

Spectre 109

There's a thin stretch of Highway 109 where the ground dips, where the sun strikes at an odd and obtuse angle on two occasions a year. On that matted place of pavement, near ever-flooding and thinning Simms Creek is where most of the ghosts have been spotted. Sometimes they ask to hitch rides—men with mules in odd flannel—things alien to a driver in a heated car. Some drift over the pavement, sparking through the night air and leading drowsy drivers into hedges or trees along the road. They are there—something is there that sustains the rumor, if it is only a rumor of ghosts, or if they are truly ghosts, or maybe convicts, or some strange beings along the road. The stories have been told since the earliest years of the county's memory.

Monk Walston saw the lights the week before his father was scheduled to serve a six-month sentence for drunk driving. His father, Arl, had done no damage, but it was the fourth time the same deputy had pulled him over leaving his favorite bar north of the county. For the final arrest the deputy was waiting for him two hundred yards inside the county line. Monk talked about the lights most of the week, mostly among friends, his friend, Ed, with the storeowner where he bought drinks and hotdogs on those hollow-still late summer days. All that week, Monk's dad was quiet—quietly assessing the cell that awaited him, and wondering how the scars of indignity would bear on a son who had not known him to be jailed, not since that son had been so dumbly young. But Monk at 13 was excited about the lights and he told his Uncle Bib about them on Wednesday.

"Across Simms Creek. Go to it. Take a look. I saw it over the trees where the water opens up." Monk's lips pressed together defiantly. He was sure and obstinate, a confidence that comes with scientific surety—confidence backed with the illusion of proof and numbers, or with the sureness of seeing with your own eyes.

"Bet you saw one of them ghosts," said Bib. He knew the ghosts. He liked the stories. To him, they were both—ghosts and stories.

"No. It was a U-F-O."

"Yeah, I know. They say the road is haunted. I haven't heard of no UFOs on it. Not yet." Bib drawled, not making much distinction between the two theories.

"Well, now you have. Come with me tomorrow. See yourself."

"Tomorrow? How you know it's gonna be there?" Bib said, laughing that amused laugh of knowing some secret answer. Monk fell upon Bib's pronouncement of "it" as an admission that there was something to be seen after all.

"So you believe me?"

"No, I don't, but I wanna know what makes you think it will be back."

"Everybody talks about those lights. They've been around so long. They're bound to be back. I figure you look for 'em in the right spot, they'll be back."

"You know, Monk, them ghosts is pretty stubborn things. You can't tell ghosts to..."

"It ain't a ghost. It's an alien ship. I know. It's real."

"Aw mother pish, no such thing as alien ships." Bib retorted. The amusement left him. The fun of the "spirit talk" had vaporized in the obstinate alien logic of the boy.

"Well, you think there's such thing as ghosts then?"

"Now that's what they say people see. You don't know. There's somethin' to all them spirit sightin's." Bib spoke firmly, religiously.

"Well, I know what I saw." Monk closed with a cold blink of his eye. Bib nodded a truce and pulled out a pack of Lucky Strikes. Monk was sure of himself in his excitement. Bib relaxed his point and Monk ran to call his friend.

"Well, look here," his uncle called after him. "Before you get off now, somethin' I need to talk to you about." Monk looked back at his uncle who was thoughtfully rolling a cigarette in his fingers.

A News Story

In 1947 a farmer named Luke Drayer rambled one morning down the hill to the Simms Creek bridge in a choking and wheezing Ford truck. As he crossed the bridge and began to climb the long slope up McScutchen's Ridge, his engine suffocated and went out. Drayer examined the engine and checked his fuel, but sensed someone nearby watching him along the roadside. The small calf he was carrying in the truck began to jerk wildly, and Drayer ran to the back of the truck to calm it. From a break in the trees down the incline to the creek came a bright flash of light that far eclipsed the early red sun of the morning. The fireball moved silently up the road towards the truck. The calf jerked his tether left and right honking madly. Drayer fought to restrain the calf. Soon his

body began to numb. He saw vague figures, translucent, silvery spirits wisping about the truck. And he collapsed to his knees, for a moment, not sure how long. He got back up, tingled as he rose. The truck was running again. Strangely, he felt energized, with a fear that energizes, adrenalized, scared into a focused awareness. The fireball was gone as were any spirits, and so was his calf. Drayer was a moonshiner. They talked about his ordeal in those circles, and still talk about it. Some add to the story that Drayer also lost 40 good gallons of white liquor in the incident. All is still a mystery.

