

A HISTORY OF THE GHOSTS OF JUDY, TENNESSEE

By Michael Poore

Vonda Stewart stands between railroad tracks, and says a secret word three times.

Her fourteen-year-old body quivers in the November chill. She stares down the tracks, east into twilight, waiting. When nothing happens, she stomps off into the woods to smoke a half-smoked cigarette snatched from her mother's ashtray.

After a while, she is joined by her friends, Ashley and Jill. Ashley and Jill have taken the long way around, crossing the tracks behind the Starvin' Marvin because they're afraid to go near the underpass. Vonda is the only kid in Judy, Tennessee, who crosses there, because the underpass is where Odie Clark got killed. If you cross there and say the secret word three times, you can see him, a headless mist in the dark.

Ashley and Jill bring hot dogs from the Starvin' Marvin. The three of them share the half-smoked cigarette before they eat. In their bellies, supper is transformed.

The hot dogs, Ashley says, will give them strength.

The onion rings, says Jill, will become magical powers.

Vonda says the ketchup, red like a heart, will be the perfection of love.

When Vonda Stewart thinks about Odie Clark's ghost, she gets the shivers a little, but not as much as when she thinks of Odie alive.

In fifth grade, Vonda remembers, Odie Clark was this smelly kid with a huge Band-Aid over one eye. The Band-Aid was meant to force the other eye to work harder, grow stronger. If you

walked up on Odie's left, or if a kickball bounced up on that side, Odie would cock his head around like a chicken, so that he seemed always to stagger sideways through the halls of Hoke Jackson Elementary School.

His stock was further lowered by a tendency to fall asleep. He'd fall asleep in the middle of Spelling, in the middle of kickball, in the middle of peering around to see if anyone was sneaking up on him.

Sometimes, back in fifth grade, Vonda and Ashley and Jill used to have a great time going to the library to look up all the things that were wrong with Odie Clark, and then teasing him with fancy words.

"Narcolepsy!" they'd shout, running up on his left side, at recess. "Narcolepsy Boy!"

And Odie's head would peck around like a chicken, and his wandering eye would do space-loops in its socket.

Odie Clark's eyes are one reason Ashley and Jill won't cross the railroad tracks by the underpass. They could stand to see a ghost, they say, but a ghost with a lazy eye was more chilling, somehow. If the ghost of Odie Clark walked up to you and pulled away the giant Band-Aid over his good eye, what would you see?

"Something deeper than deep," whisper Ashley and Jill, and they go around the long way, drawing crosses in the air.

Judy, Tennessee has other ghosts, too.

Zion Calder, who according to Ashley is the ghost who haunts Judy's drinking water, is the oldest.

Back in the Depression, says Ashley, Calder was the most stubborn man who ever lived. He lost an eye in a sawmill accident, but wouldn't admit it. He stuffed the socket with a cotton ball and went around for the rest of his life that way, one eye normal, the other a flash of bad lightning. When Renfro County exercised its right to build a road across his property, Calder simply refused to believe in the road. For years, if you drove out that way, you slowed to a crawl because you might find Calder drinking coffee in the middle of the road that wasn't there.

"It wasn't the sawmill or the road that made Calder a ghost, though," says Ashley. "It was water. When they built the Little Turkeyfoot Dam, he didn't believe in that, either."

Around Thanksgiving of that fifth grade year, Odie Clark did something which launched him from outcast to cult status in the space of a single after-noon.

Right in the middle of arithmetic class, he screamed a terrible and forbidden word at the top of his lungs.

During the pandemonium that followed, he fell fast asleep.

For a week, Odie's desk was empty.

"Tourette's," announced Jill, conferring with Vonda and Ashley at the library. "He can't help it."

When Odie returned, he still cocked his head around like a chicken. He still smelled. Now, however, he had become the center of a universe of expectation. His classmates developed chicken habits of their own, ears focused in Odie's direction, ready for his next eruption, the next chapter in his legend.

It didn't happen often. When he *did* go off, though, the effect was like a Christmas, Halloween, Birthday and Valentine's Day party rolled into one bright, sixty-second core.

An obscenity would explode from Odie's lips, a war-cry interrupting filmstrips and reading circles, rising in wild glory above the roar of the cafeteria.

The response was always the same. The principal would fetch Odie and walk with him to the farthest reaches of the playground, and stand with him there until he was sure the fit had passed.

