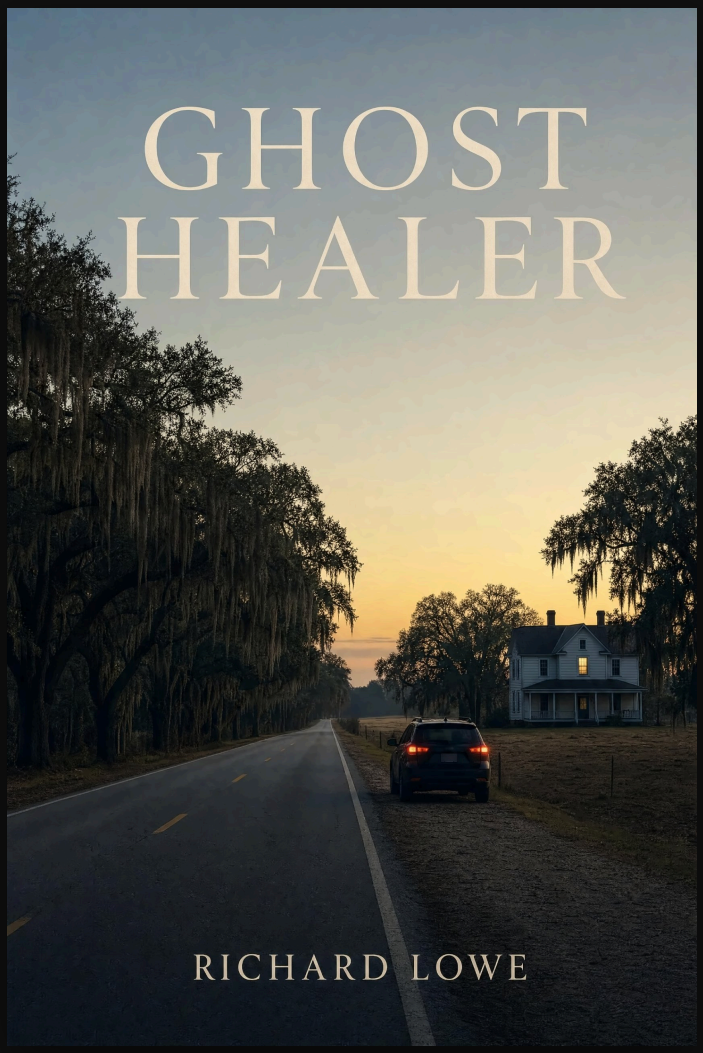
A FREE COMPANION TO GHOST HEALER

The Christmas Money

Six weeks into the road, a sign Cal Rourke cannot help reading sends him down a Mississippi county road to a kitchen where an old woman has been waiting forty years to be proved right.



RICHARD LOWE

The Christmas Money

I turned onto the county road because of a sign.

It was plywood, painted white and nailed to two posts at the edge of Highway 49 south of Jackson, lettered by somebody with a steady brush and no eraser: PLEASANT HILL M.B. CHURCH, CHRISTMAS PROGRAM SUNDAY 6 PM, ALL WELCOME, EVEN YOU. I was reading the EVEN YOU for the second time when I noticed the arrow under it pointed at a road I had already started down.

I had never been able to pass a sign without reading it. On a highway at sixty miles an hour this is a liability, and six weeks on the road had not taught me to manage it.

The county road was patched asphalt with no shoulder and a ditch on each side full of brown rainwater. Pines on the left, an empty pasture on the right behind a sagging wire fence. I drove a mile looking for a place wide enough to turn the Tahoe around, and the place I found was the gravel apron of a mailbox, and that was where the air went wrong.

* * *

I did not have words for it yet. I would spend the next two years building them, and I am still not satisfied with the ones I have.

What I had that December was this. I stopped with two wheels on the gravel and two on the asphalt, and the ringing in my left ear changed its pitch. It had been there since Capistrano, and nobody had promised me it would go away, and now it went up the way a kettle goes up before it whistles.

The hair on my forearms stood under my sleeves. Then the smell came through the vents: starch, the scorched smell of a shirt ironed with too much of it, and cold wood ashes under that. Under both, faint, something sweet and burnt, like sugar left too long in a skillet.

The mailbox was black tin on a cedar post. Stick-on letters on the side said TEA UE, with a pale rectangle where the G had been.

At the end of a dirt drive behind it sat a frame house with a tin roof gone to rust in long stripes where the rain ran off. A porch across the front, the boards cupped and gray. Four pecan trees in the yard, bare for the winter, the ground under them scattered with nuts nobody had picked up.

The grass was dead and short. Somebody had mowed it months ago, and nobody had mowed it since.

I sat with the engine running and the wipers going and looked at the house.

I had done this once before. Three weeks earlier, at a motel in Tennessee, a man in a short-sleeved work shirt had opened the door of his room and told me he was late. He had been late since 1983, and in the end I had shown him the time card in his own jacket pocket, punched out, the shift over, and he had gone.

I did not understand why it worked. I did not know if it would work twice. I had a sleeping bag, a cooler, a stack of paper maps, a water bottle that had cost more than it should have, and one success I could not explain.

I turned the engine off.