The Light Enfilade

Thursday afternoon, Monk slogged through the marshy plain along Simms bottom looking at treetops and searching for clues, hard evidence, of the flickering specters. He searched in a quiet, contained way—as someone would mask a focus, or intent, or mania, or trouble in himself. His friend, Ed, staggered behind collecting chunks of mud, some old cans, anything that looked like a clue. Ed didn't share the conviction that Monk kept. He ventured on curiosity—a wonder of what might exist beyond present perception coupled with an energetic sensibility to avoid boredom. Monk remembered what Bib had told him, that ghosts were stubborn things. He wouldn't find one if he were looking for one. The two wandered the bottom through the afternoon, and finally surfaced near the creek on the worn 109 roadbed beside a stream of traffic speeding home from work in the city 20 miles uproad. The gray pavement burned dry under the wash of cars.

When Monk arrived home, his father was at the door. He looked at the boy over a beer he held.

"Where you been?" He looked as though he had waited a while, but backed away casually as the boy came through the door.

"Out spookin' in the woods." Monk answered nonchalantly. Arl fidgeted with his hands.

"Gotta talk to you," Arl began slowly. "I... I ain't gonna be around next week you know." Monk glanced over to him shyly. His uncle had told him about his father's jail sentence.

"Uncle Bib told me that you was going to jail."

"I told him I'd tell you," Arl answered tightly. "When did he tell you?"

"Yesterday," Monk began quietly, gazing away at the floor. "When you going? You gonna be here this weekend?" There was a silence, then a breath of despair and silence again. Arl turned to Monk.

"Yeah, I go Monday. They'll pick me up, or I'll just go myself. Tomorrow, I'll finish work and pick up my check." He spoke freely and deliberately. An apparition of anger came into Monk's face.

"It ain't fair." Monk focused on his father resolutely.

"Well, they got me fair and tight." Arl held his hands aloft in resignation.

"Ain't you mad. You don't wanna go, do you?"

"Hell, I don't want to go. More than anything I don't want to go. Nobody wants to go, but I figger why fight it. It's got to be, so let it."

"You can't go that easy."

"Don't worry. I'll be gone a little, then I'll be back." He paused. "Look, you ain't never had to see me go off like this, I know. I was thinkin' of spendin' time with you before I went." He paused again shortly, then he blurted harshly, "Why didn't you say nothin' to me yesterday?"

"I don't know," Monk replied. I couldn't figure, I guess. You just gonna go, ain't you. Nothin' to it?"

"You didn't say nothin' to me 'cause you was ashamed, wasn't you?" Arl retorted.

"No. I didn't know what to do. I figured you'd be fightin' if somethin' was wrong. You should'a told me sooner. You wanted to go to that shootin' place you like to go to last week. You wanted me to go. If I'd known, I'd'a gone. Now we can't. All day today Ed and me was lookin' at Simms Creek for UFO landings. Nothing to see. You could'a told me. I'd'a gone today with you."

"What kind of landin'?" Arl looked oddly at his son, with some irritation and confusion.

"You know, those lights they been seeing. They say it's some UFO landin' place."

"Boy, I tell you," Arl gasped in disbelief. "Ain't no UFOs out there. That's that ghost I been sayin', or one of 'em. I told you the story of ole Cecil when you was smaller. There's ghosts all down there—there's ghosts *all* down there. Lights on the road, faces in the woods, horses in the fog. That sort of stuff been happening for years. I told you all yer life about that. You never believed none of it 'til now, huh?"

"Well, there's people who saw some stuff the other day and then the lights came. It ain't like those old stories. Some people just seen it, a ship, somethin' real."

"I can tell you who seen *stuff*—I can tell you half dozen people I know. Hell, one night..." he stopped short, then changed his tack. "I don't know what's with you, boy. You got all the facts and you come up with a different story than the true one. Can't you just see?"

"I know, I know... I heard all that before. Why does everyone get all up at it when I talk space aliens?" Monk was focused on his belief.

