

THE
VALLEY
OF
GHOSTS

HE LOOKED FOR FORGIVENESS.....

AND FOUND ABSOLUTION!



JOHN PARHAM

The Valley of Ghosts

A Short Story by John Parham

Dedicated to Mark (Coney) Burns

I shall miss “One Duck, Two Hen”....My Friend

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Bobby looked at the clock and thought *“Its 2 AM and my shift is over, now the pain begins.”*

He worked the late shift at Premier Boat Manufacturing in Mt. Home, Arkansas. The night shift began at 5:00 PM and his job was to spray layers of gel coat to the boat hull mold. Each layer he sprayed made the hull layer for the acknowledged best sports fishing boat in the industry.

Bobby took pride in his work and was the best sprayer at Premier Boat Manufacturing. Every night for the past three years he would give it his best, but the work took a toll on him.

He had to wear a breathing aspirator to filter the noxious fiberglass resin fumes. At first, they had no detrimental effects, but over time the fumes left him light-headed at the end of his late shift. The light headiness would dissipate when he exited the manufacturing plant and got fresh air outside.

Bobby had to drive thirty miles each night through the Boston Mountains to his small rental house near Cotter. It was not a great distance but took time since the route wound through mountains the entire trip. At places, the road would rise 2,500 feet over the top of the mountains then drop 1,500 feet going down the valley on the other side with many hairpin curves.

The nightly drive would be more challenging when the weather did not cooperate. Heavy rain, fog, and occasional snowstorms could double or triple the drive time.

He dreaded the nightly drive, not because of the mountains, nor the weather. He dreaded the time it afforded him while he was cooped up in his car. Bobby would reflect on his wasted life the entire drive, night after night.

He was a highly ranked athlete with superior grades at Mt. Home High School, top colleges swooned him with offers of a free ride through college. They promised free education and fame, all he had to do was lend the school his talent for four years. Bobby decided to move away from Arkansas and attend the State University of Florida. He was a star athlete on campus and had it all. His date for the biggest game of the year was Cindy Smith, the State University Homecoming Queen. His team won by three touchdowns, and he was the king of the homecoming party. The Golden Boy had arrived.

Bobby was golden during his freshman season but in the off -season became tarnished. His wild partying lifestyle overtook him. Booze flowed and drugs followed. Then he discovered crystal meth.

His addiction became his life. The drug was given to him by drug dealers for access the Golden Boy, and access they had. Bobby could not get enough of the drug, and the drug loved him. His 3.8-grade point began a rapid decline to where his eligibility for the team came into question. That caught the coach's attention.

The head coach took notice of Bobby's extracurricular activities. He reviewed his grades and sensed something was wrong. The coach noticed his football skills eroded along with his easy-going personality and thought something is not right with Bobby.

The coach called him in for a meeting to discuss any problems he may have. Bobby reassured the coach he was okay and explained the wildly successful season had put a lot of pressure on him to follow up with next season. There was even talk of him being a leading Heisman candidate next year as a sophomore.

Bobby left the coach's office after he delivered promises to improve his grades and better manage his lifestyle. The coach arranged for a tutor to work with him to bring his grades up. He left assurances for turning his life around with the coach, exited the coach's office and shut the door.

He left the athletic facility with one thought in mind; he needed to smoke a bowl of meth. Smoke a bowl, and he would be on top of the world and all would be right. That night he had a date with Cindy, and she wanted to talk to him about something. On the way to pick her up, he pulled over and smoked another bowl.

She had something important to tell him and wanted to go to their favorite parking area near Lake Okeechobee. They parked at their special secluded spot, and she turned to face him, cried, and blurted *"I am pregnant."*

In his meth high condition, Bobby could not process what she told him. His first thought was this is not my baby, it can't be. He thought he could not be a star football quarterback and father at the same time. This could not be his future, he had too many games to play, maybe even win the Heisman Trophy.

Bobby finally replied and asked Cindy *"I know of a clinic where we can get an abortion. We have to get an abortion, right?"*

Cindy snapped her head to him and shouted *"No, I will not give the baby up! If you don't*

want to man up and do the right thing, I will raise the baby on my own. I will not have an abortion!"

