



# BLOOD BENEATH MY FEET

THE **JOURNEY** OF A **SOUTHERN**  
**DEATH INVESTIGATOR**

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**JOSEPH SCOTT MORGAN**

"A new storyteller rises in the Southern gothic style... This powerful memoir attests to the deep, dark waters through which death investigators often navigate."—Mary H. Manheim, author, *The Bone Lady*

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BENEATH  
MY FEET**



**THE JOURNEY  
OF A SOUTHERN  
DEATH  
INVESTIGATOR**



**BY  
JOSEPH SCOTT MORGAN**

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Port Townsend, WA 98368

*This work is dedicated to my precious wife,*

---

*Kimberley H. Morgan.*

*Thank you for being tough enough to pry me loose  
and tender enough to love me when the faces appear  
in both my waking hours and in my dreams.*



*“You are NOT a death investigator,  
you are my husband and a father.  
Death has taken enough from you...  
turn loose, it will all be okay.”*

*—Kim Morgan, October 2004*

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*“It takes two people to make you, and one people to die.  
That’s how the world is going to end.”*

—William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

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# ADVICE FROM DEAD KINFOLKS

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THE ASPHALT GLISTENED beneath my headlights. It had been raining for several days, but in this toilet there is never enough water to flush it clean. I was on my way to another traffic fatality. How many was this? Twenty-one years on the job times a non-specific factor of stupidity plus human frailty, minus sympathy, divided by dumb luck, equals who cares.

*Impervious.* That's me. Nothing manages to surprise me any longer. I am not saying that I have seen it all. You never see it all. I have just seen more than enough. By the time I had pulled my vehicle onto the interstate in downtown Atlanta on that predawn morning in 2004, I figured I had been parlaying with death for far too long.

Fragmented skulls and maggot-infested bodies no longer affected me. Apathy was now a warm protective blanket I wrapped myself in. I no longer pitied or even gave pause to those who grieve. My job was simply to exist from day to day in a haze of competence. I had ceased being a real death investigator, anyway. Once I had lived to answer the questions others didn't have the desire or the intestinal fortitude to delve into. Now I just didn't give a shit. Our medical examiner had relegated the investigative staff to the role of clerks. Our opinions no longer mattered to either the ME or the forensic pathologist we served. We were just box-checkers splattered with blood.

In most large cities the job of investigating deaths ultimately rests with a medical examiner and death investigators like me. Though there are numerous support personnel, forensic pathologists sit at the top of that pecking order, above even the ME. As a death investigator, I was the one to go over a death scene and provide written assessments, as well as sometimes assist in autopsies back at the morgue. I'd been assessing Death's handiwork for decades. Now I just wanted out.

Smoke and flashing lights were refracted in the tiny prisms of rain droplets on my windshield. With the flash of each wig-wag strobe light from the police and fire vehicles, Death was telling me *You're one step closer, boy.*

I had felt for some time an awareness of my own flesh in decay. Whenever I stared down at another finished human being, I now saw my own face. I never allowed terror to grip me, fighting it instead only to observe, but each shift I worked had become my own personal deathwatch. There was no longer a question of *if* but simply *when*. Because Death, my closest companion, was always waiting nearby.

As a younger man, I had stood over lifeless bodies and arrogantly thought, *How could you do this to yourself? Or Boy, you were stupid. Or Better you than me.* I had wanted this job. Perhaps I'd thought that the world would view me as *somebody*, an official medicolegal death investigator who was worthy of accolades due to all the important work I so carefully and sensitively performed. Because I valued life and respected death. But only a fool believes Death cares what we think or do.

The same actors appear at every death scene, only wearing different bodies. The young police officers were milling about, absorbing how the older officers were conducting the investigation. The firefighters and EMTs were rolling hoses and writing reports—there was no one to save. Witnesses were sitting in their cars, still in the disbelief stage, and maybe wondering why all this didn't look like it does on TV. And of course Death was center stage, in what was left of a charred young man wedged inside his burned-out pickup truck. He had driven himself into the side of the overpass abutment. Someone else would figure out why.

Death is like the slobbering drunk at the office Christmas party. You hope he doesn't see you, but then he does and makes a beeline for you, throwing his arm around your shoulder and blowing his hot breath in your face. He tells you his sickening story and you've heard it before. It may feel pointless to listen, but it's not so easy to get away. Enduring each retelling again and again had become too much for me. For over twenty years I had been the Reaper's first audience and interpreter, recounting his tale in fine detail to anyone who wanted to hear it. But it had become my own eventual death that appeared in every repeated interpretation.

When a death investigator arrives at a death scene, looks become palpable. I felt everyone's eyes on me as I closed my car door, tucked my notepad under my arm. The cops and firefighters may think they know what I have seen, but even they don't want to know everything. The older ones whisper to the younger ones, who probably wonder to themselves what kind of person could want to do what I do every day—come face to face with the dead. I'm sure they all have their ideas about me, and the older ones carry around stories of the things they have seen me do that they could not bear to watch, the places I've had to go that make them thank God they don't have my job. Their platitudes chase me. "Man, I don't know how you do it!" "Whatever they're paying you, it ain't enough."

