

Excerpt from "Vulture" by John Stewart Wynne

The rails ran close to the Carolina coast on the ocean side, there were only a few feet of tangled marshes between the tracks and the low waters of the inlet. The inlet was defined by two narrow, rocky promontories, beyond which was the Atlantic, flat and silent in the August heat. On the west side of the tracks were thick woods of oak, cypress, and pine, occasionally broken by a clearing where a rundown house or two stood on the outskirts of town.

It was in these woods that the men paused, waiting for the two o'clock Amtrak to pass by on its way north. The train was late. The men exchanged glances and one of them took a deep breath. Without a word, they set the laundry bag that held Lynn's corpse down on a dry patch. Twigs snapped beneath her weight.

Pat squatted and started scraping mud off his work boots with his pocketknife.

Davy sat on a rock. Pulling the red bandanna off his head, he wiped sweat from his chin, arms, and neck. He fished a packet of Camels from the left sleeve of the T-shirt which gripped his muscular arms. He lit a cigarette. His hands didn't tremble but inside he felt like holy shit. His stomach was like the fucking Atlantic in a storm, all black, wet, and raging. He didn't offer one to Pat, just eased the pack back in his sleeve pocket.

The sunlight found its way to the floor of the woods like sporadic flashlight beams, suddenly pointing here, suddenly there, always changing. *Like it was searching for somebody*, Davy thought. *Like it was searching for two killers*. It was spooky, this dance of light and dark.

Davy forced himself to look at the bag. One of Lynn's hands protruded from the opening. He looked away, up at the sky which was crisscrossed by heavy green leaves on frail branches.

Davy took a drag from his Camel and waited. He didn't wait long. At two-fifteen the train rushed by. Davy couldn't see it, but he felt its hot breeze and heard its rattle. Then it was gone. Pat threw Davy a disgusted look and stood up. Time for business.

The septic tank, corroded and lichen-covered, lay in a clearing between the tracks and the edge of the wood. Together they carried the bag through the brambles into the clearing. Pat lifted the rusty tank lid and looked inside. It was at least twelve feet deep with water at the bottom and its sides were crawling with big red ants, running every which way, startled by the light. By now both of Lynn's bare arms were sticking straight out of the bag. *Rigor mortis*, Davy thought. *Unbendable as logs*.

"Fuck it," Pat read his mind. "Leave her like she is."

They dropped her into the tank. Lynn's arms flailed against the sides as she went down and when the bag hit the bottom there was a small splash.

"Done," said Pat and he wedged the lid back on the tank. But Davy's heart had stopped. About thirty feet away in a patch of swamp grass stood a little girl gazing at the

men with curiosity. She was as still and lifeless as a lawn statue and Davy might never have noticed she was there except by chance he'd happened to look in her direction. Now Pat saw her too. His mouth fell open in amazement.

She wore a loose blue cotton dress, much too big for her, that hung from her skinny shoulders like a bedsheet. Her mass of brown curls was uncombed and messy, even though it was tied back from her forehead with a satin blue ribbon. She couldn't have been more than nine or ten. Her gaze was steady. Davy had no idea what she had seen or what she was thinking, but she obviously wasn't afraid. He took a menacing step toward her.

"Hold off, fool," Pat hissed.

The girl took a step backward but she didn't flinch. Her face was expressionless.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Pat said, his voice low and steady.

"But what about her?"

"Forget it, man. Just turn around and walk back into the woods. Slow. Don't act guilty."

But Davy shook his head. "Pat. She saw us."

"Give it up." Pat shoved Davy roughly. "Move."

Davy's brain was exploding inside. But somehow he turned and started walking. Whenever he wavered, he felt Pat's hand on the small of his back, pushing him on. As they reached the cover of the woods, Pat put his arm around Davy's shoulder, all buddy-buddy, but Davy knew they had made a terrible mistake. They had let the girl go when they should have killed her. It was as plain as day. They should have strangled her and dumped her into the tank with Lynn. But they hadn't and now they were in deep shit.

The girl waited until the men had disappeared then cautiously made her way to the clearing. The woods were quiet. There was no sign of the men. To the east, beyond the tracks, she could catch glimpses of the green water of the inlet.

She sat down by the septic tank and put her chin in her hands. The ground was full of life. Beetles weaved in and out of strands of dried moss, a lizard crawled from under a dented Dr. Pepper can, and red ants ran across her sandals.

After awhile the girl decided to lift the lid. It was a struggle at first, but only because it was bulky, not heavy. Once it was off, she leaned over the opening. It took a minute for her eyes to adjust to the blackness. Finally she saw at the bottom two outstretched white arms lifted towards her, almost pleadingly. The girl put a hand over her mouth to stop from crying out. She was looking at death. And in doing so, she understood that the woman with the raised arms could never come back. She sighed, her shoulders sagged, and she took her hand away from her mouth. She pulled the lid back over the opening and stood up. Shaking the ants off her sandals, she turned towards home.