the distance, there was another lazy, low rumble of thunder, louder and closer than the one before. There was a faint rattling noise that Larry couldn't place until he realized that it was the sound of his wedding ring tapping against his metal thermos; he was shaking.

After a few moments of stunned silence, Larry muttered something about the chances of rain and walked back to the office in the dull gray morning light.

He snapped the padlock back on the front door and got back into his truck. He was the caretaker here at Rosehill Cemetery, and an old cemetery like Rosehill needed a lot of care.

But today, Rosehill would have to take care of itself, he thought, as he started the truck and drove through the fog, down the winding path, and toward home.



John's Bayou Road

Vanceleave, Mississippi

After they related the story of their accident to the state trooper, Barry and Kate stared at him, and he, in turn, stared back. The office was quiet, the only noise coming from a squeaky desk fan as it struggled to turn back and forth. The trooper turned his attention to his laptop, typed a few more lines, and then closed it. Reaching into a drawer from his desk, he took out a battered, faded notebook whose cover was worn from both age and use. He thumbed through various yellowed handwritten pages until he found a blank one.

“OK, Mr. and Mrs. Stevens. Let’s go over what happened one more time,” he said, as he began writing in the notebook.

Barry and Kate turned to look at each other. It had been a long day—a very long day—and neither really wanted to tell the story again. Kate made a face that said “humor him” and Barry shook his head.

“OK. My wife and I were driving up to my sister’s for a wedding. The trip was going fine until I heard...”

“Oh my God. Is that...blood?” Kate said, as she pointed toward an upcoming expanse of road.

Barry looked up from his phone where he was trying to find another podcast to listen to and slowed the car as the red, wet patch on the road came closer. The asphalt ahead was streaked with a red liquid that definitely appeared to be blood. The red mass covered the entire road and stretched on for several feet. Deep crimson and bright-red patches on the edges glistened in the sunlight.

“What the...,” Barry muttered to himself. Setting his phone down, he eased the car to the shoulder of the road.

“Um, what do you think you’re doing?” asked Kate.

“That’s a lot of blood. What if someone is hurt? It’s too much to be an animal. I mean, I suppose it could’ve been a deer or a cow, but, with that much blood, it would’ve been a hell of an impact and there would probably be a wrecked car along with it. My roommate in college crashed into a deer one night. His truck was pretty much totaled and ended up in a ditch. I just want to take a look.”

Barry parked the car halfway onto the shoulder and stepped out. Looking both ways to ensure no traffic was coming, he slowly headed toward the thick liquid patch that covered the highway and knelt near the large puddle. It—whatever it was—had to have happened recently. The blood was still fresh. Fresh enough that it was oozing toward the opposite shoulder, thanks to the natural incline of the highway.

“Kate,” he called. “Come check this out. Something got hit—and recently. And this is definitely blood. This stuff hasn’t even had time to dry.”

Kate exited the car and walked to stand beside her crouched husband. The whole time, her eyes never left the crimson swath on the highway. Barry rose as she approached. “Should we call the highway patrol?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I want to look around first, though. Check the grass and bushes on the other side. Whatever it was that got creamed, looks like it dragged itself off that side of the road.”

The blood trailed over to the opposite side of the highway and disappeared into the knee-high grass. Barry took Kate’s hand and began walking to the other side while carefully avoiding the ominous red liquid at their feet.

“Do you hear anything, Barry?” Kate asked, as she scanned the tall grass in front of them.

“I thought I heard a moan or something when I got out of the car. I couldn’t tell if it was a person or an animal, though.”

“No. Do you hear...anything?”

Barry hadn’t noticed it before, but it was deathly quiet. No birds chirping, no insects making insect sounds, nothing. There had been a slight humid breeze when Barry got out of the car, and now that was gone as well. The tall grass in front of them stood completely still. And whatever was out there in the grass was silent and still as well.

“Go ahead and call the highway patrol. Best to let them look at this,” Barry said. “I don’t like it at all.”

