

The Lake Lady

My grandfather used to tell me stories when I was young. One of his stories is the origin of the Lake Lady ghost that so many of the tourists and drunks claim to have seen. This was one of the few I had to wait 'til I was sixteen before I could hear it. He told it something like this:

Back in 1963 when I bought this house, I was a plant worker trying hard to make ends meet while at the same time planning for my eventual retirement. Your Granny and I've always loved the view from these cliffs and when the chance came along to actually move here we jumped at it. The only thing I worried about was your father, your uncle James, and your aunt Lindy. They were always playin' on the cliffs and swimmin' when they weren't sup'ose' t' be. Worried me and your grandmother somethin' fierce.

Well one day when mowin' the lawn seemed more trouble than it was worth, I took my trusty air mattress and went for a little swim of my own. I was floatin' under those overhangs down a few hundred yards from the house. You know the ones. In the shade and outta sight of your Granny. Just me and a six pack of Heineken. What more could a man ask for? I guess I'd been floatin' along for 'bout an hour when I floated on under the overhang where the Johnson's live now. 'Course there weren't no house there back then.

So anyway, there I am just floatin' along as happy as a clam when I notice this smell. Bad

one. It is possible that I mighta been a little tipsy by then. I'd kinda skipped lunch in favor of getting out and getting hidden; you know how your Granny is about idle hands and all that. Well, as I'm lookin' around for the source of the smell, I notice somethin' floatin' at the back of the overhang, back where it's pretty dark. It looked like a mess o' black hair and I thought it mighta been Widow MacAntyre's cat, Moonstroke. Silly thing was always huntin' along the cliffs.

So, I paddle back there and not wanting to touch it, I give it a little push with one of my empty bottles. It just sorta swishes back and forth but doesn't roll over. The smell sure's hell weren't no better up close either. But the widow 'uz a nice lady and she had a right to know if her cat was dead. Reluctantly, I reached out and gently turned it over. Lo and behold its not a cat it's a girl. No more 'n sixteen by my guess. Drowned it looked like. Her face had as little expression as I'm sure mine had shocked surprise on it. I guess I could add the part where I was so startled I fell off the raft or the part where I paddled out from under the overhang just as fast as I could once I got back on my raft, but you aren't interested 'n hearin' about that so I won't mention it....

No, you aren't interested and I'm not mentionin' it. That's final.

So anyway, when I got back t' the house your Granny just about skinned me alive. It seems she really had her heart set on having that lawn mowed. She changed her tune I'll reckon when I ignored her tongue lashing and got right on the phone and called the sheriff's office.

Well pretty soon there's divers all over the place. Not a few boats around too. Not much press, though. The town fathers have always frowned on bad publicity concerning lake accidents. 'Fraid it might run off some of the tourists.

It was nigh unto dark when the last of them left and that only with the promise of dinner later that week. Henry Bowers was a deputy back then and already a good friend. He was still a single

man back in those days and frequently benefitted from one of your Granny's famous meals. He promised to let me know what they found out.

That night I had a visitation. I guess you'll think it was a dream but dreams just don't get this vivid. Not in my experience. Anyways, I was awakened from a sound sleep, sometime around midnight I guess. I don't know what it was that woke me up but when I did, she was there.

Moonlight coming in from the drapes was the only thing to see by, but I could tell easily enough that she wasn't wearin' a stitch of clothes. She was kinda short and she had long, slicked down black hair. I took a quick look at your Granny then to see her reaction to this but she was still sound asleep. Now, I could tell you about how I just sat there shocked, or how my shock deepened when I finally realized I could see the vase and the dresser right through her, but you don't want to hear about that. I guess it was some time after that I finally realized just who and what I was seein'.

I think I finally made some sorta croaking noise. Evidently, this was the signal she'd been waiting for. She took a step closer right up to the end of the bed. I probably cringed back but I really couldn't honestly tell you if I did or not.

"You have nothing to fear from me," she said. "I won't harm you. Quite the contrary perhaps. I may help you and yours forever more."

Well this didn't exactly put me at ease but I did relax a little. I looked over at your grandmother again but she was still sound asleep.

"Don't worry. Your wife won't hear us."

"Umm, right," I managed after a moment.