"'Cause ain't no aliens." He settled his tone. "I just don't like you talkin' crazy, that's all." Arl was disappointed, a dull sunken feeling as if his teaching had failed, a nagging feeling that comes when, with the same set of facts, another reaches a different conclusion.

Past Perspective

Arl told the stories to Monk at Halloween and sometimes at night, on camping trips, whenever Monk's friends were over. He was a passionate teller. But Arl had a belief for the ghosts—A belief as necessary as the heart of his boyhood memory. A belief that vibrated since he heard stories and made stories himself wandering through the bottomland near Simms Creek bridge. He told the story of Drayer and the story of Alderman Benson who gave directions to a strange man with a mule only to find the man and the mule gone when he turned to watch them go up the hill to the next ridge. He told the ancient story that everyone knew about lights that confused travelers and led them

into bridge pilings or into trees along the roadside. He told Monk about moonshiners and whole hobo camps who ran gasping from hiding places along the creek terrorized by the demonic sights they saw in the night. The "spirit stories" found a place in Monk's life, threading his life to his father's with that line of incomprehensible lights. The lights excited him. He shared the wonder with friends. He and his friends hunted the bottom in an ecstasy of fear, hoping to find something real from the stories and terrified at finding anything. But now, Monk's independent spirit excited a stingy delight in checking the facts and experiencing life on his terms.

As it went, everyone who looked found something in that bottom. Arl found ghosts; Monk found aliens. Monk had found something very sure—something he saw differently than his father saw.

Some Facts

The Department of Transportation released six studies several years ago that declared State Highway 109 the third deadliest road in the state. This assessment becomes more amazing when the thin population of its rural county is taken into consideration. The third study, done five years ago, reported an "acute concentration of automobile mishaps along a specific stretch of highway running west southwest along and over Simms Creek." A later study condemned 38 spots along the road where "thin centerlines, outdated, narrow lanes and uneven pavement" created "critical hazards" in the most favorable driving conditions. The last study, concluded eight months ago, castigated local water control agencies for negligent flood control in the Simms Creek

and adjoining Elk River, and recommended environmental studies be conducted to measure "what appear to be excess levels of waste and sewage along the river and its tributaries."

The Chaste Phantasm

Friday night came quietly. Bib stopped by the house as Monk came home from school.

"Saw your Pa last night." He spoke slowly as Monk shuffled through his school bag.

"I wondered where he went."

"He weren't too happy."

"With me?" Monk looked at his uncle with surprise, concern.

"Naw, he's got things that trouble him." Bib frowned and pulled out his cigarettes.

"You know, this is a hard time for him." Monk focused on his uncle.

"You mean jail."

"Yeah. He don't want you thinkin' any less of him."

"I'll never think less of him. He's my Pa." Monk spoke sternly, reassuringly.

"I know that, but he's worried about you. He wants you to remember him better than this."

"Remember him? I'll see him on Tuesday's, right? He's getting out in a few months. That's what they say, right?" Bib nodded his head.

"Yeah, I know that. I mean later on. Like when you think back on him." Bib drew a breath of his cigarette and backed onto a countertop by a window. "He don't want you no different than he was, I guess."

"We're all different." Monk answered logically.

"Yeah, that's right, but he wants you just like he remembers you. You know, like his boy." Monk shook his head understandingly.

"I guess I know." Bib paused to finish his cigarette, then turned to Monk who was near the kitchen corner.

"Your Pa and me saw one of them ghosts back 20 years ago." Bib paused again listening for reaction.

"What? You saw them lights?" Monk grew excited, shuffling his feet around the floor.

"Why didn't you ever say nothin'?"

"It was a long time ago." Bib dismissed the question and continued. "I don't know what it was. I thought sure it was a ghost. Your Pa said it was a man with a mule carrying a lantern. It was dark and foggy. All I saw was this light zipping across the road about 200 feet from the fork bridge. I couldn't even see the bridge."

"We was turning out the mill road at the top of the hill and we looked down at the creek and there it was. When we came up to the bridge, it like to got brighter and began zipping back and forth. I thought it was someone walking with a lantern, like I say. Well, we got closer and it was going back and forth real fast across the road in front of us. That's when your Pa got out to look at it. All I know is my hair stood up when that light started hovering like that."

"What did Pa do?"