* * *

The front door was locked, and the porch boards gave under my boots in a way I did not trust. I went around the side of the house on the dead grass. I passed a clothesline with no clothes on it and a henhouse with its wire door hanging by one hinge.

The back door had a screen and, behind the screen, a wooden door swollen in its frame from years of rain and heat. I put my hand flat on the wood.

This was somebody's house. Somebody owned it and paid the taxes and mowed the grass at least once a year, and I was a stranger from California at the back door. I could feel that in my stomach, a cold weight like a swallowed coin.

I put my shoulder to the door and it gave.

The kitchen was colder than the yard. That made no sense, because the yard was forty degrees and wet and the kitchen had walls and a roof, and still my breath came out white in front of me.

A black iron woodstove in the corner, cold. An avocado green electric range beside it with the clock in the backsplash stopped. A table with an oilcloth cover printed with little red teapots, worn through to the threads where somebody's elbows had rested.

On the wall by the door hung a calendar from a feed and seed in Magee, turned to February, 1998.

Above the stove there was a shelf, and on the shelf sat a cracker tin. Square, red and gold once, the paint worn to bare metal at the corners where hands had lifted it. It sat at the exact center of the shelf with the lid on, and the burnt sugar smell was strongest there.

"If Wendell sent you," a voice said, "you can turn right around and tell him no."

She was at the table. I had looked at the table when I came in and she had not been there. Now she sat in one of the chairs with a bowl in front of her, a pile of pecans beside the bowl and a nutcracker in her right hand.

She was small and past seventy, her hair in pins, a cardigan buttoned to the throat over a housedress. Her eyes were pale blue, and they had already decided about me.

She cracked a pecan. I heard the shell split. She picked the halves out with her thumbnail and dropped them in the bowl, and nothing landed in the bowl, and the pile beside it did not get smaller.

"Nobody sent me," I said.

"Then you're lost."

"Probably," I said.

She looked at me a while longer, then nodded at the chair across from her, the one with its back to the door. "Well, sit down. You're letting the heat out."

There was no heat. I sat down.

* * *

Her name was Opal Teague. She told me that first. Then she told me this was her kitchen and her table, and her husband had built the henhouse with his own two hands in 1951, and she had lived on this road since she was nineteen and knew everybody on it, and she did not know me.

"Cal," I said.

"That's not a whole name."

"Cal Rourke."

"Rourke." She tried it the way you try a piece of fruit you suspect has gone soft. "Where are your people?"

"California."

"Well," she said, and cracked another pecan. "Somebody has to be."

I laughed. It came out of me rough, because I had not laughed in a while. She did not smile, but the line of her mouth changed, and I had the impression of a woman who had been funny her whole life and mostly married to people who did not notice.

She talked and I listened, because in Tennessee listening had been most of it. She told me about the hens she had kept until her hip went, Rhode Island Reds, because they laid through the winter and did not peck you unless you deserved it. She told me about the pecans, four trees in front and six behind the henhouse, two hundred pounds in a good year if she beat the squirrels and the crows.

"I sold the eggs at the feed store," she said. "And the pecans to a man from Hattiesburg with a truck. And every bit of it went in there."

She did not point. She lifted her chin a quarter inch toward the shelf over the stove.

"That's the Christmas money," she said.

"How much?"

"Six hundred and twelve dollars, December of nineteen and eighty-two." She set a pecan on the oilcloth and squared it with one finger. "For the grandbabies, and the church, and a coat for Earl, because the one he had was a disgrace."

The cold in the kitchen moved. I felt it on the back of my neck, a draft from a door opening behind me. The door behind me was shut.

"My son went in that tin," she said.

She said it flatly. She had said it so many times that it had worn smooth, like the corners of the tin itself.

"I was at choir practice on a Tuesday night," she said. "I came home and Earl was at this table with the tin in front of him and the lid off and nothing in it. He wouldn't say one word, and he didn't have to, because Wendell's truck was in this yard when I left and gone when I got back."

"Did you ask Wendell?"

"I didn't need to ask Wendell." Her eyes were not pale blue anymore. They had gone darker, the color of the ditch water out by the road.

"He came around on Christmas Eve," she said. "Stood on my back step with his hat in his hand. I told him a thief could stand out in the yard with the hens, and he could see himself off my property."

"What did he say?"

"He said Mama, let me explain." She picked the nutcracker back up. "A thief always wants to explain."

I sat at her table with my breath showing white and hers not showing at all.

I believed her. That matters for what came after. She had the year and the amount and the night of the week, and she told it without decoration, and I had no reason to doubt a word of it.

A son had stolen his mother's Christmas money and she had never forgiven him. She had been sitting in this kitchen ever since, cracking pecans that did not break. I thought I knew what was wrong with that, and I was looking at it on the wall.

* * *

The calendar had a red tractor on a green field. Under it the days of February were crossed off in ballpoint, neat diagonal strokes, the first through the eleventh. The twelfth was not crossed off.

The clock in the range said a quarter past six. I reached over and pushed the light switch by the back door, and nothing happened. The house had not had power for a long time.

The man in Tennessee had gone when I showed him the end of the thing he was stuck in. It looked simple. I was twenty-six, I had done this once, and I took one success for a rule.