“Barry, I’m not getting a signal.” Kate replied, as she stared at the screen of her phone.

“What do you mean you’re not getting a signal? You were just on the phone with your sister a few minutes ago before we stopped.”

“I mean I’m not getting a signal. Nothing.”

“Let me take a look,” Barry said. “I think you should always be able to call emergency services. They broadcast a special frequency or something just for stuff like 911.”

Thinking back on the events that followed, Barry tried to remember if he’d seen the black van coming. He’d try to convince himself that maybe he just hadn’t noticed it. Black vans just don’t appear out of nowhere. Maybe it had approached them while they were looking for whatever was dead or dying in the grass. But the answer was always “no.” One minute the black van wasn’t there and the next, it was.

The van’s engine roared as it headed straight toward their parked car. The shirtless figure behind the wheel was pale with a scraggly mess of black curly hair that obscured his face as he leaned forward, gripping the wheel and bracing for the impact. Barry grabbed his wife’s hand and yanked her toward him as the van slammed into their car in an explosion of glass, plastic, and metal. The force of the collision shot their car down the embankment and it rolled on its side. The driver of the van hadn’t used the brakes at all. If anything, he’d sped up. And now the driver, as well as the van, was gone. Barry and Kate were alone on the side of the road. There was no van, no blood. Just them and their demolished car.

“And that’s exactly what happened,” Barry said, as the trooper jotted in the battered notebook he’d pulled out. “I know it doesn’t make any sense, and I don’t blame you for not believing us.”

The trooper stopped writing and looked up at the couple.

“Oh, I believe you,” the trooper replied, as he stared at the notes he’d just written. “You folks aren’t the first people this has happened to.”

“What do you mean?” asked Kate.

“This notebook belonged to my daddy. He was a state trooper in Vancleave just like me. He started this notebook back in 1973, right after some folks much like yourselves told him pretty much the exact same story. Couple stopped to investigate a bunch of blood on the road and then a black van plowed into their car, only to immediately vanish. Driver of the van is always the same. Some shirtless, scraggly headed guy.”

“You’re kidding,” said Barry.

“Wish I was,” the trooper said, as he held up the notebook and thumbed through the pages. The notebook’s yellowed pages were filled with dates, notes, and even a few diagrams. “My daddy started keeping this notebook right after the first time he heard about the black van. Every incident that he worked is documented here. And when he retired, he passed it on to me. But he kept on looking for that van. Kept looking right up until the day he fell over dead from a heart attack. You folks are lucky. Some folks were sitting in their car when the van hit them. A couple from Ole Miss got killed on that exact stretch of road not two years ago. We filed it as a hit and run—same as we’ll do with you folks—only because ‘ghost car’ won’t do.

Wish I could tell y'all who or what it was, but I can't. I can only tell you that this isn't the first time this has happened, and it probably won't be the last."

As Barry and Kate sat there in confused, stunned silence and listened to the trooper, Kate recalled that, before the van hit their car, the driver had thrown his head back and screamed. And the scream was like nothing she'd ever heard before.



Bogue Chitto Swamp

Pearl River County, Mississippi

“**W**ell, that’s not weird,” said Matt to himself as he drove past the odd-looking elderly man on the side of the road. Sure, there was nothing inherently weird about seeing someone on the side of a lonely road, but, still, something seemed off about him. He was wearing a black suit in the middle of summer, and he’d topped off this suit with a tall black hat, which he took off and waved at Matt as he drove by.

Driving past the old man, Matt glanced in his rearview mirror. The man had stopped waving his hat around and was now standing completely still and watching as Matt’s car continued down the road.

“If you’re wanting a ride,” Matt said aloud, “it’s probably best not to dress like a mortician from the 1800s.” He chuckled to himself, skipped to another song on his iPhone, and continued on his way. The old man, still standing perfectly still, faded into the distance.