There are a few who envy me. They want to know what they have to do to get my job, to be who I am. "It's only death, how hard can it be?" *Here*, I silently reply, *take it all*. Every festering remnant of the people no one cared about in life, much less in death; all the broken children who will never know that I had grieved for them. Take it all. Just leave me my car keys so I can go home permanently. Someone else can listen to the bullshit Death loves to spew. He never shuts up.

Investigators hate rain. It washes away everything that is key, everything that may help you find blood, semen, hair, fingerprints, gunshot residue. Given enough time, water destroys it all. Death prays for rain. With the water, his chances of having a bountiful harvest increase exponentially. Slides, roads, drownings, rainy-day blues—water is one of Death's favorite toys.

Droplets rolled down my face as I neared the truck's wreckage. The young man sat curled and crispy behind the contorted steering wheel, staring pensively up at the bridge, but his eyes had been burned away. His smell entered my nostrils and he immediately became, like so many others, a part of me. People always say that if you ever smell burned human flesh, you never forget it. I had forgotten. It was like I'd had lidocaine poured into my senses; I could no longer react to it, even though I badly wanted to be repulsed, like anyone else would be. I was someone who had grown immune to it all. But the repulsion was still there, all around me and in me, whether I could feel it or not.

"We got a crispy critter!" One of the traffic cops shouted to me, too big for his polyester uniform. *No shit*, I thought.

"Our guess is he was late for work." With no response from me, the cop drifted away again.

My hands trembled as I stood before the burned-out frame. I avoided the eyes of the others standing around me now, waiting to see me perform. It's not like I didn't know what I was doing, but the shaking had begun. I was in the presence of my master, Death, and in recent years my fear of his questions, of his demands on me, had resulted in barely controlled trembling jags. I was tired of his rubbing all his talents in my face. *Do you see this? Just like I have told you before, I can do this anytime I want*. Death too was watching me perform my thankless job.

I leaned into the cab of the smoldering Ford Ranger. What remained of the body looked like a hot dog that had rolled off the grill and into the coals. Any remnants of the clothes he'd been wearing had melted—along with the seat—to his back. Everything else was gone. Everything except his hands. They hung in the air like blackened hooks. When I leaned closer to see if his seatbelt was buckled, the charred fingers of his left hand brushed my cheek. I jerked back and, without thinking, grabbed his



arm. It snapped at the elbow. I stood holding it while the rain persisted.

My glasses had fogged, so with my free hand I pushed them up onto the crown of my head. I stared at the structure of the scorched mass before me, considering its forensic value. My trembling intensified. I wanted to hide. With the dead man's burnt arm still in my grip, I backed away and attempted to keep a slow, even pace, retreating into the dark patches under the overpass unlit by the response team's headlights. I held that arm like a dog that had just found a discarded bone to gnaw. I sat on a stretch of concrete in the shadows at the base of the retaining slope, shaking so hard that tears began to fall from my eyes. I felt all alone and hanging onto a bare thread of control in the dirty, wretched darkness of Atlanta.



Had Sherman sensed it? The false promise of a place like Atlanta? From the moment I had rolled into this city, years previously, I had felt it pour over my body like some Holy Roller anointing me with rancid oil. But both Death and my own vanity lured me into staying. I was gonna reach truly great heights in my career, in a city that promoted itself as the South's greatest. Death surely had had a few chuckles at that.

Most Southerners labor under the assumption that William Tecumseh Sherman had hated Atlanta and its residents. As a lifelong Southerner and a Civil War enthusiast, I don't share the belief of my fellow denizens. It is well documented that throughout the war Sherman made several favorable comments relative to Southerners, and Atlanta in particular. And before the war, he had been the first superintendent of the Louisiana Military Academy, which later became Louisiana State University. But to listen to the reports in the local news over the past twenty-five years, one would think that Atlanta is a veritable Dixieland Garden of Eden. It's not. Even as Sherman's men set fire to the city, Atlantans held onto a belief in their own supremacy. Their hope remained resolute.

Death investigation, no matter where it's performed, is a profession lacking all hope. Collecting clues at the scene of a death is meager consolation when compared to the burden of day in and day out loss. The bodies never stop coming. Every day I would drive in from the south side of the city to work and as the skyline of Atlanta materialized in my windshield, a spirit of dread would ooze over my soul like thick decompositional fluid pouring down my gloves during an examination. The knot in my stomach grew larger over the years, along with the associated nausea. I would sit down at my desk each morning, stare at the pictures of my family, and long to be with them instead of waiting for the Reaper to summon me. Atlanta was sapping me of my breath and my will. Certainly of any hope.

Over the course of the hundreds of cases I investigated in this city, how many people did not die from gunfire or heart disease but died instead from a lack of hope? A former mayor of Atlanta once called the place "the city too busy to hate." I guess that all depends on your perspective.

In a grotesque twist of fate, two of my ancestors had fought against Sherman in the defense of Atlanta. The entrenchments where they had watched their friends and relatives die, where they had hidden throughout the six-week siege, surely filled with foreboding and fear, are near my office. I wonder whether they had sensed the futility of what they were doing. What convinced them to participate in such an apparently pointless exercise in death? Perhaps the siren song of glory and adventure will always tempt young men, just as it had tempted me toward Atlanta.