"Mrs. Teague," I said.

"Opal. Mrs. Teague was Earl's mother, and she was a trial."

“Opal. Look at the calendar.”

She did not look at the calendar. She cracked a pecan.

“It says 1998,” I said. “It's been December twenty-six times since then.”

I had worked out the number on the way across the kitchen, and I handed it to her like a present.

“I think you died here,” I said.

The pecan in her hand stopped.

She did not look at the calendar or the stove or the dead light switch. She looked at me. Her eyes went from ditch water to the black of the inside of a cast-iron pan.

The windows frosted, all of them at once. Frost came in from the edges of every pane and grew toward the middle in white ferns, fast, and I could hear it, a thin crackling like cellophane. In three seconds I could not see the yard.

Then the tin on the shelf began to rattle.

The lid chattered against the rim like hail on a roof, louder than a tin that size had any right to be. The cold dropped so far and so fast that my teeth ached in their sockets. My eyes watered and the water went stiff on my lashes.

“You get out of my kitchen,” Opal Teague said.

She did not raise her voice. She did not need to.

The cold hit me in the chest, all of it gathered in one place and pushed. The chair went over backward with me in it, and I slid on my back across the linoleum, and the screen door banged open. I went down the back steps one at a time on my spine and landed in the wet grass with my wind gone and both palms skinned where I had tried to catch myself.

The wooden door slammed. The screen door slapped shut after it.

I lay in the yard and looked at the sky, which was the gray of an old sheet. A crow went across it, and then another, and the second one said something rude about me on the way over.

* * *

When I could sit up I sat up. My palms were bleeding a little, with grit in the scrapes, and my back hurt in a long even stripe from my tailbone to my shoulder blades. Through the kitchen window I could see the cracker tin on its shelf, centered, lid on.

A pickup was parked across the road.

I had not heard it pull up. It was a white Ford gone yellow at the seams, engine running, exhaust going up in a thin plume. An old man sat behind the wheel with the window down, watching me.

I walked out to the road, because there was nowhere else to walk and he had seen whatever he had seen. He was Black, eighty or near it, in a canvas coat and a feed store cap, with a thermos on the seat beside him. He looked at my palms, and then at the dead grass stuck to the back of my coat.

“You went in Opal's house,” he said.

“The back door was open.”

“No it wasn't.”

I did not argue it. He drank from a Styrofoam cup and looked at me over the rim.

“She put you out,” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Mm.” He nodded like a man hearing it had rained in a place where it usually rains. “She put out the man from the county, and a real estate lady from Brandon.”

“Anybody else?”

“Two boys from Magee on a dare, and one of them broke his arm on that back step and his daddy couldn't figure out who to sue.” He held up the thermos. “You look like somebody that wants coffee.”

I did.

His name was Lavelle Hinton, and he had lived across the road since 1962, in a brick ranch with a carport full of firewood. He poured coffee into the thermos cap and handed it through the window. It was black and strong and had been sitting in that thermos since about six in the morning, and it was the best coffee I had found in Mississippi.

I decided it deserved a dot on the map, though a pickup on a county road was not what the dots were for.

“What are you?” he said. “You ain't from the county.”

“No.”

“Church?”

“No.”

“Television?”

“No.”

He waited. I had not had an answer to that for myself in six weeks, and I did not have one now, standing on a county road with a dead woman's frost still in my eyelashes.

“I'm passing through,” I said.

“Everybody's passing through,” Lavelle said. “Some of them take longer.”

* * *

He told me about her because I asked, and I think because nobody had asked him in a long time.

Opal Teague died in that kitchen in February of 1998. Her son found her. Wendell had been driving up from Hattiesburg every other Sunday for years to sit in his truck at the end of the drive for an hour, because she would not have him in the house.

“That Sunday there wasn't any smoke from the stove pipe, so he went to the back door for the first time in fifteen years,” Lavelle said. He looked at the house. “She was at the table with a bowl in front of her and the nutcracker in her hand.”

My palms stung. I closed my fingers over them.

“He owns it now,” Lavelle said. “Won't sell it, won't rent it, won't go in it.”

“But he mows.”

“Every June he mows the yard and sits on that porch about an hour and gets back in his truck.” He shook his head. “He's seventy-three, and one of these Junes he's going straight through those boards.”

“She told me he stole from her,” I said.

“That's what she told everybody, and she stood up in Wednesday night prayer meeting and asked us to pray for her son who was a thief.” He turned the cup in his hand. “Earl never said one word to her or nobody, and he'd stand at the edge of a conversation like a fence post.”

“Did Wendell steal it?”

Lavelle did not answer right away. The engine ran. Behind his house a dog barked twice and gave up.

“Wendell told me one time he paid it back,” he said. “Ten years ago, in the checkout line at the Dollar General in Mendenhall, he turned around and said, Mr. Hinton, I paid Daddy back every dime.” He looked at the cup.

“Did you believe him?”

“I believed he believed it,” he said. “He said it like he'd been carrying it in his mouth thirty years and had to set it down somewhere. His truck threw a rod that December, and without the truck there wasn't any pulpwood, and without the pulpwood there wasn't any rent. He paid his daddy back because she wouldn't take a dollar from his hand.”