Matt was traveling to meet his new girlfriend's parents for the first time. He met Jennifer during their freshman year at college and had been dating her for few months. It was getting serious, he supposed; she had invited him to visit her at her parents' home during the fall break. And while Matt was looking forward to getting away from campus for a few days and enjoying some home cooking, he was somewhat nervous about meeting Jennifer's folks.

She told him that her parents lived in the country. Based on the road he was driving, which ran near the Bogue Chitto swamp in Pearl River County, Matt was pretty sure she meant in the absolute middle of countrified nowhere. The first part of his drive from school had been fine, as he cruised down the four-lane blacktop. Now, he found himself on a narrow two-lane highway that was in desperate need of maintenance. Each side of the road was surrounded by thick woods that crept up to the edge of the highway.

"Man, she wasn't lying when she said they lived in the country," Matt said, as he followed the directions on his GPS. "This is some *Hills Have Eyes* territory. Leatherface country and crap."

According to his GPS, he would be on this road for another 60 miles before the emotionless voice of his computerized navigator would tell him to turn. He shifted in his seat to get more comfortable and pressed onward.

It was several miles later that he saw the old man in the black suit again. This time he was standing closer to the road than before, with his arm extended and his thumb up. Although it was impossible, Matt was sure this was the same man he'd seen several miles back.

His tall black hat was perched on his head this time, but he was still dressed like he was in charge of a funeral in a Charles Dickens novel.

“No. Friggin’. Way . . .” Matt muttered, as he slowed his car to get a better look at the gaunt figure on the side of the road.

The man was indeed old. Very old. He was almost unnaturally thin, and his wrinkled, liver-spotted skin was stretched tight over his thin frame. His face was almost skull-like. Matt was reminded of someone suffering from a terminal disease and how they become more skeletal toward the end, just bones draped in discolored tight skin. His dark eyes were set back in their sockets and topped with long scraggly eyebrows that looked like masses of cobwebs. The same wild white hair cascaded from under his top hat and down to his shoulders. Dry, cracked lips parted into a smile that was full of long, yellow teeth with the gums receding back to the bone.

As Matt drove past, the old man leaned forward and stuck his crooked upturned thumb farther out. His grotesque smile, which Matt thought couldn’t get bigger or more gross, got worse. The man was straining to smile as wide as he could, showing all of his awful teeth; his eyes were so wide with the effort that Matt could see the yellowed whites that surrounded his dark pupils and could swear they were watering. When the car was side by side with the old man, he started to shuffle to the car and reach for the passenger door.

That’s when Matt floored it.

Matt saw the old man several more times. Always standing on the side of the road with his aged eyes fixed on Matt’s car as it approached. Once he was standing

on the side of the road and waving a stick over his head like some hellfire-spitting tent revival preacher with a Bible over his head. Another time he could swear the man was dancing or something close to it. As he drove past the old man, he was kicking up his legs and waving his arms over his head. Each time Matt saw the man on the side of the road, he went past him a little bit faster than before. He was getting scared now, and he wasn't ashamed to admit it.

The last time Matt saw the skeletal roadside figure, he cradled something bloody in his hands and held whatever it was close to his chest. This was also the moment Matt's car stopped working. His car was new—a graduation present from his folks—and had never had any trouble. But just as he passed the old man, everything on the car shut off. All the lights on the dash blinked off, his radio went dead, the AC stopped churning out cold air, and the power steering stopped working, making the steering wheel heavy and sluggish. Even his iPhone had gone dead.

As the car slowly coasted to a halt in the middle of the road, Matt turned in his seat to look behind him. The old man, still hugging something bloody close to his chest, had started hobbling toward the car. He could barely lift his feet, and each time he slid one scuffed-up black shoe forward, he kicked up a cloud of red dust.