The very area where my ancestors spilled blood, and had their own blood spilled, is now occupied

by drug dealers, crack whores, and government housing. The same killing fields are where I cleaned up the blood of other young men with no cause to fight for or against except that of their own indulgence.

Those of us who were subjected to Bible-thumping Sunday school teachers were taught that not only was honesty the best policy but that the lack of it was a sin. Having worked first as a dead-end investigator in the suburbs of the most renowned of all Southern cities, New Orleans, then in the urban neighborhoods of Atlanta, I can avow that there is a lot of plain and simple honesty missing in the self-proclaimed Capital of the New South. If these two cities were ladies, and both were known to be whores, New Orleans is the one who at least freely admits it. That type of honesty is easy to live with. Whereas Atlanta is the whore who keeps her face hidden behind a veil of pseudo-respectability, draped herself in the flashing chrome and glass of the mansions along West Paces Ferry, while her poor survive in substandard dwellings and dodge bullets daily from passing vehicles. Many come to Atlanta for a new, prosperous life only to find the decomposing remnants of a rotting peach.

Those not from the South often use the adjective "charm" to describe all things Southern. *Gone with the Wind* is the only impression outsiders seem to maintain of the region as a whole and, for some, Atlanta represents its epicenter. In truth, Atlanta is devoid of charm. When tourists arrive here they find Tara has been supplanted by both multimillion-dollar high-rise condominiums and slums. And this film's musical score is not full of sweet and melancholic violins, but the thumping sounds of Ludacris and Lil Jon.



My Great-Great-Great-Uncle Steve Dupry. Defender of Atlanta and unreconstructed Rebel. Circa 1901.

As my dauntless ancestors spin in their graves, Atlanta continues her evolution into just another Southern city. And New Orleans, despite its lethal weather and dangerous streets, survives as the graceful Southern lady who speaks more gently and states, "I am here to be loved, but you must love me in total." New Orleans is both beautiful and violent. It possesses an allure absent from Atlanta where thousands of commuters drive in and out day after day, living their lives in contrived trace home developments.

When I first arrived at the Atlanta medical examiner's office during the summer of 1992, I thought it held promise. I'd imagined the change would do me good, that maybe the cries I carried around in my head from all the anguished New Orleans families would somehow be quelled. They weren't. The melancholy of constant death hung just as heavily in the air here. I had looked forward to new colleagues who might inspire in me a renewed energy for forensics. They didn't. They were just as bitter and dissatisfied as all the others I had worked with. The new surroundings bolstered my hope that I would be plying my trade in new, exotic locales. If anything, I missed the comforting allure of the Crescent City.

I soon understood that the professional castor oil I was required to ingest in New Orleans had to always at least come with a dose of sugar. In Atlanta, the sugar bowl was quite empty. There were no fascinating cases, just really poor people killing other really poor people. It became apparent that the only intellectually stimulating cases were generated in and amongst the middle class. I had arrived about fifteen years too late to work those cases; the middle class had already fled the city. What remained were the fabulously wealthy, those who believed themselves affluent, and those who existed on government scraps. In New Orleans, people lived on top of one another; there was no place to flee to. The chances that the middle class and the poor would clash were much greater. But the rich in Atlanta never traveled any further south than Turner Field for a baseball game and, because they were so fearful of being robbed, they would sprint to and from their vehicles, then relish a speedy return to their safely gated homes. There are two Atlantas but there is only one New Orleans.



To work as a death investigator is to offer up yourself as a sacrifice to your own personal god of vanity. It is a notorious profession, depicted on TV and in films in ways that intrigue and repulse in equal measure. Some perverse characters even wish they could see the things you have seen. Other professions carry their own built-in cachet—brain surgeon, fighter pilot, professional athlete—but none of those professions requires you scrape brains off the floor.

As I reflect back and picture myself sitting, trembling under that overpass in rainy darkness on another Atlanta morning broke, I realize I was in that moment at the end of my profession. I held on to that scorched arm of some unknown man caught by Death, shaking so violently I could no longer hold it.

A more official end of my profession would come after three trips to the emergency room within the following two months, certain each time that I was having a heart attack. The third visit required a ride from my office in the back of an ambulance. It was the last time I saw the hollow looks of my colleagues, those devoted few who had pulled this weight with me for so long, interpreting Death as never-ending stories.

When a psychiatrist assessed me from across her desk as I shivered like a lunatic standing on

naked in the snow, I read my future in her eyes. There would be no end to this shaking. She told me ~~was one of the worst cases of post-traumatic stress she had seen since her days working with new~~ returned Vietnam vets. She placed me on medications to give my nervous system a break. I stayed home and slept for four days. Everything stopped. Even the remembered screams. And I knew, just as the psychiatrist had said, that I would soon be committed to a mental ward if I tried to go back to being Death's interpreter.

My unwanted partner had taught me so much, had stolen so much from me. I was no longer Senior Investigator Joseph Morgan. I was just unemployed, disabled Joe looking at a fresh new page and wondering what was next for me. But I had survived Atlanta. I had survived Death, for now. Even though I knew full well that no one ever beats it, I felt hopeful. I continue to feel as if I had, at least once in my life, cheated Death.