Bobby fueled by meth turned his anger into a rage. He screamed back to Cindy *"How the hell do I even know it's even my baby?"*

Cindy's voice trembled, and she sobbed back *"It is your baby Bobby, there is no one else and I only love you!"*

Bobby was shaking with rage, and sure he liked her a lot, and she was one of the prettiest and most popular girls on campus. But he did not want to become a father. There was no way he could be a father and a football star at the same time he thought.

What he wanted was to smoke another bowl of meth but resisted the urge. He swore not to smoke drugs in the presence of certain people, and Cindy was one of them. Bobby looked over at Cindy, and she was sobbing uncontrollably, all he wanted now was to get her out of his car. Cindy was being selfish he thought. She could get an abortion, it was now like having your tonsils removed. No big deal!

His rage grew more he thought about her not wanting an abortion. He now hated her, she would ruin his life. Bobby decided he had to get her out of his car, so he could smoke and clear his head. He fired up the Mustang Fastback, provided as a courtesy by the local Ford dealer, and whipped the car out of the parking spot.

He entered the highway, floored the Mustang, and swerved all over the road. Rather than slowing down, he gave it more power. Bobby looked over at Cindy still crying and sobbing and floored the car. This was a high-performance Mustang Fastback and all 460 HP kicked in.

The car slid into a curve sideways as the engine revved up. All the power transferred to the rear wheels caused Bobby to over steer and lose control. The car slid through the curve and hit a large cypress tree dead on the passenger door.

Cindy never had a chance. In her distraught condition, she had not fastened her seat belt. Even if she had fastened her seat belt, it would not have helped much because of the extensive damage to the passenger side of the car. Cindy was killed on impact, she and their baby were gone.

Bobby was knocked unconscious, his seat belt saved his life. He received multiple broken ribs, broken right shoulder, and a concussion.

There is an inquiry into the physical condition of the driver and deceased passenger after the accident. The investigation resulted in Bobby being charged with Vehicular Homicide and DUI driving under the influence of drugs. The deceased female was clean of any chemical influence and five weeks pregnant. He had it all, and it went up in meth smoke. He not only lost everything, but sentenced to four years in prison. His college was over, the Heisman Trophy gone and his life over.

Bobby was fortunate to be sent to a progressive Georgia Corrections prison. Their philosophy was to empower and rehabilitate inmates through learning new skills and athletic competition. He went through crystal meth detox and survived all the wicked withdrawal symptoms to become clean of drugs.

Bobby vowed to turn his life around and became an exemplary prison inmate. He used his athletic skills to coach other inmates in intramural sports and also learned the skill to spray paint. His specialty was to work with spraying fiberglass resin.

He now accepted full responsibility for Cindy and his baby's death, it was his burden to carry the rest of his life. At his parole hearing, he was fortunate to gain his release with five years' probation. He was an exemplary inmate and helped many others to survive prison life.

Bobby was contacted by the warden who had become a friend and was told he may have an opportunity for employment in Arkansas. He had a buddy with a boat manufacturing plant that specialized in fiberglass fishing boats. They needed someone experienced with spraying fiberglass hulls for their boats on the late shift.

The warden assured his friend that Bobby was not dangerous, he only became a victim of drugs and lost in life. He was now completely rehabilitated and paid for his sins and besides, the best fiberglass sprayer he had ever seen.

Bobby was both excited and terrified about the job prospect. The warden advised him the job would require him to work in his home town of Mt. Home. He was thankful to find employment but did not know if he could live with his shame in his home town. Now he worked the night shift and arrived when most folks had left. He saw his aging parents ever now and then but mainly kept to himself. But he proved to be a valuable employee for the company and the owner was glad to have him on the payroll.

Tonight on leaving the plant at 2 AM, the air was much thicker than usual. February brought heavy rain and fog to the Boston Mountains, maybe snow or ice. The mountains peaked at 2,500 feet then frequently drop 1,500 feet into valleys. The circuitous road home would rise and dip the entire thirty miles.

Bobby leaned against his car door and tried to breathe deeply the night air to clear his mind before the mountainous drive. The air was thick with heavy rain and fog, not

what he wanted to drive in. It would take more time for the drive and it would always torment him. Cindy's ghost cried and screamed in his head all the way home, it would haunt him the rest of his life.

He resigned himself to the drive and entered his car. It too was a Mustang but an older 2003 GT with a much smaller engine. He exited the plant's parking lot and entered US 65 for the drive home to Cotter.