The man's face had changed too. While still skeletal, it now looked more angular. Meaner. His wild eyes were now narrowed, beady and dark like black marbles, and they appeared to have sunken deeper into his skull, but they stayed locked on Matt. Sharp cheekbones protruded from the sides of his face, and his cheeks hugged close to the bone. His smile was

still hideously large and full of long, discolored teeth. Matt watched as his mouth slowly opened and a moldy looking tongue licked his cracked, bleeding lips. The man looked more like a wolf than a man. The shuffling figure was almost to the trunk of the car now, and Matt was able to see what the old man was holding in his hands. It appeared to be the carcass of a rabbit. From the looks of the mass of blood and fur, it had died a very violent death.

Matt turned in his seat and tried the car again. He heard something touch the trunk of his car and thought he could hear the man mumbling something. Just as he was about to ditch his car and take off running on foot, the car roared to life. All the lights on the dashboard flashed on and the radio blared the song he'd just been listening to. With a loud screech, Matt peeled off and sped down the highway. He looked in his rearview mirror, expecting to see the old man still shuffling after him or throwing the dead rabbit at his car. But the highway was empty. Just a barren strip of asphalt that cut through the swamp woods like a scar.

Almost an hour later, Matt arrived at the house belonging to his girlfriend's parents. It was shortly after dark, and Matt was still shaken from his encounter but did his best to hide it. It was a lovely home, and—just like she described—it was in the middle of nowhere. Jennifer met him on the front porch.

Her parents seemed to like him and asked him all manner of questions over the course of supper. Matt did a good job of endearing himself to them and, despite what he'd been through, managed to come across as very charming. Jennifer gave him a look that let him

know he was doing a good job with her parents and making quite the impression.

After supper, Matt excused himself and stepped outside. He stood quietly on the front porch and gazed at the dark woods that surrounded the house as he thought about the day's events; he'd told no one. After a few minutes, Jennifer's father came out onto the porch with two beers and gave one to Matt. They sat and made pleasant small talk. They asked about each other's families, talked sports and plans for the future. Her father offered another beer and Matt gladly accepted.

Midway through this second beer, Matt, relaxed by the alcohol, told Jennifer's father of the events that had taken place on the way there. About the old man and how he kept appearing all along the road and the sinister turn it had taken toward the end. Her father listened silently. When Matt was done with his story, the father sat there as if he was thinking of what to say in response to the outlandish report he'd just heard. Matt, despite every word of his tale being true, felt foolish.

"Matt," the father finally said. "That's what folks call an urban legend. At least that's what I think I read on the internet that it's called. I guess in this case it would be a rural legend," the father said with a chuckle. "They's always been stories about that old man haunting the roads around here for as long as I can remember."

"So you don't believe me?" asked Matt.

"Matt, nobody is going to believe you when it comes to that story. So I'd keep it to yourself." The father paused here and sat silently for a bit. After a minute or two, he spoke. "But I believe you. As sure

as we're sittin' here. I saw the old man, too, one time. Back in 1965. Like to have scared me to death; I'm sure it must've done the same to you. I even saw the dead rabbit he was carrying."

Matt suddenly realized that in the excitement of telling the story, he'd omitted the detail that the old man had been holding the dead rabbit like a mother would hold a baby. The two silently stared into the darkness for a short while. And then, with a nod from Jennifer's father, they both headed inside.





Burnt Bridge Road

Hattiesburg, Mississippi

I'm pretty sure everyone has a prom night story. Prom night is one of those special nights in a person's life that mark the end of one part and the beginning of another. For many people, it's one of the last big flings with the friends they've grown up with—before life makes other plans and scatters everyone. I have a prom night story too. Mine's a bit different, I suppose, as I didn't attend my prom.

I didn't have a date for prom. So I did what most kids without dates on prom night do—I drove around and felt sorry for myself. In high school, I was a glasses-wearing nerd who was more into comic books and Dungeons and Dragons than I was football or pep rallies. I was picked on all through school and, honestly, couldn't wait to leave my hometown for the larger world. This was years before it was suddenly cool to be into geeky things. I'm still not sure how that transition happened. I blame *The Big Bang Theory*.