Had my ancestors felt this way when they had retreated from their defense of Atlanta? What scars had they borne as they trekked back west to their homes? If given the chance, would they have done it all again? They had come ready to spill blood. I was there many decades later, ready to mop it up. It had probably meant very little to the people of Atlanta, but it had cost us almost everything.

# PAINTING

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## THE TOWN WITH JOE

**THE NAME JOSEPH** is a seemingly innocuous one. Think of it. To be described as mediocre or socially invisible is to be called an Average Joe. This is the name I have been known by various times in my life. Others include José, Josephine (sadistic former stepfather), Dummy, Mordecai Eeyore (ex-wife), Joey, and of course the ever-popular, bland Joe. My wife despises Joe. She believes it indicates an intellectual dullard. I don't necessarily agree. What can I say? I find succinctness appealing.

My wife insists on calling me by my given name; thus, everyone we meet knows me as Joseph. The name has great history: Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers; Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus; Joseph of Arimathea, who provided Christ's burial plot; and to Alabamans everywhere, the hallowed Joseph William Namath. However, the Joseph who most influenced my life was the one after whom I was named. The influence that I refer to is not so much a result of his taking me fishing or passing on any words to live by; his influence was far more potent, and it originated from beyond the grave.

By the time I was given my name, Joseph Frazer Killian had been dead for almost thirteen years. People just called him Joe. He was the eldest of six children and born to an alcoholic, skirt-chasing stonemason, my great-grandpa R.R. Killian, and his wife, Elizabeth, a woman so devoutly Christian that she forbade anyone to even speak of card-playing in her home. The courtship of my great-grandparents was the stuff of legend. Even their marriage made the front pages of the newspapers the day—though certainly not because the two had scaled the heights of society, unless chopping cotton and milking cows qualified for social advancement.

On the day R.R. and Elizabeth were wed, Great-Grandpa Killian had waited until Elizabeth's father, Reverend Frazer Scott, had left to preach a local revival in his buggy, drawn by the family mare. Reverend Scott was well known as a fire-and-brimstone Methodist Circuit preacher. When his Killian beau came to the door, Elizabeth was cooking. As the story goes, he called out to her, like some backwoods Romeo, and Elizabeth rushed out of the house and hopped on the back of R.R.'s horse. Off they rode into local infamy, leaving the peas burning on the stove and subsequently setting the man of God's house on fire.

That evening, as the newlyweds most certainly found their first coital comfort in one another's arms, Reverend Scott was searching for his shotgun in the burned-out remains of his home. The next day's paper detailed the story of the two youngsters, and since Elizabeth was only fourteen, it also added how her father was shooting to kill if he ever caught sight of either one of them.

However justified Reverend Scott would have been in slaying R.R. for the theft of his young daughter's maidenhead, not to mention the razing of his domicile, the better angels of his nature eventually prevailed, and the two survived to procreate. Perhaps as a peace offering, the young couple gave their first male child the good reverend's name. Being the eldest child and the only male, Joseph Frazer Killian was idolized by his younger sisters. Each one of his sisters, including my grandmother Pearl, described him as a prankster, but one who would follow up any of his tomfoolery with a reassuring hug and a wink. As Joe matured, he became quite a strikingly handsome man. He was always dapperly dressed and was never one to get his hands dirty. He often looked as if he had stepped

off a Hollywood soundstage during the silent era.

Great-Uncle Joe Killian's family, like many of their clan, resided along the swampy banks of Bayou Macon (pronounced Mason and named for the flatboat pirate Mason, who had plied northeastern Louisiana in the 1830s). Bayou Macon was known for the various hooligans who had passed through over the years, the most legendary having been Bonnie and Clyde, who hid from G-men and bounty hunters in an area known as Swampers, or Killian's Landing.



The Killian Children. Bottom row, left to right: Juanita Killian Osterland, Pearl Killian Morgan (my grandmother). Top row, left to right: Roxie Killian, Eunice Killian Lambert and Joseph Killian (after whom I was named). Circa 1915.

Originally, before the onset of hostilities between the North and South, the Killian ancestors had lived in grand antebellum style in Mississippi on lands that had been granted to them by the Spanish Crown at the end of the 1700s. But the Killians were forced to flee after General Grant had burned down their plantation just north of Natchez, Mississippi, while en route to his siege of Vicksburg. Ulysses was not held in high regard by the family, to say the very least. In fact, one of my grandmother's uncles is rumored to have named a pig after the much-esteemed hero of the Yankee aggressors.

After the war, the Killians continued their agrarian life on lands the family had already owned in Louisiana, but it was a life devoid of the successes of their earlier generations. Various members of the clan drifted into work as tradesmen and craftsmen, so it stood to reason that my great-uncle Joe

would become a craftsman too. He chose house painting. The whole family eventually left Swamper migrating northwest to the town of Monroe, Louisiana, and it was there that my great-grandpa Killian continued his trade as a stonemason—as well as his whore chasin’—while his son Joe eventually became the president of the state painters’ union.

Joe Killian eventually married and had children. He led a good life, by anyone’s standards, and was loved by most who knew him, especially his quintet of sisters. Their names sound like characters in the mind of F. Scott Fitzgerald: Eunice, Roxie, Myrtle, Juanita, and Pearl. These names may conjure up images of flappers and bathtub gin, but they would never have been caught doing that in Charleston in Great-Grandma Killian’s strict kitchen.

