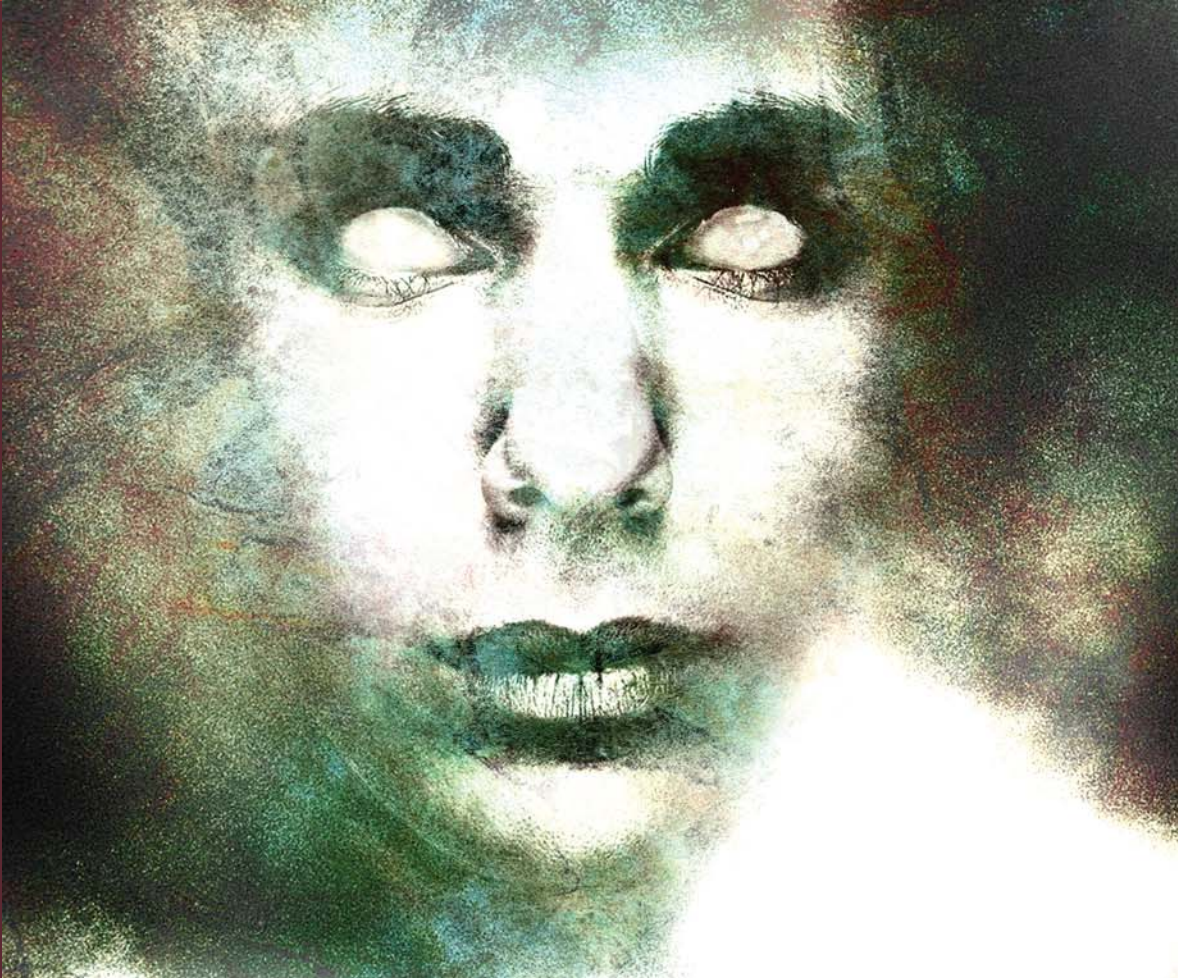




**BETWEEN LIFE
AND DEATH**

DAVID PYLE

Between Life and Death

By David Pyle



PublishAmerica
Baltimore

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First printing

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ISBN: 1-60836-244-2
PUBLISHED BY PUBLISHAMERICA, LLLP
www.publishamerica.com
Baltimore

Printed in the United States of America

“...this kind of thing’s too awful, here this time of night with witches and ghosts a-fluttering around so. I feel as if something’s behind me all the time; and I’m afeard to turn around, becuz maybe there’s others in front a-waiting for a chance. I been creeping all over, ever since I got here.”

—Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

Between Life and Death

Prologue

Monday, June 6, 1977

When I was very young, I believed that all women could read minds. At least all the women in my family and their friends could. At some mysterious age, this gift was passed on and all of the female gender kept this well guarded secret from the male population at large. They seemed to know just what I was doing or thinking at any moment and of course, I would get into some kind of trouble for whatever I was planning...or had already done. So, the dilemma was how to keep my thoughts mundane while in the presence of any female.

Oh well, I know that's not happening.

Somewhere along the timeline of my 17 years, I dismissed this notion, along with the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny. However, incidents over the last few days have driven me backwards into a reevaluation of my logic and beliefs. My childish beliefs about the boogey man, hidey behinds, ghosts and the unknown are all subject to scrutiny.

Right now..., this second, the small hairs standing up on the back of my neck are governing my belief system.

So, why am I standing in the dark, outside, in my boxers and t-shirt, listening to something that I thought I heard? Something that I thought I glimpsed out of the corner of my eye?

Silence escapes me. All I hear is the beat of my heart pounding in my ears and every breath I take sounds like a cow in labor.

I've heard that it's adrenaline..., I think its fear.

Nevertheless, I'm beginning to see things that aren't there, out on the edge...

