

HAMBURGER LADY

(From a note dated August 17, 1973, found in an envelope on the author's nightstand)

I want to tell you about the time I saw a ghost, and the things I've done at Newberry High School for which I am deeply ashamed.

If you think this an attempt to garner sympathy, that's not my intention, and besides, sympathy is not what I need right now. It won't do me any good. All I want to do is gain some kind of perspective on what I've seen and why I've seen it, for what's left of my peace of mind. Make what you will of it, but what I tell you is true, at least according to my understanding of truth.

My name is Orlando Wake. I'd been teaching literature at Newberry for twelve years.

Urban legends, I believe, are as much a part of high school culture as senior ditch day. I've heard plenty of accounts from students retelling the sordid stories of lost spirits in the gymnasium or the cafeteria or the girls' locker room, and as the stories get passed on from generation to generation they grow wilder and more grotesque in the decomposition of translation.

The stories I've heard flying about among the student body regarding the "Hamburger Lady" are as gruesome as an impressionable teenager can make them, but are actually rather mild in comparison to the facts, which after a few weeks of research I can now share with you.

Most of you are unfamiliar with Darius Maghee, and that wouldn't be surprising, because his life went mostly unnoticed. He worked in a slaughterhouse in Goodyear, Arizona in the mid-1920's, a son of a Scottish immigrant. Folks described him as a "quiet, pleasant gentleman" who, on the surface, didn't fit the profile of a murderer.

Very little is known about the prostitute he picked up one night in September 1928, but knowing what I know now, I could probably reach the conclusion that she was a beautiful, vibrant young woman who wanted the means, not the sex her activities provided. I think in spite of her position, she loved life very much. There's no doubt about that.

Maghee picked up that prostitute in Phoenix, strangled her, and brought her body to the slaughterhouse after hours where he processed it like the pigs and cows that met their fates behind its walls. This poor, desperate, unknown young woman was gutted, drained, and turned into ground meat. Her body was discovered the following day, and the slaughterhouse was shut down. It is unknown if any parts of her ended up in the meat supply.

That was according to Maghee's delirious, panicky confession to the authorities two months after he murdered the girl. He was hung in Florence Prison two years later, just twenty-nine years old. His last words were "God, I hope I never see her again," and it

would be easy to interpret them as an expression of raw apathy for a young life, but I know that's not what he meant.

I know, because I know now what was haunting him, what made him confess. I've seen it in the halls of Newberry High School, which was built on the spot where the old slaughterhouse used to stand. For everyone who has passed through those halls, it was a shocking and amusing legend, but one that wouldn't manifest itself into reality for just anyone. Most of the student body believed the story was just some sick joke born in reaction to the Manson family murders from a couple of years back.

One who didn't was a young lady who I will only refer to as Daisy, a bright, warm, charismatic junior in my third period composition class.

There are certain women for whom men would forsake their morals, obligations, and even logic just to hold them close and kiss them, and Daisy fits that description. Maybe it's a little ironic that I refer to her as a woman, but she was all definitions of that to me. She was *beyond* desirable, womanly shaped beyond her peers, shameless in her conversation, coltish yet seething with quiet seduction. I was her teacher, yet I was no different from all the shy, pimple-faced boys in the room who wanted to sit as close to her as possible, with the exception that I was happily married, a father of a baby boy, and an authority figure in the community. None of that mattered whenever I saw her, although I struggled with keeping my feelings in check for the sake of my profession if nothing else. I lost that struggle when I met her after school one day to discuss one of her papers and she professed her attraction to me with an openness and vulnerability I couldn't resist.

We had sexual relations for a month, and for that I am deeply sorry.

In all my years of teaching I've never sought out such relationships with students and even found the idea of doing so distasteful. So what made me want to satisfy my physical needs with a young woman twenty years younger on the desk of my own classroom? I wish I knew. Perhaps that ghost knows the answer.

It was Daisy who first told me the details of what the students knew about the ghost, the "Hamburger Lady" as they call her. It was after one of our late night "sessions" in Room 5 of the English building. With a twinkle in her eyes that revealed equal parts fascination and fear, she told me of the old meat packing plant and how a "female employee was stuffed into the meat grinder out of jealousy," in her words. I told her she was far too sophisticated to believe in such nonsense.

"My big brother saw it," she explained. "One day he got caught making out with some girl in the boy's bathroom, but he never got in trouble for it other than two hours of detention. The next night after football practice he saw it. He said it looked like a woman with bloody skin crawling on her hands and knees. Scared the crap out of him. It's been four years and he hasn't been the same since."