What the Killian sisters lacked in Roaring-Twenties sophistication, they made up for in unrivaled loyalty to their family. Under the direction of Great-Grandma Killian, eight-year-old Pearl would take food to the local jail, because one of my great-grandma’s friends from the local Methodist church had been arrested for sending her husband to meet Jesus prematurely. Pearl was terrified to convey the basket of food to the woman in lockup, yet typical of the Killian girls, her older sibling Juanita said, “Don’t worry, sister. I’ll protect you,” and off the two went to face an accused murderess together.

This commitment to each other would serve them all well over the years. Decades later, after Pearl had married and started a family of her own, her mother-in-law said about the Killians, “If you kill a chicken, they all have to show up to eat it.” Though homeless and living under her daughter-in-law’s roof, the woman never quit bellyaching about the family who ended up caring for her until the day she died. The Killian bond was unbreakable, even in death.

The weather on January 24, 1951, was cool and clear. That afternoon Grandma Pearl was at home getting ready for a Wednesday-night prayer meeting, when her phone rang. Without telling her why, a nurse at the local hospital urged her to come to the emergency clinic immediately. Imagining her husband had been hurt at work or maybe one of her siblings was in need, Pearl tucked my four-year-old father into their car and raced to St. Francis Hospital in Monroe. What the Killian sisters found on that day would not only change their lives but mine too.

The apple of the Killian family’s eye was lying on a treatment-room bed, his hair freshly cut and his skin smelling of barber salts. Great-Uncle Joe had been shot while coming out of a local barbershop. The boy who had once loved, played, and protected his younger sisters was bullet-riddled. He had died in the back of an ambulance on the way to the hospital.

According to witnesses, this pride of the Killian clan had not been pleading for his life by dancing and darting about the street, trying to keep his parked Ford sedan between himself and the murderer’s gun. It was beneath his Ford, on an Ouachita riverfront street in West Monroe, Louisiana, that he had met his end. As Joe had attempted to scratch his way across the tarmac toward safety, the murderer had stuck a .38-caliber Smith and Wesson under the car and pulled the trigger till there was no further point. Joe’s executioner had then strolled off down the street toward the river, casually holding the weapon in his hand as if he were going fishing in the Ouachita with a new kind of tackle.

As the police and the Killian sisters pieced together what had happened, it became apparent that the young Killian lion had been slaughtered over paint. Great-Uncle Joe had been the first president of the Louisiana Painters’ Local. It was up to him to decide what bids would go to each union member. When a particularly lucrative job of painting a bridge spanning the Mississippi was posted, Joe had made the soon-to-be fatal mistake of not giving it to a fellow by the name of Moore, who then tracked my great-uncle to his barber and waited for him in the saloon across the street.

In graphic detail, over and over again throughout my youth, my grandmother told me how it happened, her eyes weary with tears.

“He always went to the same barber over in West Monroe. Joe always liked to look neat.” She would pause then before saying, “Everyone knew that he went to that barber on the same day every week.”

The only time I ever heard my grandmother use profanity was when she told this story. She explained how Moore rolled the bullets of the revolver across the bar, telling the other bar dwellers, “You see these? They’re for that son-of-a-bitch Killian when he comes out.” Moore then coolly loaded the revolver, strode into the street, and pointed the weapon at Great-Uncle Joe.

Of course, a story this salacious was big news in a small Southern town of the 1950s. The arrest, the sanity hearing, and the trial remained front-page news for months. But what really jolted both the community and the Killian sisters was that, even though his actions were clearly more than enough to get this unapologetic assassin the best seat in the house at Angola, Moore was pardoned by the governor Earl K. Long. It had long been hinted that Earl himself was insane and this only confirmed the fact for the Killian clan.

The alcoholic, homicidal painter and the demented governor of Louisiana set in motion a Killian family tradition. Every year, for almost twenty years to come, on the precise date of beloved Joe’s death, Moore received a black wreath with WE WILL NOT FORGET emblazoned in gold script across its adorning ribbon.

Maybe the insanity and the sorrow have been embedded in my DNA, some kind of loosely twined pair of threads strung through the generations and woven into me. From the moment I was old enough to listen, I was regaled with stories of a man I never met but for whom I bore a name. Tales of how cruel and unjust his death was, how his killer did not receive justice, but that in God’s time he would. My birthright was death.

A Southern man looks not to chance but to the hand of God. My grandmother always told me that God had preordained me to do great things with my life. Her dogma coupled with the ceaseless homage paid to her brother set my young mind to work. I could not then have anticipated what awaited me these many years later, but what boy could imagine a destiny filled with bearing witness to mankind’s foolishness and fragility?



# Death To Organized Labor

Sometime ago, in Ouachita Parish, JOE KILLIAN, the business agent of the Painters Local, was murdered by a man by the name of Moore.

Mr. Moore was defended in the District Court, in Monroe, by C. E. (CAP) BARHAM, and the defense was based on the fact that JOE KILLIAN, as a business agent was a UNION MAN, and **as such**, that in enforcing the rules and regulations of organized labor, **he deprived Moore of the right to work!**

Cap Barham, in arguing his case to the jury, compared organized labor with Communism, and castigated its members as having, and practicing, the same philosophy as JOE STALIN.