After the immediate chorus of joy and the ecstasy of shock, Odie's classmates would watch the playground from the corner of chicken-cocked eyes, observing the figures of Odie and the principal across the intervening distance, through six hundred feet of the mist which seemed at all times to haunt the valleys and low places of Judy, so that the two of them, the old man and the boy with the lazy eye seemed to vanish and reappear, or to hover halfway in-between, like shadows turned inside-out.

According to Ashley, Zion Calder was so stubborn he had to die twice before he could become a ghost.

The first time he died was because he had a huge blind spot due to his cotton eye. He wandered into the path of a moving hoist and got knocked into the chipper, a monster of a machine which took in whole trees at one end and spat out chips at the other.

Somehow, Zion Calder went through the chipper and came out the other end without a scratch. No one could believe it, least of all Zion Calder.

"Well," he sighed, "that's it. I'm dead," and marched himself off to the graveyard. He built a little shack out there, and nothing anyone said could convince him to come on home.

Not that anyone said much. There was something patently miraculous about the way the old man had gotten through the chipper in one piece, and a lot of people tended to treat Zion Calder as a sort of accidental holy man after that. They scribbled their most urgent prayers on scraps of paper,

then crept out to the cemetery at night to tack them to the door of his shack. Whether Calder read the prayers was unknown, and seemingly immaterial. The door of his shack fluttered with a thousand paper wings.

In 1939, the Tennessee Valley Authority decided to harness the Little Turkeyfoot River with a dam. Much of Judy, Tennessee would be lost underwater, but what remained on higher ground would have electricity.

Zion Calder's graveyard was right in the middle of the proposed reservoir. Calder, naturally, declared there "weren't no such thing as a TVA," and locked his prayer-bedecked door like a fortress.

The dam got built anyway. The waters of the Little Turkeyfoot began to swell and rise, and men from the county engineer's office came to move the cemetery. Calder advised them to go ahead and move whatever they wanted as long as they left his shack alone. This advice was rendered over the barrel of his squirrel rifle, punctuated by the lightning of his cotton eyeball.

They didn't bother him again.

All summer long, graves were opened and coffins pried loose. The diggers wore perfumed handkerchiefs over their faces, and were glad to move on to other work when the cemetery was finally tucked into high ground in the next township. Pilgrims stopped tacking prayers to Calder's door, and by mid-July the old paper scraps had disintegrated in the humidity, leaving only bare wood and a forest of tacks.

Sometimes Odie Clark showed up at school with bruises, and everyone knew it was because his mom liked to hit. She wasn't like the people at the school; when Odie screamed awful things at home, the consequences were less than gentle.

Sometimes he had bruises on his arms, sometimes in places you couldn't see them. One time he had a great welt on his neck, and for a whole week he couldn't cock his head sideways and got beaned with the kickball four times. By the end of January, Odie had gone from outcast, to hero, to object of angry pity.

And then, too fast for the minds of his schoolmates to follow, he became a ghost.

One day, his mother grabbed his hair and punched him in the ear for yelling a whole string of evil words while she was on the phone. Odie went out to cry and rub his ear. He went out, like he often did, to put pennies on the rail- road tracks, to lower his undamaged ear to the rail and listen for approaching wheels.

He fell asleep with his head on the rail, and vanished into legend.

Zion Calder, Ashley said, sat alone in his shack amidst rows and rows of empty graves. As the water table climbed, the graves slowly filled until they resembled rows of mirrors.

The water table rose, inch by inch, swallowing the basements of abandoned houses, filling the caverns and hollows and valleys, forcing the coal mines to close. At last, one morning in late October, Calder stepped out to find the Little Turkeyfoot River lapping at his toes. He tipped his hat to the water, slipped back inside and waited behind his locked door.

By mid-November, the Little Turkeyfoot River had become Little Turkeyfoot Lake. Its winter-gray surface gave no sign of Calder's shack, the cemetery, or any of the houses it had swallowed. The lake, like Calder, denied everything.

Sometimes Vonda wishes her mother were more like Odie Clark's. Even a mother who hits is at least a mother who does *something*. Vonda's mother goes to work and gets tired. She comes home and sits, or disappears into her room at the end of the trailer, straight to sleep. She's a ghost who isn't dead yet.

Vonda goes out alone, sometimes, and puts her ear on the railroad tracks, right where Odie Clark became a ghost. She tells Jill and Ashley that if you go to the tracks at midnight and cover your left eye with your hand and say the F-word three times, a ghost train will come moaning through, a ghost train that's just a headlight and a wind that tosses your hair, followed by the headless ghost of Odie Clark staggering along with his head under his arm, bleeding from the ear where his mom hit him.

