

The Gurdon Curse

By Eric Wilder

When I was young, I lived in the country just outside of Gurdon, Arkansas. Our house sat alone, back in the woods, about a mile off the highway. Daddy was a logger. Mama took care of the house and all six of us kids. Hattie was a black woman who helped Mama with everything. She had her own house and family, but would often stay after work and visit with us on the front porch.

The porch wrapped around the house and Daddy had screened it to keep out mosquitoes. We were all sitting outside that night, enjoying the dampness a late autumn rain had brought, along with a little chill that made it comfortable to cuddle up in one of Grandma's old Afghans.

Bobby Jack was almost grown and hardly ever around. He had a date that night with the new girl down the road and soon slipped out the screen door without saying bye. Brother David was at a basketball game. Mama frowned when my Daddy dropped the butt of his cigarette on the porch, smashing the glowing stub with the toe of his boot.

Waving at us over his shoulder, he said, "See you all tomorrow. Four o'clock comes early."

Mama shook her head, grabbed Nita and Carl Wayne and followed Daddy through the front door. We had no light on the porch but the glow of an almost full moon cast Hattie and Sharon Ann in a warm glow. She was eight; I was nine.

"Guess it's time for me to go home, too."

"Please, Hattie, tell us a story before you go," I begged.

"I'm tired and you two girls have heard every story I know at least a dozen times."

Hattie's smile disappeared when Sharon Ann said, "You never told us about the Gurdon Lights."

"Maybe you know as much as I do. What have you heard about the Lights?"

Sharon Ann gave me a frowning glance, daring me with her eyes to blurt something out and take the spotlight away from her.

“We heard it was the ghost of a railroad man that had fallen off a train and it cut off his head. They say the lights are from the lantern he carries up and down the tracks, looking for his lost head.”

As Hattie grinned, a big truck out on the highway blew its horn, and the dying moan mingled with the chill breeze, whipping the limbs of the big pines in our front yard.

“The Gurdon Lights are real, but the true story ain’t nothing like anything you ever heard. I’ll tell it to you when you both get a little older.”

“No way,” I said, grabbing her arm. “We’re both old enough so tell us now.”

Sharon Ann grabbed her other arm. “Is it spooky?”

Hattie let us direct her to Mama’s rocker. “Spooky? It’s downright scary and the story is kinda long. I need a big ol glass of ice tea to wet my whistle if I gonna to tell it.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. Rushing into the house, I poured Hattie a large glass of tea from the pitcher in the ice box. Before leaving the kitchen, I doctored the brew with Daddy’s bottle of Weller’s he kept hidden in the pantry, behind the Mason jars.

I didn’t bother stirring the mixture before handing it to Hattie and after her first sip I knew it didn’t matter. Sharon Ann and I sat on the porch in front of her, huddling together in the warmth of the Afghan.

“This story might give you a few nightmares. Your Mama wouldn’t like that.”

“We’re not scared,” I said.

I always thought of Hattie as a big woman, maybe because of her husky voice. She wasn’t big at all. I realized as much years later when returning to Gurdon for a visit. She did have square shoulders, big arms for her size and slightly bowed legs that we girls used to tease her about, and her skin was as dark as if she had spent her whole life in the sun.

Hattie took another slug of the laced tea and I knew she wasn’t going anyplace until she had finished every drop. After settling into Mama’s comfortable rocker, she began her story, her words so low that Sharon Ann and I had to lean forward to hear them over the gusting wind.

“Marilyn, you and Sharon Ann are such a pretty little white girls. I was not much older than you are now when I first saw the Gurdon Lights. It was about this time of year, maybe just a tad later. Sister Selma and me was sitting outside the house

in the swing. It was way past dark and Mama had called for us to come inside at least twice.”

Hattie leaned her head back and closed her eyes before slowly continuing.

“Our daddy was the local preacher man. Everybody knew him. We lived in a nicer house than most black folks, not far from the railroad tracks. Selma and me was waiting for the ten o’clock to thunder past. It wasn’t quite ten when I saw something else instead.”

“Selma, you see that?” I said, pointing down the tracks.

“It was a light moving toward us. We couldn’t tell much else because the night was kinda misty from one of them low-hanging fogs. Sorta like tonight.”

“Where? I don’t see nothing.” she said.

“I didn’t have time to answer because here come the ten o’clock, right on time. The train blew its whistle and rattled right on past our house. When it finally disappeared into the darkness the flickering light I had first seen was gone.

“I was the oldest girl in the family, my room on the first floor, in back of the house. That night I heard something tapping on my window. The sound woke me but I was still half asleep. It was dark and my eyes blurry when I looked at the window where the noise was coming from.

“Someone or something was tapping on the window and the sound echoed though my room. Tap, tap, tap, it went. Tap, tap, tap. It was dark outside but I saw the shadow of something in the window.”

“What was it?” Sharon Ann demanded.

Hattie sat her tea on the porch floor, closed her eyes and hugged her arms together at her bosom.