"He walked a little closer, not much. Then he ran to the car and we took off the other way."

"He said it was a ghost?"

"Yeah. That man with the mule that disappeared way back."

"Do you believe it?"

"I don't know what it was. But you think it was somethin', don't you?"

"Weren't no spaceship?"

"If that thing came from anywhere, it came from under the earth, not over it. It was some evil thing, I can tell you that."

"Why didn't you ever say somethin'. Go after it." Bib cut him off sharply, not antagonistically. He was fidgeting with a cigarette, irritated.

"Weren't no matter now. You know. Hell, I don't know what it must have been." He ended oddly ambivalent. Monk ceased his question in the strangeness of his uncle's

reply. The whole matter intrigued him, excited his youth, a physical connection with the phantasm. It awakened his link to his dad—a new excitement over an old thing, something Monk had found to fit his own terms. He waited for his dad that day, waiting for a chance to talk about his newfound connection.

If 109 is a mysterious road it is also a dangerous one. Sometime Friday evening, Arl swung wildly around the turn into Simms' bottom and straddled the centerline a moment too long. He couldn't recover before a loaded log truck rammed the front of his displaced vehicle. Bib heard first. Then the mother. Monk came home late that night. It had been a strangely heavy few hours. He walked inside his home like a corpse laden with news he had heard. He had heard it at the peak of his excitement. His father was dead.

He stumbled into a murmuring house. Bib came to him as he entered.

"Your dad..."

"Yeah?"

"He's ...dead..."

"Yeah, I know." Monk answered empty, diffused of nerves and emotion.

"Who told you?" Monk had wandered empty and corpse-like for an hour since he heard the news from a friend of his father's outside a store near home.

"Jimmy told me he was hurt bad—in the hospital—I could tell he wasn't going to make it."

"He didn't make it to the hospital. Died real fast. That's what they told me.

"He didn't want to go to that jail, did he?"

"I don't know about that. ...He...he didn't want you to see him there—I know that. The truck hit him, straight on. I don't know how it happened."

Monk was quiet. "It was a ghost, wasn't it?"

"Driver said he saw lights on the other side in the fog. That's when Arl's car came at him."

"Do you think Pa saw those lights coming at him and skidded over—that ghost in the fog?"

"That ghost? You believe it was a ghost?" Bib was puzzled by the boy's connection.

"It had to be. Pa don't... he didn't believe in no UFOs."

"You think, Monk?"

"It was a ghost good as God what got him."

"You knew when you heard, didn't you?"

"I knew." Monk paused, struck with emotion. Bib paused a minute.

"Where were you this afternoon?" he asked.

"I went to the creek."

"To look for a spaceship?"

"Ain't no spaceships. It ain't fun no more." There was a gasp and a heave of breath. Monk was crying. "I want the ghosts, Bib. Want 'em now. Want 'em to be there."

"What you want ghosts for, boy? Your Pa's just..." Bib tried to repress his emotion.

"No, you don't know. I want 'em for real. I want 'em to be there. They're all I got left of Pa. All I got left." He sobbed weakly and fell to Bib's shoulder. Bib reached an arm across his back and began to quietly weep.

After the Facts

Another sighting occurred four days later, late at night. A small article made the paper when a policeman reported following a weird blue orb for half a mile across the bottom stretch. He claimed it was a strange new army plane or a spaceship. It gleamed brightly over McScutchen's Ridge and disappeared, leaving only a short news story, another testimony. These were the few facts. The rest of the article was filled by a county councilman's peevish commentary:

"When I was little they used to call those things ghosts. Now it's spaceship this, or UFO that, or secret government flying machine something or other. Seems people now have to have a scientific reason for anything to exist. Things just can't be, even if there's no way in Hell anyone'll ever know what the damn thing is or if the people seeing it weren't seeing things in the first place. Sometimes there's stuff you can't know—when you get older you just let it be.

“But I reckon after a while all you paper folks'll forget about those lights and maybe next time they come along you'll call 'em a swamp monster, or a cult, or maybe even a ghost again. That's all fine. People fly from one thing to another in life faster than those lights. Give's 'em something to hold to, I guess, keep relating to one another. Don't seem to last as long, though.

So just flit around—call 'em what you want. You're the only ones goin' anywhere.”

END