"My name is...was... Faye Gatton. Two nights ago I was drowned by my boyfriend. I was leaving him and nothing that is his ever leaves except when he is through with it. I guess he figured he could make a few thou' more off me.

"You see, Jack, that's my ex-boyfriend, isn't a nice man. When I was fourteen, he picked me up and introduced me to womanhood so to speak. We moved to this state on the back of his Harley with only a backpack, a bedroll, and fifty dollars. Jack was quitting his gang and didn't want any of his biker buddies to slit his throat.

"So we arrived here. We stayed out near the Woody Hollow trailer park. I'm sure you know it's reputation. It would probably be shutdown in an instant if the sheriff wasn't likely to find one of the town fathers out there smoking dope or screwing some underage sweet thing.

"That's what I was I suppose, an underage sweet thing. Jack had me strung out on drugs in what seems like a really short time. He convinced me that if I'd just do one friend of his that he never ask me again. He could use the money to go get a job and we could move into an apartment. After I refused to do the tenth such guy, he threatened to cut me off from the drugs permanently and did cut me off for almost a week. I was docile for a long time after that. Did whatever he told me and that was quite a lot.

"Eventually we did move into an apartment. I was hopeful things would get better but it didn't last long. It seemed that Jack was just interested in attracting a higher class of john. A few months after that, Jack and a couple of his buddies came up with the idea of making a movie. Yeah, I see you understand. It was horrible.

"So one day, in fact I believe it was this last Thursday, I stopped to take a good, long look at my life. I finally saw what'd happened; what I'd done to myself and what he'd done to me. 'Jack,'

I sez, 'I'm leaving.' His reply was pretty typical for him. 'Like hell.' 'No, I'm serious,' I sez. So he grabs me by the hair and drives me out to the lake.

"You see all this?" he sez, his gesture encompassing all the water visible from here.

"I was in a bad mood and scared too. I didn't know where my next fix was coming from and I didn't know if Jack was going to do something crazy. After a minute, when Jack was starting to get angry with my silence, I nodded. It was all I trusted myself to do.

"This is going to be your home if you ever say anything about leaving me again. Under the surface. At the bottom. You understand? You're mine. For ever and ever 'til death do you part.'

"He was serious. My blood went cold. I knew there was something wrong with him. Had known deep inside since the day I met him. Realizing just how wrong and how deep it ran shocked me deeply.

"Evidently, I zoned-out for a while. It happened sometimes due to the drugs. The next thing I know he's taking off my bra and saying something about a moonlight swim and forgetting all about this leaving crap. 'Nice night for a swim,' he tol' me. It suddenly occurred to me that he'd left the keys in the ignition of the truck he'd used to drive us here. So, thankful for the dark, I nod my head and take off my pants. When he had his halfway off, I snatched up my clothes and ran for the truck.

"I threw the clothes in and was in the driver's seat before he was halfway back to the truck. Unfortunately, Jack's pretty athletic and in my rush to get out of there I flooded the engine. He pulled me out of the truck through the open window by my hair. I tripped once and he tried to help me back up by my panties. He thought it was really funny when they ripped off instead. Bastard.

"With both my arms held up behind my back I couldn't even scratch him. He dodged my furious efforts to kick him and into the water we went. The way he was holding me forced my head

down. It didn't take long for us to get to deep enough water that my face was in the water. He held me there a long while.

"After what seemed an eternity, he pulled me up.

"Is this what you want? You stupid bitch, did you think I was joking? Well here's your last chance, baby. What'll it be?"

"I wasn't thinking too well by then. Panic accompanied by fear mixed with mild withdrawals makes one bad combination. I think I cussed him. I know I struggled.

"Have it your way, sweetheart.' He forced me under again. This time he didn't let up until it was too late.

"And that's my story mister. You can probably guess why I'm back. Jack ruined my life and then ended it before I could get it straightened out again. I want to make sure he doesn't do it to someone else. And of course there's revenge. Oh, yes. He killed me and I want to do the same for him.

"Here's what I want from you and what I'll do for you in return. I want Jack. All you have to do is get him into the water. That's all. You just get him into the water. In return, I'll guarantee the safety of your family in the water. I'm new to this death thing but I do know that after I've taken my vengeance I can leave. I also know that I can come back every so often to fulfill promises.