I took the empty glass from the floor and scurried back inside to replenish it before she thought better about finishing her story. Sharon Ann had Hattie’s arm, begging her not to leave when I returned from the kitchen.

“What did you see in the window?”

Hattie took a deep breath and a slow sip before answering. “I didn’t hardly believe what I saw myself, but it was a white ghostly head, with long white hair.”

“You mean a ghost?” Sharon Ann asked, sucking in her breath and holding it for Hattie’s answer

“It was a ghost all right, staring at me through the window with eyes that didn’t have a drop of color. Scared the scream right outa my throat. I swear to you nothing come out. I just pulled the covers over my head and shook.”

The wind whipped up, causing a real commotion with Mama’s chimes hung on some of the nearest low-hanging limbs.

“Then what happened?” I asked, reaching for Sharon Ann’s hand, squeezing it fiercely in my own.

Hattie steeled herself with a healthy sip from the tea glass and finally began again.

“I would probably still be under the covers, but Selma couldn’t sleep and had walked down to my room. When she shook the bedspread I almost had a stroke. I didn’t answer her so she yanked the covers away from my head.”

“What are you doing under there?” she demanded of me.

“I glanced at the window, and then back at Selma. Whatever I had seen in that window was gone. Selma laughed at me when I told her, and before long I’d convinced myself it was just a dream. Next morning my brother found something that brought back my fear.

“Somebody’s gonna get in trouble when Mama find out who broke off her favorite rose bush,” he said.

“Selma and I followed him outside to Mama’s roses growing right outside my bedroom window. Petals strewed the ground beside the broken bush and it looked like someone had fallen on it, mashing it nearly flat.”

“A ghost wouldn’t have fallen,” Selma said. “Someone climbed up on the big rock and was looking into your bedroom.”

“I wasn’t convinced that I hadn’t seen a ghost but the thought of a peeping Tom in the neighborhood did little to soothe my nerves.

“That night, the light was back, only this time Selma saw it too. We weren’t the only ones. For the next few months, people all over town began seeing it, usually late at night and almost always close to the railroad tracks.”

Hattie took another sip, and chilly as it was, wiped beads of perspiration from her forehead. The wind outside had slowed and it got all quiet, except for a dog barking in the distance. Fog hung close to the ground, in the hollows and between the trees. The screech of Mama’s cat outside the house startled Hattie. A grin spread over her big face when she saw us staring at her so intently.

“I see you girls aren’t going to let me go home until I finish the story.”

“The expressions on our faces were the only answer she needed, plus, we were a captive audience, and she knew it.

Hattie grinned again, took another sip and continued. “My Daddy, like I said, was the preacher man and I knew I couldn’t tell him I’d seen a ghost or he’d of made me listen to one of his sermons after the other. I told my Grandma instead. I could always talk straight to her and she always give me good advice.

“Grandma was a very old woman, with skin as black as chimney soot and hair white as ash.

“You believe in ghosts, Grandma?”

“Course I do. I was your age when I saw my first ghosts. I was pickin’ cotton with my Mama and Daddy. It was hot and we was tired. I cried, grabbed my Mama’s dress and begged her to let me quit.”

“Chile,” she said, “We can’t go till we finish pickin’ this cotton, but we got some help and will soon be done.”

“She pointed behind me. There was folks I had not noticed and they was helpin’ us pick the cotton. They was our dead ancestors, looking as real as you and me, and doing just as much work, except you could see right through them.”

Hattie drew a deep breath. “Granny said we all have spirits that guide and protect us.”

“Don’t ever be afraid, little Hattie,” she said to me. “Always do the brave thing and God will protect you.”

“I got my chance to test her words not long after that. I was asleep in my room when the same tap, tap, tap on my window woke me, just like before. My eyes were wide as saucers when I peeked out from under the covers and looked at the window.”

Hattie covered her eyes and shuddered. “Don’t stop,” I said. “Tell us what happened.”

“This time I got a good look at the ghost. He was huge and white as a sheet in the light of a full moon. His eyes had no color and he was tapping on my window with long fingernails that curled up like fishhooks.

“I covered my head with the bed covers and stayed that way, thinking he would bust through the window any minute. It never happened and sometime during the night I fell asleep from exhaustion, but my heart was still pounding when I woke up next morning.

“I ran outside in my nightgown and I found something under my window.”

“Tell us,” Sharon Ann said, squeezing my hand to where the pink of the fingers gave way to white.

“Was an envelope and there was something in it - a letter.

“I waited until I was in class before I opened and read it. It didn’t say much cept; Help me – Dorothea James, the old house that sits alone down the railroad track. Please come.

“I wanted to tell my Daddy, or Granny, or maybe even Selma but something in the message made me keep it to myself. I was working on a project for the English teacher and it was after five before I left school. Instead of going straight home, I headed up the railroad tracks, toward the old shack in the woods.

