

The Old Lady of the Lake

A Ghost Story by Darren Shell

When I was a young lad, I would sometimes ask, “What makes those swirling mists rise up out of the lake like magic?” Of course, I was speaking of the tiny whirlwinds that occur on cool mornings when the fog is raising from the lake surface. They dart and sway all about the fog-filled coves here in our hollows. I have witnessed those same swirling mists form in the late evening hours and dance over the lake surface with grace and beauty. It is a beautiful phenomenon to behold. This story is about one such mist that lived years ago...and perhaps lingers still today. I’d like to introduce you to our resident ghost. She is The Old Lady of the Lake.

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Our story begins in the early 1800s. A young farmer and his newlywed wife lived along the Obey River on a stretch of rich pasture land. They farmed those few acres of fertile soil with the grit and determination of true early pioneers. They were quite poor but turned to their acres of soil to produce a bountiful life for themselves. Although he could not afford to buy his new wife a wedding ring, he vowed to do so later in life...when the time was right. And together, they worked hard, played hard, and lived a blessed life.

Now, this alone would make a pleasant story. And for the most part, our little farm family led a quaint and rewarding life. They eventually worked and saved to purchase more land, and even began a boarding house for slaves working their way toward freedom. Their tiny little farm became much bigger, and their life was richened in many ways. And for all practical purposes, this family lived out all if its days in the placid shelter of the Obey River Valley...just as they had planned.

But there is a tie to this lake that our farming family left behind that brings us to our real story. It brings us closer to the “making” of our lake. It offers us a reflection of the past and teases our minds with thoughts of ghostly apparitions...long ago spirits in our midst. This...is what happened.

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Our young farmer gave a solemn vow to his wife on his wedding day. He offered one simple sentence to her, which he recited again each and every night before bedtime. Before dozing off to sleep, with the sound of crickets chirping in the night air, he would give her his promise. “Someday...someday...I will buy you a ring worthy of my love for you.” And she would smile with appreciation and love in return.

As time passed, the farmer began saving money toward his promise. And as the young farmer grew older, he finally fulfilled that promise to his wife. He bought her a

new diamond ring, far beyond that of what he had ever expected. Their hard work in life had paid off...and he delivered on his promise, just as he had said he would. From that point on, the bedtime conversation changed. He no longer needed to promise the ring worthy of his love. It was hers to keep. It was she that now spoke words of earnest. "When I die, will you bury me with my ring?" she would ask. "I want it with me for eternity."

The farmer's answer was always the same. "Of course, my love. It will be yours forever." And time passed. Eventually, the farmer and his wife each lived to a ripe old age. And just as he promised, upon her death, the farmer buried his wife with the token of his love...her wedding ring. Soon thereafter, he joined her, returning to Mother Earth. The life of a farming family in the Obey River Valley came to an end, and Father Time ticked away.

Here is where our story takes a turn for the unpleasant. The year was now 1942. The US Army Corps of Engineers had purchased thousands of acres of land, preparing to build our wonderful lake. The Corps then issued hundreds of eviction notices and delivered many checks for family farm land. Houses were destroyed, businesses were demolished, and communities were uprooted in the inevitable transformation from land to lake. And there was one more unpleasant turmoil to undertake...one more ugly facet that must proceed...one more gut-wrenching task that must be endured...the removing of the graveyards. And it was no easy task.

First and foremost, no one wanted the job. No one wanted to dig up Uncle John or Aunt Sally. This tightly-knit community knew everyone within its borders. So grave digging was mostly left to outsiders...rough individuals looking for more than their fair share for their hour's wage. Their gritty and difficult work landed them many *benefits* in the form of theft. After all, many folks who die are buried with prize possessions...boots, guns, belt buckles, even jewelry. And most of it never re-entered the earth during this grave digging process. It was a sad system, yet it continued for the lack of a better one. And despite vigilant efforts by the Corps...many less-than-worthy disinterments were logged into documentation...and unknowingly left for the rising waters of Dale Hollow.

Now, let's get back to our ghost. Have you gotten a clue to her presence in our story? Have you seen the ties of old...binding us to the building of the lake? In case it hasn't hit you...in case you do not fear the souls of the dead coming back in search of stolen property...I will present it for you. I will tell it like it happened. Hold onto your seats, folks...this ain't purdy.