"So, what'cha say? You get peace of mind and I get my revenge. No blood on your hands and you'll know that justice is served and no one else will suffer my fate at Jack's hands. I see you're still a bit too trashed upstairs to make a decision now. I'll have to judge by your actions. Goodbye."

Just like that she was gone. Vociferous little thing.

After a few minutes, I finally managed to get up. The carpet was wet at the foot of the bed.

I went to the bathroom and once I quit shaking got back in bed. I didn't sleep any the rest of that night.

The next day the girl drowning was in the papers but you had to turn to the back of page seven, halfway down the page to find it.

Henry Bowers dropped by for dinner that evening. I 'uz real anxious to discuss what the police and coroner had found out but it had to wait 'til after dinner. Your granny didn't no more tolerate that sorta talk at the table then than she does now.

So, after dinner the two of us took a coupla cold ones out to the back porch and sat down. It was still a couple of minutes before Henry finally got around to sayin' anything. Henry liked to be dramatic, ya know. His dyin' like that sure was a tragedy, but I'm getting off track again.

"Whole thing's strange," Henry finally began. "California girl been missin' for two years turns up dead in our lake. Traces of drugs in her system. You know how Harald Berman and the rest of the city council are. According to them there is no drug problem in this county, much less this town. Therefore, she musta been a tourist. Yeah, right. A tourist with no car, no clothes, no nothin'.

"This case is gonna get ruled 'accidental death'. I suppose that's the best way. The coroner says there weren't enough drugs in her system for that to be the cause. Not enough bruises or cuts or nothin' to make it look like anythin' other than an accident. I think the official story's gonna be that she swam out too far and couldn't make it back to shore. She was in the water about two days.

Damn shame."

I just nodded. Jack would have gotten rid of her clothes and other things by now. No evidence to link them together. Sheriff was too damn lazy to start an investigation on an easily closed case anyway. What to do? What to do?

I went to work the next day with that question still on my mind. I've never been a great fan of doin' nothin'. Sheep do nothin' - look what it gets them. The slaughterhouse. I ain't no sheep.

Justice. The word rang in my mind. Boy that girl sure knew which of my buttons to push. Peace of mind. Living near water with three children.... Yes, peace of mind might be nice as well.

Justice. Back then the court system still hadn't been overhauled. Prisons were little more than a criminal clearing house. Still pisses me off just to think about it. I've always had a hangup with that sorta thing ever since my Uncle Albert was run down by that drunk and the drunk got off scot-free. At one time I thought about bein' a lawyer but I have too much of a conscience for that.

If I could help add just a little justice to the world.... People have a constitutional right not to endure cruel and unusual punishment. And Jack loose in the world violated that right. I had to think of something. I did too.

The next evening when I pulled the boat up to the old, abandoned Barnes family dock, Jack was there lookin' rough, tough, and buff. He had my note clutched in his hand. He didn't look any

too happy.

"You the guy who sent me this note? If this is a joke, I don't think it's funny."

Everything she'd said about him and more. A real winner.

"Yeah, I'm the guy. C'mon aboard and I'll tell you about it." My adrenaline was really pumpin' but my voice didn't shake.

He just stood there looking at me and suddenly gave a sharp nod and jumped into the boat. It may have been just my imagination but for a second I thought I saw a dead, white arm reach out of the water and grab for his leg. He landed in the boat so I guess the hand missed or maybe it had just been my imagination. Anyway, Jack got up from where he'd fallen down and gave me a dark look. Bloody landlubber. I stepped in after him.

"There's beer there in the cooler." I told him as I revved the engine up and put 'er in gear. We headed out across the lake. Jack sat down on the rear deck and began drinking my beer. You have no idea how much seein' him doing that angered me. I'm still not sure why. Sometime later I sold that boat for the one I have today. It's a lot bigger and.... Oops. Distracted again.

So anyway, I headed us down one of the many branches of the lake that goes off into nowhere and idled the engine down. For a second looking back over the lake I thought I saw someone's head and shoulders sticking out of the water in the center of the lake but it was probably just a fish jumping.

"So," he began. "Just what is it you know about this Faye Whoever that could get me in trouble? I only came here out of curiosity and because you offered a six pack. Not because I have anything to hide or something." I tell you, a great actor he was not.