Chapter 1

The gentle currents of the Mississippi night air pushed the faint scent of locust blossoms through the sheltered back yard. The sound of a lone cricket, scratching its legs, matched the ebb and flow of the leaves in the huge cottonwood near the tool shed. Behind the house, one silent witness stood frozen, back sticking against its clapboard siding, listening intently.

A scratchy click, click, clicking sound coming from nowhere in particular, that didn't match anything in a library of memories, had become a nightly irritation.

Last week, James Earl Williams made his annual flight from New Jersey to visit his maternal grandparents. This had been uneventful enough, but this year *normal* ended somewhere over the Mason-Dixon Line. Since his arrival in Deep South Mississippi, a nightly sound, somewhere between the back porch and his bedroom, had broken that subtle routine of the body and mind. At 3 a.m., when most people enjoy their deepest sleep, James was busy with a begrudged nightly inspection.

Without the aid of the familiar glow of the Jersey skyline, James had only a mix of glow and shadows from the single streetlight far in front of his grandparents' home. The dark seemed ridiculous.

He shook the flashlight once more and the dim yellow light reappeared. It was more of an irritant than aid.

James stood still, thoughts churning in a desperate attempt to prove his theory that this was something common in nature. He had never been the type that needed a night light or ran whining into his parents bedroom

from a nightmare or some monster under the bed. Spooks and monsters were reserved for cheap horror movies and novels and of course, what he dispensed to his younger brother Sam. It was a wonder that *Sam* could sleep at night after fifteen years of sibling torment. Maybe this was just karma making its circle.

The sound disappeared just as quickly as it started with the same nightly shuffling sound and then dead silence. Even the lone cricket and air movement died away as if on queue. Beyond the beat of his heart, James heard the solitary sound of distant thunder with its gentle rumblings and flashes of orange heat lightning along the horizon. His damp back sticking to the outside wall and fingers digging into the clapboard siding like a rock climber had produced its regular migraine. With a slow exhale, he relaxed.

Maybe this was just an exaggeration of the mind and none of this was real. Reality would be the raucous alarm clock that would wake him in a couple of hours. What could have changed since his last summer in Natchez, Mississippi?

Back inside, back to bed, back to the steady drone of the ceiling fan and pray for sleep.

Journal—Thursday, June 9, '77

Ever since I got here to Gramma and Grampa's, I've spent my best sleep time of the morning, investigating inside and outside, with my ear against the wall. There's this ticking noise and it's driving me crazy. I know it's just a bug, but I want it gone.

If I had a stethoscope, I would use it, find it, kill it.

They do have a cat. Gramma's monster Siamese, "Tommy", takes care of mice, with his creepy ability to zero in and make a meal of anything that moves, especially moths and crickets. But the last few days he's been out being a tomcat.

Both my grandparents have dismissed the ticking as "house settling."

You know these old houses settle for years—Gramma Ames told me.

They just wear out like the bones in us old folks and start creaking. I like the way she puts things in perspective.

I took that as an answer the first few nights, but now...

Oh God, I don't want to admit it here, in case someone reads this.

I've started seeing things...faces, glaring at me.

In the daytime...I can't tell anyone.

So..., it's like I'm daydreaming about something, anything...and out of the corner of my eye, in a pattern in the floral wallpaper or in the furniture arrangement, or even a bush or tree outside, there's a face staring at me.

Now before I'm labeled completely crazy, or over imaginative, the faces don't go away when I look their direction.

They aren't happy faces either.

Some sad, some angry, or just plain pissed off, but never happy.

I asked my Gramma Ames if she saw one last Friday morning. She just stared as I went over to the collage of vases and flowers on her curio trying frantically to help her see, until I noticed the desperation of boredom come into her eyes.

I never mentioned it to her again for fear that she would think her grandson was kooky.

Was I? Am I?

James Earl Williams, average white boy, ready for the loony bin, at age 17. Is it the trauma of moving halfway across the country from my usual Jersey City life, to Mississippi where there are only three local channels on TV? These people don't even have cable. Most just have a bunch of twisted rusty metal poles strapped upside their houses with arrow shaped antennas dangling from the top.

I'm going stir crazy, already.

I like visiting my grandparents, but since it became a forced visit, part of my probation, it took away all the usual feelings I normally get from being around them. But this is my last summer to be under that thumb and I'll be free!

Really free.

It's hard to believe that five years have passed since I was sentenced to stay here during my summers, away from my parents and brother, but more importantly away from the "bad influences" of the neighborhood.

I don't know where I'll be going, but I'll definitely be gone.

Or will I? I can't make up my mind. I'm really starting to like the slower pace and the people here.

At least work at Earl's Garage with my Grampa keeps my mind off my troubles. Now if I can just figure out what's making that ticking racket.

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

Love is supposed to bring happiness and hope, a bright perspective of future events. Put both of these elements into a pot, stir in a little dark Voodoo with a dash of passion, and the murky stew will turn deadly.

Supernatural powers are calling in their markers within the historic town of Natchez, Mississippi. James Earl Williams, unwillingly anointed heir and keeper to decades of family secrets, is being meticulously stalked by a malignant force targeting his family. Only seventeen years old and days after graduating from high school, yet he will have to make irrevocable decisions any battle-hardened soldier would fear. Can he leave his beautiful Jolie behind for the safety of his family?

Tormented by the past and present, love and hope will entice him into a dark place where dreams and premonitions mirror reality. Yet this new reality will be a tiny glimpse into the hell inside us all.

DAVID PYLE comes from an extended career in manufacturing and technology, crossing now into the world of literary imagination. His love of writing since childhood coupled with a tenacious curiosity birthed the story *Between Life and Death*. His own family history anchored in Mississippi, David now lives in north Texas with his son and daughter.



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ISBN: 1-60836-244-2

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Contact at: author.david.pyle@gmail.com

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