It was the fall of 1942, when Tommy and his buddy, Willie, took up the job of grave digging in the southern reaches of old Willow Grove. Both had been digging all day and their arms and legs ached with the pain of their day's work. Night had fallen and both had planned to work even later...in these dark hours when no Corps overseers would be gazing over their shoulders. Their pockets were full of shiny parcels as they dug.

“I’ve sifted until my bones ache,” said Tommy. “I’m done for tonight. I’m beat.” He looked down at the pile of small wooden boxes filed with remains of very old graves. “You can’t fit a whole body in these tiny boxes anyway!” he grumbled. And he was right. The Corps had provided these small boxes to be filled with bodily remains of those graves too old to be dug in full. Many of these old graves could not be found, and even those that could, would not lend themselves to be easily dug. Their old and weathered stones had fallen, and briars had disguised their once lavishly decorated plots. Even if one wanted to dig these graves properly, it would have been most difficult. There was just very little left to dig...and sifting was the only real way to discern body from dirt.

“Yeah, I’m tired, too,” commented Willie. “Let’s gather our...” He stopped mid-sentence with a mumble of surprise. Something had caught his gaze in the dusty soil at his feet. Something *sparkled*. “Whoa...” he uttered.

Tommy stared in disbelief, as Willie pulled a shiny diamond ring from the clammy soil at his feet. Even with its great age and tarnished surface, it was easy to tell that it was of uncommon quality...and quite valuable. “Wow!” exclaimed Tommy as Willie examined his prize. “Put that one in your pocket, and let’s head for home.”

But Willie was too mesmerized by the piece of jewelry in his hands. *Gold...diamonds...flawless!* He quickly dropped it into his pants pocket. The precious metal of the ring was cold against his leg. Its weight seemed even heavier than normal. This parcel was different somehow. And soon Willie would know why.

Cool mists began to blow in the hollow. A damp and cold air settled in around them as they stood bewildered in their freshly dug graves. Clouds of fog gathered near and far...and they seemed to swirl in the night air. The once warm and humid night grew cold and damp, chilling both men to their core. “What’s that?” chattered Tommy.

Both men heard something calling on the air. Was it their imagination, or perhaps just a whining in the wind? But there it was again. Strange voices seemed to call in the night air...moaning desperately in the breeze. And then both men heard words...real words in the spinning mists of fog. And those words were unquestionable. Four words seemed to hang in the air... “Where’s my diamond ring?”

“Put it back!” shouted Tommy. “Push it back in the ground! Now!”

But Willie stood clinching the ring in his grip. He was too engulfed in the moment to consider his hand...or what it held. He was chilled to the bone...and for good reason. The swirling mists in the air began to take form. Those forms swirled into shapes of people...shapes of those folks from long ago. And they were letting their presence be known. Faster and faster the mists spun. Voices of old shouted and called. They swirled and swayed into giant whirlwinds of mist and fog. Again, one voice called out! “Where’s my diamond ring?” In absolute panic, Willie threw the ring with all his might and fell to the ground with his hands over his ears. The ring landed deep into the

grassy field near the old river, where it laid silently hidden to all. But the mists still called and whined all about. Whirlwinds would raise and fall in bitter dismay...ever hissing into the night air. Unrest and anger pounded through the night sky. The small whirlwinds began to join into one giant tornado of mist and fog. The joining cyclone of energy ascended high into the air and then crashed down through the cemetery with one tremendous display of crashing splendor...taking with it all forms of life, including that of the lowly gravediggers. And the graveyard fell utterly silent.

The whereabouts of the famous ring of our farming housewife is unknown. Many say that the souls of Dale Hollow still search in vain for this elusive piece of antique jewelry. Many say that The Old Lady of the Lake still swirls in the misty coves of Dale Hollow and seeks the token of love once given to her by her loving husband, so many years ago. "Where's my diamond ring?" echoes into our quiet hollows...even when no one is present to listen.

Have you ever heard that voice in the night air? Have you ever witnessed those special swirling mists that rise and fall into the misty hollows of this dale? Have you ever felt that you were *not alone* in our coves?

I know that I have seen those mists many days, quietly swirling their way over the lake surface. And I sometimes wonder...if they are really mists at all.~