He had driven the mountainous road many times in the past year and a half but never under these conditions. The fog was so thick the headlights could only slice through about fifty feet of highway. The fog lessened somewhat on top of hills but would become impossibly thick going down into the colder valley.

After two hours fighting the weather, Bobby wondered what would happen if he turned his lights off. He thought maybe it would be best if he traveled the road without lights on, maybe this time he will hit a tree on the driver's side and end his sad life.

Bobby turned the headlights off, drove for a few moments, then had the urge to turn them back on. When the lights came back on they illuminated an old man wearing a long trench coat and a fedora on the side of the road. He was not traveling fast and the apparition caused him to hit the brakes, the car fishtailed for several yards before it came to a full stop.

He looked in his rear-view mirror and thought *"Who the hell is out in this weather?"*

Bobby slowly backed the car until the man's outline in the fog appeared. He pulled up to the man, lowered his window, and asked *"Do you need a ride?"*

"Yes, it would be preferable to standing in the rain," the mystery man replied.

He unlocked the door and the mystery man shook the rain from his fedora and trench coat, then sat in the passenger seat. Bobby thought *"I have not had anyone sit in my passenger seat since Cindy."*

The stranger looked at Bobby with dark sunken eyes over a hawk billed nose and said *"Thank you, friend, I was about to freeze out there, this is not a night for man nor beast to be out in. I am fortunate for you to come along, I have been on the road in this rain for hours."*

Bobby wondered why the old man was standing beside the road in the rain and fog. He asked, *"Mind if I ask why you are standing on the side of the road this time of night, and in this weather?"*

The old man looked at Bobby and replied *"Mind if I ask you why you drive in these conditions with your headlights off?"*

Bobby shook his head and tried to think. *"How did he know my headlights were off?"* he thought, *"I guess he saw them reflected in the fog then go out."* He asked, *"How did you know that?"*

The old man replied, *"Bobby, you have had one disastrous accident, don't have another."*

Bobby was confused and started to reply when he looked up and only saw a fog bank. Not a road, nor stripes, simply dead cold grayness. He concentrated on the road and felt a shiver run up his spine. The road now headed up a mountain and the fog lifted somewhat.

When the fog lifted, he felt comfortable enough to look back at the old man and asked *"How did you know my lights were off? And how do you know my name, do I know you?"*

The man looked at Bobby and replied *"Bobby, you have done horrible things. You have taken the life of another person, and worse the life of a person to be."*

"Who are you?" Bobby shouted.

"My name is Bartholomew Jackson," the old man replied.

Bobby slowed the Mustang and asked, *"What do you want?"*

"It is not what I want, but what I can give you," he replied. *"Bobby you made a terrible mistake six years ago. You have lived with it ever since and paid for it with guilt and a destroyed life. You now have attempted to live a better life but cannot get free from the shackles of guilt."*

"What the hell does that mean?" Bobby asked.

"What I want, you ask, I want to deliver absolution for you," the stranger said.

"Bobby, I know why you turned off the headlights tonight. I understand, the burden of grief has become too heavy a weight to carry," the old man said.

"I want to offer you deliverance from your pain. You did a horrible thing but have paid your dues, both to society and your soul. I offer you salvation, I am giving back your life, live it to the best of your ability, and help make other lives better," the stranger said. *"And make sure and watch the road, you have a lot of good life to give back to society."*

The old man turned to stare ahead and Bobby did likewise. He did not realize he had been looking at the old man and not the road. When he looked at the road, the fog lifted to reveal a landslide blocked it.

Bobby hit the brakes and began to slide towards the fallen boulders. The cars slow speed halted the Mustang before impacting the large boulders in the road. The car stopped, Bobby shook, then turned to ask the old man if he was okay. He looked at the passenger seat and the old man was gone.

He was confused, walked around the car to find the old man, and then got back in without success. Bobby wondered *"Was this all a hallucination?"*

"If it wasn't, how did the stranger know so much about me and that I would even be out on this road on such a lousy night at 2 AM? And how did he know of the rock slide? Did this just happen?" he thought.

Bobby turned on the cars' overhead light to search for the stranger. He saw nothing but a damp passenger seat. Something caught his eye in the seat's crease. He reached over and extracted the object which was a card.

He was not sure how the card became stuck in the seat, lifted the card closer to the overhead light and read it. Bobby was taken aback by what was printed on it.

Printed on the card was: *Bartholomew Jackson -Angel of Life-Savior of Souls.*

The End

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