He declared in a loud voice that the **eyes of the people of Louisiana** were on **that** jury, and that they could find that Moore was **justified** in killing JOE KILLIAN because Killian was a union man and was depriving him of the right to work.

Cap Barham, in that trial, publicly expressed his true feelings toward labor, when he compared organized labor with Communism and Hiberism!!

**THIS IS THE SAME CAP BARHAM WHO IS NOW SEEKING THE OFFICE OF LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR ON THE TICKET HEADED BY JUDGE ROBERT KENNON.**

If Cap Barham is elected Lieutenant Governor he will **preside** over the Senate—and may the Good Lord have mercy on organized labor when Cap Barham gets through with us.

The Monroe Central Trades and Labor Council, who know Cap Barham, and his anti-labor record best, has gone on record of opposing the election of this anti-labor candidate for Lieutenant-Governor.

JAKE STEVENS, B.A. & F.S.  
Painters Local Union No. 901

CLYDE ANDERSON, Business Agent  
Iron Workers Local Union No. 710

A. G. PATTERSON,  
Carpenters Local Union No. 1811

SAM C. CARD  
Monroe Typographical Union No. 540

RICK SCHERR  
Bricklayers Local Union No. 3

R. L. MOORE  
Papermakers Local Union No. 364

R. H. CHATHAM  
Pulp and Sulphite Workers No. 512

J. P. BRADY, Business Manager  
Plumbers & Steamfitters Local Union  
No. 659

W. J. DeLOACH  
Sheet Metal Workers Local Union No. 503

W. T. HAMILTON  
Cooper Local Union No. 17

L. E. BLACK  
Electricians Local Union No. 446

JOHN B. WHITFIELD, Member  
Police Local Union No. 775

JAMES W. MORRISON, President  
Local Union No. 59  
International Brotherhood of Bookbinders

Organized labor flyer registering their collective complaint against the campaign of Cap Barham who was running for Louisiana Lt. Governor. Barham defended the man who murdered my Uncle Joe.

I sought out my destiny at the same time it was searching for me. When I was just a teen, envisioned myself as an investigator, always asking why or how, and seeking to be in a position where those questions actually meant something. The investigation of death felt as though it fit me like a glove. All my senses told me I was born to it. Understanding the system, the people, and mostly the dead, felt like second nature.

Why would God have me, this Joseph from a long line of Josephs, be the one to record the despair of broken-hearted mothers, wives, and, yes, sisters? Maybe I thought I could do good. Maybe I thought I could save the Great-Uncle Joes of the world and by doing so soothe the anguish of the Killian sisters.

But at the end of the day, things shake out a bit more simply. The path I journeyed as a death investigator was handcuffed to the legacy of a man who bled to death in the street, beneath an old car, and a decision he'd made about paint. You see, neither my long dead great-uncle nor I is an Average Joe.

# JERRY LEE AND ME

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IN THE SOUTH, music influences your life one way or another. As a small child I would sit in ancient wooden camp-meeting chapels with their sawdust aisles listening to “Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling” and the pleadings of a traveling evangelist. I’d be jammed in next to my Southern Methodist grandmother, wondering if the shouted pleadings would ever end.

“This message is for every mother, brother, daughter, or son. When you walk out that door and get into your car, you may be stepping into eternity! This may be your last chance!” I can’t count how many times I heard these same lines repeated through my childhood. Fat, sweaty, balding, and claiming to have been called by God to preach but lacking any call to formal education, the preacher expected his congregation to trust him without question. “The savior is calling! But he is a gentleman to his brothers and sisters. Jesus never barges his way in. He’s waiting at the door of your hearts. Won’t you answer him today?”

A Southern evangelical Christian church is great theater. The drama is in figuring out who would avoid the Devil on any given night.

I preferred to listen to the local music minister sing the hymns in his baritone, rich with a patina that only comes from Deep South humidity and a diet of unfiltered Camels. There was always something soothing about the familiar voice of the music minister as opposed to the preacher, who knew even at my young age was playing the congregation of suckers with his message of spiritual extortion. From the beginning, I favored the music over the preaching. A music minister once said to me, “The great thing about heaven is that there will never be any more sermons, just endless singing. Amen to that.”



The Killian children with parents: Robert R. Killian, Great-Grandfather and Mary Elizabeth Scott Killian, Great-Grandmother. Though they remained married, his chronic drinking, whore-chasing and card-playing ran contrary to her staunch Methodist worldview.

For all the folks in the South who clamor to be shouted at in church, just as many worship the King—Elvis, in all of his crushed-velvet glory. But not us Morgans. It was the Killer our family measured any advertised musical talent against, and to a certain degree still do—Jerry Lee Lewis.

Whether it was Gershwin or the Stones coming through our tinny television speakers, my father would glare at the screen and state, “Well that sum bitch shore ain’t the Killer.” Then he would

abruptly stand and walk away, scratching himself through his boxers, and subsequently slam the bedroom door behind him. My father had been thoroughly proselytized by Jerry Lee. I am still amazed to this day that I was not named after him, Jerry instead of Joseph.