“And Earl didn't tell her.”

“Earl was going to tell her when she cooled off, and Opal Teague never cooled off a day in her life.” He finished the coffee. “Then Earl's heart quit on him out by the henhouse in eighty-five, and that was that.”

“So there's no way to know.”

He looked at me then, a long look, the kind a man gives a stray dog while he decides whether to feed it.

“Earl Teague,” he said, “would write you a receipt for a dozen eggs.”

I waited.

“Carried a receipt book in his shirt pocket, the kind with the carbon paper,” he said. “You bought firewood off Earl, you got a receipt. I got a drawer full of them in my kitchen right now, and that man's been in the ground since Reagan.”

“If Wendell paid him,” I said.

“Earl wrote it down.” He held out his hand for the thermos cap, and I gave it back. “Opal put every bit of Earl's things up in the attic after the funeral and told my wife she couldn't stand to look at his handwriting.”

* * *

I got a room at a motel on the highway in Magee. The sign out front said WELCOME HUNTERS and under that, smaller, NO DEER IN ROOMS. I read it three times in the parking lot.

I cleaned the grit out of my palms in the bathroom sink with hot water and the little motel soap, and it hurt more than the skinning had. Then I sat on the bed with the Mississippi map on my knees and put a pencil dot on the county road where Lavelle Hinton's truck had been. It was the first dot I had made for anything but a coffee shop.

I lay down in my clothes and looked at the ceiling.

I had told her she was dead. I had counted the Decembers out loud at her table and handed her the number, and she had not even looked at the calendar. She had looked at me.

I went back through it the way I used to go back through code that would not compile, line by line, hunting for the place the logic broke. The man in Tennessee had gone when I showed him his time card, so I had decided the time card was the point. I had decided the point was the date, the end, the proof that they were past their own lives.

But the man in Tennessee had not been stuck on being dead. He had been stuck on being late, and the card told him the shift was over.

Opal Teague had the same trouble. She had been sitting in that kitchen for twenty-six years with the tin over her head, and the calendar mattered to her about as much as the stopped clock in the range. She had told me exactly what was wrong, and she had told me twice.

My son went in that tin.

I had argued with her about the wrong thing, because the calendar was the most obvious thing in the room.

I did not have a rule. Later I would have rules, and some of them would turn out to be wrong, and it is easy to look back from a rule and pretend you always had it. What I had that night in Magee was a pair of skinned hands, an old man in a pickup and a receipt book that might or might not be in an attic.

I slept badly. The ringing in my ear kept me company.

* * *

It was Sunday when I drove back, and the county road was full of cars going to church. A man in a gray suit lifted two fingers off his steering wheel at me, the way people do on roads like that, and I lifted two back. The sign out on the highway still said EVEN YOU.

Lavelle's truck was in his carport. He was not in it. The smell reached me across the road before I had the engine off: starch, cold ashes, burnt sugar.

I went around back and stood at the bottom of the three steps I had gone down on my spine, and I did not go up them.

"Opal," I said. "It's Cal Rourke, from California."

Nothing. A crow in the pecan trees. The wet grass soaking through the toes of my boots.

"I'd like to come in," I said. "I won't talk about the calendar."

I stood there a long time and counted the hinges on the henhouse door, two, one of them broken. I counted the clothespins still on the line, eleven, all gray. I had been counting things since long before the diagnosis at fourteen gave it a name, and I counted them now with my hands in my pockets because my palms hurt.

The wooden door opened.

Nobody opened it. It swung inward on its swollen hinges with a sound like a long complaint and stopped halfway.

I went up the steps.

* * *

She was at the table with the pecans. The kitchen was cold, but not the cold of the day before, and my breath showed only faintly. The windows were clear.

"You said a hateful thing in my kitchen," she said, without looking up.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry."

"Hmp." She cracked a pecan. "Sit down."

Somebody had stood my chair back up. I sat in it. The bowl was as empty as it had been the day before, and the pile beside it was as big.

I did not talk about the calendar. I did not talk about Wendell either, not yet. I asked her about Earl.

She did not want to talk about Earl. I could feel a stiffening in the room, like a cat's back going up under your hand. But she had been raised to answer a direct question, and after a while she answered.

Earl had worked at the sawmill in Mendenhall for thirty-one years and come home every night smelling of pine pitch and chainsaw oil. He built the henhouse and the back steps and the shelf over the stove. In forty-one years of marriage he had raised his voice a handful of times, and every one of them had been at a mule.

"He kept a receipt book," I said.

Her hands stopped on the nutcracker.

"In his shirt pocket," I said. "The kind with carbons."

"Who told you that?"

"Mr. Hinton."

“Lavelle Hinton talks more than a radio.” Her hands started again. “I'd give Earl a dollar for the collection plate and he'd write me a receipt for it, and he thought that was the funniest thing in the world.”

The line of her mouth changed again. “Forty-one years,” she said. “I've got a shoebox of receipts for collection money my own husband handed back to me.”

“Where are they?”

The stiffening came back. The cold shifted, and I felt it on my wrists.

“Earl's things are put up,” she said. “And they can stay put up.”