So, on my prom night, I was just another four-eyed, acne-covered, miserable kid driving around aimlessly, listening to even more miserable music. I think it was The Cure, but it could've been The Smiths. Yes, now that I pause to think about it, it probably was The Smiths. I was that miserable.

Initially, I drove around my hometown of Hattiesburg, but, after seeing so many of my classmates heading to the dance, I decided to get out of town and hit some of the country roads. Seeing the people I went to school with—some of whom were absolutely awful to me—all dressed up and laughing wasn't helping my mood. I just wanted to get away from everyone and drive around in the dark for a while. I tried to cheer myself up with the thought that I would be off to college in the fall and would never have to see any of these people again.

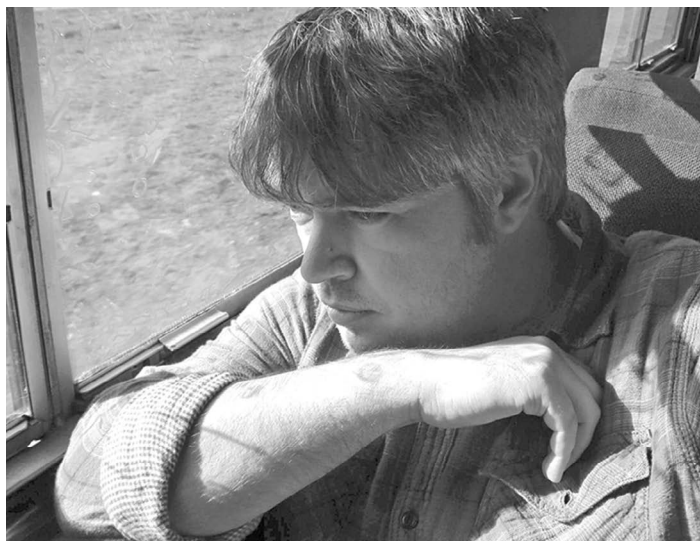
It was nearing midnight when I made it to Burnt Bridge Road. I was getting tired and figured that, after I crossed the bridge, I would find a spot to turn around and then head back to my house where I'd read comic books until I fell asleep. But as I started across the bridge, that's when I noticed something odd.

There was something on my car.

At first, I thought that it was some kind of mechanical issue. A pink-colored mist hovered over the hood. I figured I had blown some kind of gasket or a hose had come loose. As I watched, the mist got thicker and thicker. Translucent at first, the mist swirled and churned. Its color increased in brightness until I could barely see through it.

As I slowed my car and prepared for all my warning lights to pop on, something very strange happened.

About the Author



Jeff Duke was raised in Tupelo, Mississippi, and began writing at an early age. He formulated a love for all things horror after spending untold hours in detention with books by Stephen King and H.P. Lovecraft. In college, he studied creative writing under Barry Hannah at the University of Mississippi and under Dr. Price Caldwell at Mississippi State University. Although he mainly writes Southern-style “grit lit” these days, he still enjoys writing about horrible things that go bump in the night. Jeff currently resides in Austin, Texas, with his dog, Boone; his cat, Gabbers; and his wife, Angelica, who he still thinks is way out of his league.

Embrace Your Fears with Mississippi's Spookiest Stories

A graveyard where the dead do anything but rest peacefully, a haunted bridge that was the site of unspeakable violence, the ghost of an ancient witch that roams the dark woods—Mississippi is among the most haunted states in America. This collection of stories presents the creepiest, most surprising of them all. Author Jeff Duke grew up in Mississippi and has spent countless hours combing the Magnolia State for the strangest and scariest run-ins with the unexplained.

Horror fans and history buffs will delight in 14 chilling tales about haunted locations. They're based on reportedly true accounts, proving that Mississippi is the setting for some of the most compelling ghostly tales ever told. The short stories are ideal for quick reading, and they're sure to captivate anyone who enjoys a good scare. Share them with friends around a campfire, or try them alone—if you dare!

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