God bless my grandmother. She warned every Morgan, including Daddy and me, about the evils of secular music but to no avail. Who could renounce Jerry Lee, especially when the family rumor was that we were related to him? Hell, my grandmother's home in Monroe, Louisiana, was located just down the road from Swaggart's Grocery, owned by Jimmy Swaggart's aunt and uncle. And Papa claimed that he had sold horses to Mickey Gilley's father. So the die was cast for us all, most importantly my father.

My very first concert was seeing the Killer rock the Civic Center in Monroe with my mother. That piano stool flying through the air as he kicked it backwards while singing "Great Balls of Fire" that's one image forever burned into my memory. I stood through the entire show. This sure wasn't a camp meeting and the audience here was actually cheering while someone shouted at them.

Daddy worshipped at the First Church of Jerry Lee. Like a Mississippi Delta snake charmer, Jerry Lee had the ability to make my father groove like no one else. Whether it was the rockin' Killer or the trailer-park Jerry Lee trying his hand at the country side of life, Daddy danced—destructive, angry, and unfaithful to everyone but his deity. I didn't understand then but there was a rhythm tumbling out of the Killer's ivories (Granny would've said it was the devil), a rhythm that scored my father's dance with both life and death. It was a rhythm I loved too, but it also frightened me—just like my daddy frightened me.

He was a fireplug of a man, my father, with ruddy Cajun features and arms that always appeared too big for his body. He had married my mother young and had never finished high school, and soon after he ran with dangerous older men who belonged to secret societies many are afraid to mention in polite company. He wasn't the type of man to ever back down from a fight and he rarely lost one. His anger was enough to strike fear in the hearts of the stalwart, let alone the tender heart of his own child.

The most infamous Morgan family legend involves my father at age thirteen becoming enraged at his uncle, who was no softie himself—he'd served time in Leavenworth for shooting German prisoners during World War II. Uncle Herman had teased my father into a fury, at which point Daddy grabbed a double-bladed axe and chased Uncle Herman around the yard. According to the story, Uncle Herman was visibly terrified and, if it were not for the intervention of my equally ornery grandfather, I may have been less one great-uncle that day. Dear ol' Daddy was subsequently beaten with my grandfather's leather plow lines.

At his core, my father was a mean-ass bastard with a chip on his shoulder. He always seemed hell-bent on vengeance and terror. Granny was the first to see him coming one summer afternoon in 1969, when I was at Granny's and Papaw's home in Monroe. I stayed with them most of the time because my mother worked and my daddy . . . well, you never quite knew what to expect from him. Those summer days I spent in cut-off short pants, playing in my sand pile, and eating fried bologna sandwiches underneath my grandparents' chinaberry tree. But on this day Daddy had decided to pay me a visit, with a bellyful of Wild Turkey and a sawed-off Iver Johnson double-barreled twelve-gauge shotgun.

Granny jerked me out of my sand pile and pulled me into the house. As Daddy threw metal lawn furniture at his sixty-something-year-old mother, Granny locked the front door against him. He kept screaming—about what, I don't remember, and it probably wasn't about much in particular. But I remember the stark look of fear that washed over my papaw's face. It was a look I would recognize years later on the faces of those who confronted their own mortality.

Daddy crashed the heavy wrought-iron chairs against the rear of the rundown place, cracking and sometimes shattering the asbestos shingles, as my grandmother shoved me under her bed. Then she dropped to the floor right by my face and began to pray. I was able to peer out, past her shaking knees and into the adjoining living room, where my grandfather sat in his bib overalls, rubbing his pocket watch like a talisman, talking to himself. His son called out for his blood while he had a conversation with God or who knows who.

Eventually, as I inched deeper under the bed, I heard sirens approach, but in my five-year-old mind, all I thought about was that I didn't want Granny and Papaw to get hurt. Where was the merciful Jesus they sang about at camp meetings now?

Car doors slammed. "Drop that shotgun, boy, or I'll shoot yore ass!" Then the muffled yells from my drunken daddy. Once the sheriff's men had finally subdued him, I crawled out of my hiding place and watched from the window of my grandparents' living room, with its mouse-shit brown carpet and homemade cypress-knee furniture, as they took my daddy away. A large painting of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane stared down at me while I stared down at Daddy, bruised, bloody, and staggering, his hands cuffed behind him.

The deputies pressed him forward and thrust him into the rear of their patrol car, big men in khaki uniforms who had walked headlong into a violent situation and had been able to make it all come out right somehow. For the rest of my life I would idolize those men and remain deathly terrified of my father.

The Marine Corps was where Daddy landed after that. At least that was where the judge decided he should be—it was either the Corps or the state penitentiary.

On so many occasions during my career I have thought about that scared little boy beneath that sagging, worn-out bed. What would the man I've become say to that little boy now? Would I admit that I'm still scared sometimes, no matter how familiar I've become with death? Perhaps.

One thing I've learned since then is that dead kids define you. There were days as a death investigator when I would think, "I didn't sign up for this." And who would? You'd have to be crazy not to question your sanity if, of your own free will, you chose to deal with dead children.

The pros tell you to dismiss it, to block it out. You toughen, you harden, you disengage, you forget, you move on, you wake up, and you've lost your soul. For a load of reasons, one of which was my father, I arrived at my job already an expert at some of those skills.