I looked past her through the kitchen doorway into the hall, a narrow one with a runner on the floor. Halfway down, in the ceiling, there was a square hatch with a pull cord. The cord had been looped up around a nail in the door frame and tied off with a yellow dish towel, knotted and knotted again, so nobody could reach it.

“Did you tie that?” I said.

She did not look at the hall. Everywhere else in the house, she had followed my eyes when I looked at a thing, the way people do: the stove, the window, the back door. She did not follow them to the hall.

“A man's papers are his own business,” she said.

“He's been gone a long time.”

“Forty years in March,” she said, at once. She knew that number the way she knew six hundred and twelve dollars. “And they're still his.”

A car went slowly by on the county road and did not stop. In the pecan trees the crow said something, and another crow answered.

“Why did you put them up there?” I said.

She cracked a pecan and picked out the halves. They did not land in the bowl.

“Because I couldn't stand to look at his handwriting,” she said. “Every time I saw it I saw him sitting right there with his hands folded and that tin open and not one word out of him. Forty-one years I gave him, and when it counted he sat there like a fence post and let that boy take my Christmas.”

She set the nutcracker down hard. The cold moved through the kitchen, not aimed at me this time, going around the room like something pacing.

“I'd like to go up there,” I said.

She did not answer. She turned her face to the window over the sink and looked out at the clothesline with its eleven gray clothespins and the henhouse with its one good hinge. She looked at it the way people look out a window when they are waiting for you to leave the room.

I took that for as much yes as I was going to get.

* * *

The knot took me ten minutes.

I had a pocketknife. But the towel was hers and she had tied it, and the part of me that lines up salt and pepper shakers in diners would not let me cut a thing someone had tied that carefully. It had been tied wet a long time ago and had dried that way, and I worked every loop loose with a thumbnail in the cold hall.

When it came free I folded the towel in quarters and set it on the hall table beside a lamp with no bulb. Then I pulled the cord.

The hatch came down with a groan of springs and a shower of grit and dead wasps, and a folding ladder slid out of it in sections. I went up with the flashlight in my teeth.

The attic was colder than the kitchen. It ran the length of the house under the tin, so low at the edges I had to crawl, with pink insulation going to dust between the joists and plywood sheets laid down the middle for a floor. Mud dauber nests lined the rafters like rows of little organ pipes, and a small window at the gable end let in daylight gone brown through the dirt on the glass.

And there were boxes. Shoeboxes mostly, in rows along the plywood, with a few liquor store cartons among them.

Every shoebox had a label on the end in carpenter's pencil, square capitals leaning a little to the right: TAX 77, TAX 78, MILL, FENCE, PECAN MAN, FIREWOOD 82-83.

Earl's handwriting. I sat on my heels and looked at it in the flashlight, the steady square letters, the way he crossed his sevens. It was a hand that had written a great deal and never once tried to be pretty.

I started at the near end and worked back.

It took most of the morning. Earl had not sorted by any system I could find except the order in which things had happened to him. Seed and feed and lumber, a transmission for a 1972 Chevrolet, a double cemetery plot at Pleasant Hill paid in full in 1974.

There were receipt books, dozens of them, the little ones with carbon sheets between the pages, banded together by year with rubber bands gone so brittle they snapped when I touched them. There was a whole shoebox of collection plate receipts, RECEIVED OF OPAL $1.00 and RECEIVED OF OPAL $2.00, EASTER, and on and on.

I read about twenty of them and laughed out loud, alone in the attic, and the sound went into the insulation and died.

My knees went numb on the plywood. My breath hung in the flashlight beam. Below me I could feel her, not in the kitchen anymore but in the hall, under the hatch, not coming up and not going away.

The box was near the back, under a carton of Christmas ornaments wrapped in old newspaper. It did not say WENDELL or MONEY. It said XMAS.

Inside was one receipt book, banded by itself. I took the band off and opened it under the light.

The first carbon was dated January 14, 1983. RECEIVED OF WENDELL T. $50.00 ON THE XMAS MONEY. E.T.

February 11, the same words, the same fifty dollars. Then March, April, May, every month near the second Friday. In July it was sixty-two dollars instead, and Earl had written BAL. $250 beside it and underlined the balance twice.

The last carbon was dated December 17, 1983.

RECEIVED OF WENDELL T. $50.00. PAID IN FULL. $612.00. E.T.

And under the initials, in the same pencil, pressed so hard the carbon had come through nearly black:

TELL OPAL.

I sat back on my heels.

I do not know why Earl Teague did not tell her. Maybe he tried and she would not hear it. Maybe he was waiting for the right Christmas morning, and it did not come, and then his heart quit out by the henhouse.

I do not know what he did with six hundred and twelve dollars. I know he wrote TELL OPAL in a receipt book and put it in a shoebox under the Christmas ornaments. I know that because I was holding it.

* * *

“I found something of Earl's,” I said, down through the hatch. “It's in his handwriting, and I'd like you to see it.”

The cold under the hatch did not move. My flashlight beam was shaking on the rafters because my hand was.

Then the cold came up the ladder.

I felt it come rung by rung, the way water comes up through a floor drain, slow and then all at once. Frost started on the little gable window and came in from the edges of the brown glass in ferns. The ringing in my ear climbed, a kettle again, and then she was in the attic with me among the shoeboxes, in her cardigan and her housedress, with her hair in its pins.