"I know that you picked her up from California when she was only fourteen years old. I know

that you pimped her out and forced her to make porno movies. I know that you're a scum sucking dope pusher and a murderer on top of that. Aside from that, what else is there to know?" Okay, he got me mad. Or maybe I got me mad. I guess I could have handled the matter with a little more grace but I didn't.

He stood up and pulled a knife.

"Well, I guess you do know too much mister. You probably couldn't prove anything, but I got people who want some of my hide and I don't need you stirring things up so they can find me. Too bad there's no way to make you look like an accident too; unless of course you're never found." He threw his bottle overboard and started toward me with the knife held low.

Now I've taken a self defense class or two and I know how to disarm a guy with a knife. I also know that in all likelihood I'd end up with at least one bad cut doing it. So, I did the only thing I could think of... I took a step and jumped onto the side of the boat.

Jack, as I noted earlier, was something of a landlubber. He staggered one way and then the other. I crouched down and jumped on him. We hit the side of the boat together and I managed to roll him so that his back was on the rail, him partway over the side. For my part I had a hand under his chin and was trying my damndest to push him overboard into the water. Or break his neck, whichever came first. At the time I don't remember really caring which happened so long as one of them did happen. While we're wrestlin' around, my other hand was on his knife hand busily keeping him from gutting me like a fish. His off hand was conveniently trapped under my ribs.

"We have pollution laws in this state, buster," I told him cleverly. "First pretty young girls, now beer bottles. Who knows what it might be next time." Actually, I had a pretty good idea and I really wanted to keep myself from polluting the lake.

"Don't worry about it. I'm going to cut you into little pieces and feed 'em to the fish. How's that, see? No pollution." Jack wasn't nearly so funny as I was. And I discovered to my immense dismay that Jack was stronger than me. At this rate I was going to end up with the knife in me. I thought about your granny and the kids. Hmm, maybe I should've thought about them earlier.

Suddenly, Jack was pulled almost out from under me. Surprised, I looked up. Though the water was thirty foot deep here, Faye stood there halfway out of the water. She had one hand jerking Jack's head back by the hair against the side of the boat. With her other hand she casually plucked the knife out of his hand.

"Hi Jack. Nice night for a swim huh?"

Jack made an odd sound. Half whimper, half pure surprise. Never heard it's like before and I ain't heard it since.

I stood there staring. Both at her and the tableau in general. What a waste.

She jerked Jack first into and then under the water. When the splash had subsided a bit she told me, "Well, I guess you've kept your end of the bargain. Don't worry I'll keep mine. Your family will be safe in this lake so long as they live in that house."

She allowed Jack up for one last gasp of air.

Laughing, she said, "Paybacks are hell, aren't they Jack?" And with that they both disappeared under the water. I've never seen either since but I never worried about the kids as much after that. All things bein' equal, I'd say it was a good night."

Gramps had a ton of stories. Some of them were true and others weren't so true. This one has always been one of my personal favorites.

You see, back when I was younger and dumber (my first year of party col...er, junior college), I used to throw parties at the lake house when Mom and Dad were out for the weekend. One of those nights when the music was vibrating the windows and most of the people could barely stand, I went walking along the cliffs trying to decide what I was going to do about my girl dancing with Harris Monroe. Harris was my buddy and all but they'd been dancing pretty close. And they were both pretty toasted.

That was when the rock I stepped on jumped out from under me and I fell down the cliff. It was thirty foot almost straight down into the water. I still managed to bounce a couple of times before actually going off the cliff, bruising my arms, right leg, and head pretty badly. I was concious going into the water. While sinking and trying pitifully to hold my breath and swim back up, I thought to myself 'Damn boy. This is a stupid way to die.' My lungs were on fire, my vision was getting spotty, and my ears hurt like hell (the lake's very deep along the cliffs). As I was passing out, I thought I saw a girl in a white gown shaking her head and walking, yes walking, towards me.

When I woke up, I was on the Harrison's boat ramp some half-mile down from the house. My head was facing the lake and there was a stream of water I'd already coughed out of my lungs running towards it. There were also what appeared to be a small set of footprints next to a trail of water that looked like it had been made by someone dragging someone else coming out of the water. A single set of prints returned to the water.

Oh, yes. This is one story I believe.

Thanks Gramps, you done good. And thank you, Lady.