Sometimes, too, she tells about her father, pretending to remember him.

"He went by a fake name," she says, "the whole time he lived with my mom. Now he's really famous. If I told you who he was, you'd freak."

"What?" says Ashley, says Jill. "*Who?*"

"You'd freak," repeats Vonda, nothing more.

Ashley says the winter the Little Turkeyfoot Lake was born was supernaturally cold, for Tennessee. For the first time in living memory, the temperature dipped below freezing and stayed there for three months. The new lake froze solid from shore to shore. People got in the habit of walking out onto the lake and wondering aloud about old Zion Calder sitting down there in the dark, wondering if he was stubborn enough to breathe underwater.

With the spring thaw, three fishermen decided to give the lake a try. They were floating around out there in the middle when Calder's shack, half-full of air, finally let go of the ground and came rocketing out of the lake near their boat. It hung gracefully in the air for a moment, then landed on its side, more or less whole, floating catawampus in the water. Nearby floated its builder, truly dead at last, and minus his head.

'Eaten by fish,' some speculated.

'Raptured,' said others.

Either way, no one wanted to go out on the lake until Calder's head was accounted for.

The sheriff used dynamite, trying to shock it to the surface.

The head failed to rise.

What did rise, to the displeasure of the valley residents, were parts of old houses and old trees and the mortally wounded steeple of the First Redemption Church.

But that wasn't all.

Something like a wooden submarine splashed to the surface, and bobbed darkly in the water. A second submarine followed, then another, and another.

Coffins.

Apparently, the engineers had been less than thorough in their efforts to clear out the cemetery and move on to other, sweeter-smelling tasks.

Like Zion Calder before them, the people of Judy, Tennessee turned their backs.

'Lake? What lake?' they'd say.

"My own grampa," claims Ashley, "will get up and walk out of the room if you so much as mention the lake. He will, I swear to God."

When Vonda gets tired of her mom being tired, sometimes she goes over to Jill's house, which is a real house, not a trailer. Jill has a real dad, too, not a story-dad, even if he's not famous. Jill's dad keeps an electric train in the basement, a huge layout with little towns and hills and lakes and tunnels for the trains to go through.

Sometimes, ever since they were in grade school, he sits at the controls in a high chair like a bar stool, wearing an engineer's cap with dark blue stripes. He lets the girls sit in his lap and open switches, telling the trains where to go. The summer Vonda and Jill both turned fourteen, the same month Vonda started stealing roaches from her mother's ashtrays, Jill's dad added a new track to the miniature railroad world. The new section had woods, and a perfect model of the haunted underpass.

The girls said the F-word when they first saw the underpass. It seemed kind of sick. Made them feel sick, a little, but they couldn't look away, and Jill's dad stood behind them, watching them.

Ashley isn't the only girl in Judy, Tennessee who talks about Zion Calder. His name has been whispered by citizens of all ages, floating stubbornly down the years.

The ghost is not the ghost of Calder's body, just the ghost of his teeth and his long, gray hair, the ghost of his white cotton eye, like lightning or prophecy. He haunts Judy's waters like a fish, like a bad movie which floats in puddles, glares from dishwater, kiddie pools, toilets, and shot glasses, bloated lips curling, speaking silence, cursing the TVA.

Jill says that when they are old, they'll be the old wise women of Judy, Tennessee. People will come to them, mostly little kids, wanting to know about the ghost of Odie Clark, and they'll tell how they knew Odie Clark when he was alive.

Jill says it's important to keep the blood moving in stories like that, so one day when Jill is sitting in her father's lap, opening and closing switches, Vonda grabs a toy whistle off the worktable, a wooden whistle which makes a noise just like an old-fashioned train. She runs upstairs with it and hides it at home in her dresser.

Sometimes she takes the whistle to the real railroad tracks and blows on it, and the idea is that maybe someone will hear it and look and see there's no train, and they'll know, they'll know in their souls it's the ghost of the train that nailed Odie Clark, and they'll get the shivers.

She steals a half-smoked cigarette before she goes, and smokes it alone, since Ashley and Jill fear the underpass. Sometimes a train comes, as if summoned by the stolen whistle. A real train, although all trains are ghostly by moonlight. Vonda climbs the right-of-way and stands as close as she dares while the air fills with a wild diesel throb. Rust and steel rocket by, inches away in the dark, shedding mist like a caul. She lifts her eyes, spreads her arms, swimming at the edge of balance, and she wishes. The wish comes from every part of her, rising like fire, like smoke. She doesn't even know what the wish is, but she wishes it real, real hard.