She went on to say that only men claim to have seen the Hamburger Lady, theorizing in her sweet way that it only wanted to terrorize the men because it was some kind of "women's lib" ghost, an otherworldly defender with the purpose of offsetting the social dominance of men. I found that to be both brilliant and funny. I'm not laughing now.

Two nights after that exchange I was in my classroom again waiting for Daisy with my wife at home believing I was "helping the basketball team at practice." I kept the lights off and the doors unlocked. I recall the clock reading 7:15, which meant that she was a few minutes late, and I had more time to sit in the dark and think about how wrong this was and

the dreadful idea that it would be her father or my wife walking through that door. The darkness has a way of needling the conscience of a guilty man.

It was then that I heard something in the hallway that sounded like wet footsteps of bare feet--slow and deliberate, yet landing with an audible squish--moving from one end of the hallway to the other, passing right by my room. The squishing stopped on the other end of the hall and everything was silent again. My throat was drying up. I wanted to believe that there was no one on the entire campus but me and Daisy, but what was making that sound? I cracked open the door and peeked into the hallway. In the darkness, the glass panes above the building's main doors provided a dim aperture of light.

On the floor there was blood. Even in the semi-darkness I knew it couldn't be anything else. It was a long line of blood, thin and splotchy, like something one would expect from a body being dragged, stopped, then dragged again across the floor. The line started at my door, trailed up the hall, curved and ended at the east stairwell.

A sickness welled up inside me as I began to think of Daisy and why she was late.

I followed the thin trail of blood up the hallway, praying to God I wouldn't find what I thought would be on the other end. If anything had happened to that beautiful young lady I would never forgive myself.

At the base of the stairwell was something I did not expect. It wasn't Daisy or her father, nor was it my wife. It was no living thing at all.

It was coiled on the bottom steps of the stairwell on all fours, a nude, human form with mangled, furrowed skin glistening with an unforgiving red. Its torso appeared to be female, but its shapely form was tattered. Large chunks of flesh were ripped from its legs and back leaving exposed bone, and both of its feet were gone, ripped at the shins. If it had skin at all, it was stained with its blood. On its face (not much more than ragged, red strands) was a single eye, bloodshot and blue, that allowed its meager expression of agony and rage to reveal itself to me, accusing me of crimes of which only it knew. It crawled toward me, its fingerless hands squishing in its own bloody muck. Then it turned away from me and slithered up its own trail back down the hall, and disappeared into the darkness.

I only stood there, unable to speak, barely able to breathe. If such a creature came from God, then God should be punished.

I don't know how long I was standing there when I heard someone call my name, but I remember the sound that came from my throat—something between a scream and a swallow.

Daisy stood at the door of Room 5 apologizing for being late, staring with that irresistible lust in her eyes. I was in no mood to meet with her--my heart felt like it was turning inside out—but I needed company. Right then I needed someone warm and alive to hold in my arms and help remove the nightmare from my mind. I looked down at the floor and noticed the bloody stripe was no longer there. It's gone, I thought. Nothing there.

We went back into the classroom to make love. I didn't ask her about the Hamburger Lady, how it was described by people who've seen it. We didn't talk much at all. I just let her have her way with me as I did with her. We were on my desk and Daisy was on top of me when I closed my eyes, allowing my desire to take hold of me. I opened my eyes.

The Hamburger Lady was on top of me. Her cold, bludgeoned, bloody form. Her

accusing eye.

I remember screaming, but I don't remember much else about that night. Daisy claims that I struck her across the face and tried to strangle her, but that couldn't be possible. I loved her, or at the very least, I liked her enough to never want to harm her. If I'm guilty of anything, it's having an inappropriate relationship with a teenage girl.

Anyway that's a moot point. My wife is gone and I'll never see my baby boy again. I'll never teach again. By no means am I whining about it; I brought all this upon myself and I deserve all the shame. But those misfortunes are mild in comparison to what I'm dealing with now. The house I tried to make with my family is empty and lonely beyond anything I could imagine. And yet I'm never alone.

In my dreams and in my waking hours I see her, crawling, oozing, staring at me with vengeance burning from her eye. She never speaks, but her gaze, her awful, blood-drenched presence, tells me all I need to know about my shameful life. I thought when I left Newberry High I had left her there, a salacious fairy tale to be told and retold to curious young minds. But she's real...Oh God, she's *real*! Even now as I write this, I can hear the *squish-squish-squish* back and forth and up and down the walls and the floors. I hear it again. She watches me like a prison guard, her eye...*her eye*. I can't go into my own bedroom anymore. She won't let me sleep.

She's here.

She won't leave me alone. And now I know what she wants from me.

For the last time, I'm sorry. You'll find my body in the basement.