She had not been up here since 1985. She held herself bent under the low rafters with her arms tight to her sides, as if the boxes might reach out and touch her. She looked down the rows of them with Earl's square labels on the ends.

Her face did something then that I will not try to describe.

I held the receipt book out to her, open to the last page, and put the flashlight on it.

She did not take it. I am not sure she could have. She bent over it where I held it, close, the way a woman bends over small print when she has left her glasses in the other room.

She read the last carbon. Then she said, “Go back,” and I turned the pages for her one at a time, December to January. She read every one of them, and then she said, “Forward,” and I turned them forward to the end.

PAID IN FULL. $612.00. E.T.

TELL OPAL.

The attic went still. I felt it on my wrists and the back of my neck, the air drawing in tight like a breath taken and held. I would feel that pull again in a motel room in New Mexico and in a dozen rooms after it, but that December it only felt like falling, and I was not the one doing it.

“He came around on Christmas Eve,” Opal said. “With his hat in his hand.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“He said Mama, let me explain.” Her voice was small under the tin. “And I put him off my step like a dog.”

I did not say anything. There was nothing in the receipt book about that, and nothing I could add to it.

“Twelve months,” she said. “Fifty dollars a month on what he made hauling pulpwood, with two babies and that truck, and he paid it back before the next Christmas, and Earl wrote it down.”

She straightened as far as the rafters would let her.

A sound came out of her that was not a laugh and not anything else. “That old fool,” she said. “That old fool would write you a receipt for a dozen eggs.”

“Mr. Hinton said the same thing.”

“Lavelle Hinton,” she said, “talks more than a radio.”

She looked at the boxes again, at the labels in Earl's hand in the brown light. She read them down the row, TAX 77, TAX 78, MILL, FENCE, her lips moving on each one.

“Does Wendell still come in June?” she said.

“Mr. Hinton says he does. He mows the yard and sits on the porch an hour.”

“That porch is rotten,” Opal said. “He's going to go straight through it.”

Then she went.

There was no sound and no light. She was bent under the rafters with her arms at her sides, looking at Earl's boxes, and then the place where she had been was cold attic air with my breath hanging in it.

The frost on the gable window turned to water all at once and ran down the glass in long clear streaks. Through the streaks I could see a piece of gray sky and the top of a pecan tree, black and bare, with a crow in it.

* * *

I sat in the attic a long time.

The ringing came back down to where it lived. My knees came back to life on the plywood, painfully. At some point my hands had stopped shaking, and I had not noticed when.

When I climbed down the hall was warmer. It was still December in an unheated house in Mississippi, but it was the cold of empty rooms now, and my breath did not show. The starch and ashes and burnt sugar were gone, and the house smelled of old linoleum and mice and wet wood.

In the kitchen the bowl sat on the table with the nutcracker beside it. The pile of pecans was gone. The bowl was full of shells, every one cracked clean, the halves lying open and empty.

The cracker tin was on the table too.

Someone had taken it down from the shelf and set it beside the bowl. The lid lay upside down next to it, the way you set a lid down when you mean to put something back in.

It was empty. I looked, and I am not sure what I expected.

I stood in the kitchen with the receipt book and thought about what to do with it. None of it was mine. I had come in through a back door I had no business opening and climbed into an attic I had been told to stay out of, and the only living person with a right to any of it was a seventy-three-year-old man in Hattiesburg who did not know I existed.

I could put it back under the ornaments where Earl had put it. I could take it with me. I could drive to Hattiesburg and knock on a stranger's door and say a thing I did not have words for yet.

I set the receipt book on the oilcloth beside the tin, open to the last page, where anybody sitting at that table would see it. I put the lid back on the tin, because I could not stand to leave it off. Then I went out and pulled the back door shut behind me, and it took my shoulder to do it.

* * *

Lavelle Hinton was in his carport splitting kindling. He watched me cross the road and set the hatchet down on the block.

“You been in there all day,” he said.

“Most of it.”

He looked past me at the house. I do not know what he saw, or whether he had ever felt anything from that house in sixty years of living across from it. Then he looked at my face and took his cap off and put it back on.

“Earl wrote it down every month,” I said. “Wendell paid it all back before the next Christmas.”

Lavelle did not look surprised.

“I left it on the kitchen table,” I said. “For whoever goes in next.”

“That'll be Wendell, in June.” He was quiet a minute. “If he goes in.”

He went into his house without another word. I stood in the carport in the smell of split pine and his chimney smoke, and I did not know whether I was supposed to leave.

He came back out with a slip of paper, a receipt gone soft from years in a drawer. RECEIVED OF LAVELLE H. ONE CORD SPLIT OAK $35.00, it said, E.T., 1979. On the back, in a shakier ballpoint

hand, he had written a phone number with a Hattiesburg area code and WENDELL under it.

"Only paper I could find," he said.

"Thank you."

"You going to call him?"

"I don't know."

"Mm." He picked the hatchet back up. "Take it anyhow, because Earl would want you to have a receipt."

* * *

I spent Christmas in a diner outside Hattiesburg that was open because the man who owned it had nowhere else to be either. He told me so when he poured my coffee. There were four of us at the counter, all men, all alone, none of us saying why, and he cooked us ham and eggs and would not take money for the second cup.