“Everyone in Gurdon knew about the shack, near the railroad track. It had been ramshackle long as I could remember, and we called it the haunted house. We had all heard tales about hobos and tramps living there and none of us chilluns had ever so much as stuck our heads inside that old building.

“It was dark when I reached it and I was already kicking myself for being so far from home, but as I stood on the tracks and stared down at the house I saw the glow of a light coming from inside. I almost turned and ran away down the track, but Granny’s words stopped me. I started down the hill instead.

“The old front porch creaked like an old man’s bones and I wished I had a lantern to keep from stepping in a rotten spot and falling through. Somehow I made it to the ruined screen door hanging on one loose hinge. The old wooden door was only half shut.

“I pushed through into the house. The inside smelled like mold. You could feel the dampness on your skin. The wood was all rotted. I followed the hallway to the dim light that led to a bedroom where someone was lying in bed.

“It was a woman, her hair long and unkempt as wet hay. She was black but her skin was ashen as Granny’s hair. The sight of me set her into a coughing fit, her eyes bulging when she tried to catch her breath.

“‘Oh Chile, thank God you come,’” she said, holding out her hand and speaking in a wheezing voice.

“She wasn’t old but her body was so ruined by disease that I barely understood her. Frail as she was, her grip was strong when she grabbed my hand and touched it to her cheek.”

“I’m Dorothea and I got a problem,” she said. “I’m gonna die soon and I need to share a special secret with someone I can trust.”

“What kind of secret?”

“It’s about Jerome. Jerome my boy.”

“She didn’t have to tell me someone else had entered the room because the little hairs on back of my neck bristled up and I felt a cold chill race down my back. I was afraid to turn around but more afraid not to. When I turned and seen who it was I almost fainted.

“Standing right there was the Ghost of Gurdon. My legs got weak and rubbery. I almost pissed my panties and would have, but my heart was beating so fast I had to grasp my chest to keep it from busting out of my body. The woman still had hold of my hand and yanked it.”

“It’s okay, Chile. Jerome would never hurt a soul.”

“I was once in a doughnut shop when the Grambling basketball team come in. I’ve never in my life seen such tall, athletic young men. Jerome was just as tall and big, and he had absolutely no color in his whole body, not his hair, his eyes or his skin. He was white as a ghost.

“Dorothea yanked me toward her, demanding I pay attention to her and not her giant, colorless son. She eased me close enough to her face that I could smell her acrid breath and clearly see the tears pouring down her ruined face.”

“What’s your name, girl?” she asked. When I told her she said, “Jerome’s an albino and having an albino baby in these parts is a curse. It’s called mzungu, the product of a black woman and a white man. Worse, most believe an albino is a living ghost. When families have such a curse, they usually take care of it but I just couldn’t do that to my baby.’

“I brought him here and raised him all by myself. We had a little truck patch out back, a cow and a few chickens. Jerome never had no one but me, and when I took the sickness, I got to where I could not feed us no more. Jerome’s been walking down the railroad track at night with his lantern, stealing food and things we need. He’s deaf and can’t speak and I’ve been so scared somebody was gonna kill him, or worse, hack off his arms and legs and leave him to die.”

“There’s no monster mean enough to do that,” I said.

“The woman pulled me closer, right up to her face so that I was staring directly into her brown eyes and I couldn’t help but see, and feel, her desperation.”

“You’re just a baby. You don’t know yet what hatred some people have in their hearts. Jerome thought you were older and he had a good feeling about you, but —“

“Just tell me what to do?” I said, squeezing her hand. “I’ll help if I can.”

“I can’t die and leave Jerome like this. He’ll never make it without someone to care of him.”

“Daddy’s a preacher. He is a good man and he will help you and Jerome, I promise.

“Dorothea loosened her grip on my hand and looked me square in the eyes. She didn’t say another word. She just smiled, nodded and laid her head back against the pillow.

“Dorothea was right. Jerome wouldn’t have hurt a soul. He held my hand as we walked the tracks back to my house. I give him a kiss on the cheek before sneaking in the house, without anyone knowing I had been out. Next morning I told my Daddy.”

Thinking about my own dad, I asked, “Was he okay with it?”

Hattie nodded. “He let me take him to the old house on the railroad track. He prayed for Dorothea and promised her that he would care for Jerome and protect him from harm.

“And that’s what he did. When Dorothea died, Daddy held a service for her and buried her body behind the Baptist church. Jerome was there, dressed in a black coat, a big hat with a veil so people couldn’t see his face. Daddy knew a good couple in Chicago and he called and told them about Jerome. They adopted and finished raising him.”

The story captivated Sharon Ann and me. “I can’t believe Jerome wouldn’t have been welcome here in Gurdon.”

Clouds had finally parted and a full moon lighted the path outside the screened porch. Hattie finished the last sip of her tea and started out the door, turning when she had one last thought.

“You pretty little white girls just remember one thing. Old beliefs, black or white, die hard. Some people would rather deal with a ghost than someone that’s different. Those people will keep looking for a ghost because their minds can’t admit the truth.”

END