My mother called around noon. I told her Mississippi, and there was a silence while she decided what to do with that. Then she asked whether I was eating.

I told her about the ham. She asked whether I had talked to my father, and I said no, and she said all right in the voice she used when it was not all right. Then she told me about the neighbor's Christmas lights, which had gone up the day after Thanksgiving and blown a fuse for the whole street.

I did not tell her about Opal Teague. I did not have the words, and if I had, I would not have known which of them a person says to his mother on Christmas.

After she hung up I laid Earl's receipt on the counter and looked at Wendell's number. The owner refilled my cup without asking. Out the window the lot was empty except for the Tahoe and a shopping cart somebody had left in the handicapped space, its wheels turned in toward each other like feet.

I did not call. I had already gone into his mother's house without asking, and I did not know if I had the right to go into his life the same way. I had left the book on the table, and that was as far as my right went, and he would go in or he would not.

I folded the receipt back into my wallet. I paid for the first cup and left a tip that was more than the ham.

In the Tahoe I opened the Mississippi map and found the pencil dot on the county road south of Jackson, and I went over it until it was dark. Then I put the map back in the door pocket with the others and drove west toward Louisiana and Texas and whatever came after them, the heater on, the radio off, and Earl Teague's receipt for a cord of split oak folded in my wallet.

The World of Ghost Healer

Who is who, when things happen, and where. Everything here comes from the novel, and nothing here gives away what Cal finds behind the closed door or how his road ends.

The Main Characters

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Cal Rourke	The narrator. Twenty-six, two years into a computer science degree and on a semester off, when a Tuesday at Mission San Juan Capistrano changes what he can perceive. Lives out of a Tahoe with paper maps in the door pocket. Reads every sign he passes. Diagnosed with OCD at fourteen. A ringing in his left ear has not stopped since Capistrano.
Destiny MacGee, LPC	A therapist in Savannah with an office near Forsyth Park and thirty years of practice. Listens carefully, charges more than you expect, says little, and writes everything down on a legal pad. Ends every session with the same four words.
Carol Priest	Destiny's own therapist, with an office on the south side of Savannah and a magnolia outside the window that has been too large for its spot for a decade.
Shawna	The woman in the three-story house under the live oaks in Savannah, where the lemon soap smell reaches you at the bottom of the porch steps. Her eyes change color. She tells Cal he is looking at the wrong thing.
The old man at the mission	White beard, no spare expression. Tells Cal to drink water, then says eight words and is gone.
The chief	The oldest of the dead at Capistrano. Speaks directly into Cal's head, in something older than language.
Patrice Wills	A medical supply rep in a blazer and name tag, in Room 11 of a motel outside Albuquerque. She is trying to find her car. Her clipboard is dated September 14, 1987.
Leonard Marsh	Owner of Marsh & Sons Printing in Augusta, Georgia, for thirty-one years, the last twenty without a partner. He had no sons.
Davis	Leonard's apprentice, who came to work at the shop in 1987.
Vera	The presence in a farmhouse on brick piers outside Walterboro, South Carolina. She wants to tell Cal about her sister Ada.
Margaret Cole	Taught English at Darien High School for thirty-eight years. Has spent two decades building a careful argument that she is not dead.
Harold Fenwick	A retired Alabama Highway Department engineer outside Dothan, with forty years of work built on one number from a 1961 survey report. His wife Dorothy moved his papers every time she cleaned.
Warren Gill	The presence in a Georgia farmhouse with a rag rug on the floor and a mantel clock stopped at 11:22.

Celestine Tureaud	Nineteen when she died, on the gallery of a Creole cottage in St. Martin Parish, Louisiana. Her mother was going to teach her the Christmas sauce.
Augustin and Prosper Doucet	Celestine's uncle, walking the east fence line, and the man who bought the land in 1887.
Frank Delacroix	A charming man in a double shotgun house in the Tremé, New Orleans, with a story about a debt that he tells three different ways.
June Parkes	A widow in a white frame house south of Beaufort, where something is always baking. Married fifty-five years to Robert.
Paula and Beverly	Two women behind diner counters, one outside Dothan and one outside Brewton, who refill Cal's cup without asking.

In this story only

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Opal Teague	Kept hens and pecan trees on a county road south of Jackson, Mississippi, and saved the money in a cracker tin over the stove.
Earl Teague	Her husband. Worked at the sawmill in Mendenhall for thirty-one years and wrote a receipt for everything.
Wendell Teague	Their son, in Hattiesburg. Comes up every June to mow the yard.
Lavelle Hinton	The neighbor across the road since 1962. Keeps coffee in a thermos and a drawer full of Earl's receipts.

Timeline

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
1812	An earthquake knocks down the stone church at Mission San Juan Capistrano. Nobody rebuilds it.
1887	Prosper Doucet buys the land in St. Martin Parish. The survey sets the east line. Later surveys follow in 1893 and 1921.
1961	At a surveying conference in Birmingham, Robert Ashby shows Harold Fenwick a report with a number in it that Harold never stops thinking about.
September 1967	The first job comes off the press at Marsh & Sons: a handbill for a feed store sale in Waynesboro.
1971	Margaret Cole retires from teaching and buys the house outside Darien.
December 1982	Opal Teague comes home from choir practice to an empty tin. (This story.)

1983	A man in Tennessee begins being late for work, and stays late.
1987	Davis goes to work at the print shop. Patrice Wills checks into Room 11.
Cal at fourteen	Diagnosed with OCD. His parents separate when he is a junior in high school.
October, Cal at 26	A Tuesday at Mission San Juan Capistrano. He calls in sick, gives notice, and sells most of what he owns.
November	Cal drives away from his apartment on a Thursday morning with a full tank and no destination.
Weeks later	A motel in Tennessee: the man who is late. Then, in December, a county road in Mississippi. (This story.)
Three months on the road	Room 11, outside Albuquerque. Two weeks after it, the first nosebleed. Then a house in Beaumont, Texas, that he cannot read at all.
March	Cal puts up a website with no name on it and four sentences about what he is looking for.
August	The print shop in Augusta.
October	The farmhouse outside Walterboro, and the start of the bad weeks.
November	Beaufort, Hinesville, Brunswick, a night in the Tahoe on a Savannah street, and the first knock at the house that smells of lemon soap.
December, thirteen months on the road	Cal sits down in Destiny MacGee's waiting room and asks her to tell him he is crazy. The novel goes on from there.

Places

- **Mission San Juan Capistrano, California.** Mud brick walls, worn stone paths, a ruined church, and a statue of a priest and a boy near the path.
- **The motel outside Albuquerque.** A diner with better coffee than it has any right to have, Room 12, and Room 11 next door.
- **Marsh & Sons Printing, Augusta, Georgia.** A narrow storefront on a side street, a Heidelberg press, a type cabinet with brass pulls, and a cylinder assembly in the back left corner.
- **The house with the lemon soap, Savannah.** Three stories under live oaks and Spanish moss. A painting, a skeleton, and a closed door at the end of the upstairs hall.
- **Destiny's office, Savannah.** Near Forsyth Park, with a snake plant in the corner and a view of the fountain.
- **The farmhouse outside Walterboro.** Up on brick piers at the end of a sand lane through live oaks.
- **Margaret Cole's house, outside Darien.** White frame, green shutters, a magnolia drive, books on three walls.

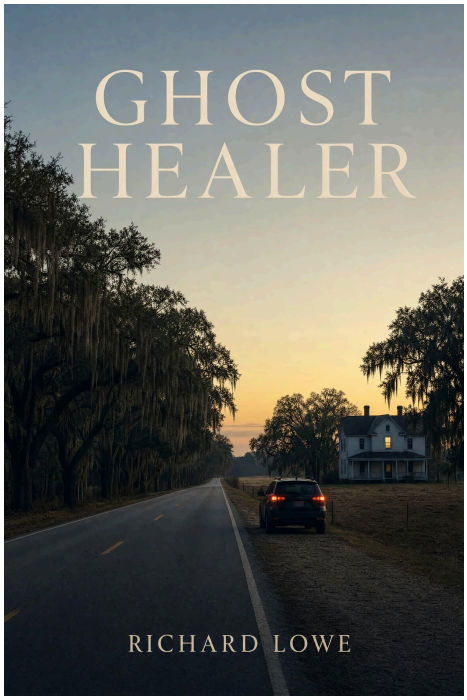
- **Harold Fenwick's house, outside Dothan, Alabama.** Built in 1934, with additions that do not agree with each other.
- **The Creole cottage, St. Martin Parish, Louisiana.** A gallery across the front, cypress boards, and a privet hedge along the east line.
- **The double shotgun, the Tremé, New Orleans.** Painted a yellow that has quieted over the decades, and lit like a stage.
- **The Teague place, Mississippi.** A county road south of Jackson, a mailbox missing its G, four pecan trees, and a tin over the stove. (This story.)

Glossary

- **Case.** Cal's word for a place where someone has not left, since nothing else fits better.
- **Presence.** The dead person still in a place. Some talk, some show him things, some will not communicate at all.
- **Signature.** How a presence feels: temperature, smell, the weight of the air. Every presence Cal knows has one, and it holds from room to room.
- **The wrong external fact.** The piece of the world a presence is stuck on, something out there that is not true. Find it, show them the true thing, and they go.
- **Going.** What happens when it works. Sometimes the room marks it. Sometimes nothing does.
- **Arriving clean.** Coming to a case with no referral and no prior read, seeing what is there instead of what he was told to expect. The cases Cal trusts most.
- **Referral.** An address passed to Cal by someone who knows someone, or later through his website. Useful, and dangerous, because it tells him what to expect.
- **The instrument.** The part of Cal that reads a room.
- **The dots.** Pencil marks on Cal's paper maps at the places where the coffee was worth stopping for.
- **Same time Thursday.** How Destiny ends a session.

Read the Novel

Opal Teague was one of Cal Rourke's first cases, back when he still thought one success made a rule. In Ghost Healer, the road runs through Georgia, the Carolinas and Louisiana, past a print shop in Augusta he should have looked at harder, to a house in Savannah that smells of lemon soap and a therapist who writes everything down.



Ghost Healer

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