Thirty years after Jerry Lee had performed for me, and Jerry Lee's disciple had gone off to Vietnam with the Corps, I found myself outside a dilapidated two-story townhouse in southwest Atlanta. A 911 call had come in concerning a dead infant. Before leaving the office to join the police, I'd grabbed a forensic pathologist to come along with me. The pathologist I'd chosen, Mark Kopone, was thorough and professional, but more importantly he almost resembled a human being. He was one of the few forensic pathologists I could stand being with for more than ten minutes. Take the biggest nerd you ever knew when you were growing up (they have to be totally devoid of any social graces) and give them a handful of sociopathic tendencies, and you have yourself a typical forensic pathologist.

We were greeted at the scene by several uniformed police officers, a police photographer, and a detective. ~~A crowd had gathered outside the house and, though it was a seemingly solemn moment,~~ bass-driven music thumped and people chatted and the young men profiled. Everyone was still kicking it, even though a baby had died.

The baby's body was lying on his mother's bed, a large four-poster with ruffled covers. The emaciated mother sat in a chair by the bed, rubbing her hands up and down her thighs and staring at nothing. According to the beat officer, the mother was well known locally as a *geek monster*, a term I'd learned on my arrival in Atlanta. A geek monster was a first-class asshole who put crack cocaine ahead of all else.

As I examined the diapered corpse, I noted that the baby was uncovered; its round infant tummy showed. A baby's face always looks peaceful after death. But that perception of peace vanishes when you touch the skin and realize that the child is as cold as a fieldstone. No soft warmth, no cooing, no cute smiles—now simply on the road to decay.

From the moment we'd walked in, something didn't jibe. The mother had said she'd woken up to find the baby not breathing. She had attempted resuscitation. The baby had been dead for a couple of hours, by my estimation, and this didn't fit with the mother's timeline. Then she changed her story. The baby had first been in his crib. Then she changed it again. The baby had slept with her all night. According to Koponen, the baby appeared healthy, but the abdomen was slightly swollen. I picked up the infant and considered him for a moment, then had his body removed by our driver.

I was left face to face with the parent of a child who was suddenly gone, a position I'd been in many times over the years. I began by asking the mother about the baby's medical history and dietary habits. Standard questions. When I asked her about the child's last known feeding, she began to laugh uncontrollably. The more questions I asked, the louder she laughed. That's when the conversation ended.

As we drove back through the hopeless landscape of South Atlanta (a transplanted friend of mine from New Orleans called it "a city without soul"), I bumped up against the same question that always seemed to nag at me: Was the child better off dead? It's callous, perhaps, but consider it for a moment. After so many child deaths, I had begun to measure the degrees of potential pain and misery that child would not have to endure. Any number of times I had wondered what the purpose was of the baby's existence, if a baby lived this kind of existence. Questions for God, not me, but after walking into so many horrific scenarios involving children, I had begun to wish that I could somehow step in beforehand and save them all. A bit like those deputies had stepped in to stop something worse from happening to my grandparents and me those many years ago. But, for a death investigator, this is dangerous thinking. Sympathy, tenderness, even friendly smiles come with a price. When the end is always death, it becomes your own flesh that you feel decaying.

When we arrived at the medical examiner's office, Koponen immediately took the infant's body into the autopsy room and started the exam. At my desk, I began to write up the case. Then I was summoned to the morgue.

"Come look at this," Koponen said as I walked in. The autopsy photographer was busy snapping shots as they both hovered over the body.

What could not be seen in the inadequate lighting of that bedroom was glaringly apparent under the morgue lamps. On the delicate, perfect skin of the infant's upper right abdomen was a perfect circular dark bruise.

As Koponen slowly opened the child's abdomen, dark red blood pooled out, mixing with the bile and flooding the stainless-steel table. After the blood was sponged away and measured, Koponen

examined the organs. The liver lay in its normal position, glistening and beefy red. What stood out was a large laceration sometimes referred to as a liver fracture. The only way this happens is through blunt-force trauma.

The call I made to the homicide detective was fueled by rage, which was the only thing that allowed me to carry the despicable information. The detective explained to me then that he had been in with the mother and, in a lucid recess from her crack-induced psychosis, the geek monster had admitted to being so upset with the crying, colicky child that she had grabbed him by the ankles and swung him over her head. I have imagined it too many times, the infant like a medieval mace, arcing overhead, slamming onto a bedpost. Of course the baby had stopped crying after that.

There are not that many degrees of separation between myself, when I was a child, and this dead baby. My early life was defined by the crashing rhythms of Jerry Lee and a whiskey-soaked father on his slow path to Hell; this little being's crack-addicted mother had chosen a glass pipe and "The Bankhead Bounce" over him. And, in the end, both our fates had been sealed by a bed. It's just that one bed had been able to ensure my future and another bed had destroyed his. The terrified little boy who was had become a man who witnessed death daily, and still I wish all of us could fit under my granny's old mattress, holding each other tightly against the sound of the sirens.

# IT'S ALL IN HOW YOU SAY IT

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DREAMS, not the eyes, are windows to the soul. Particularly if you have a bent toward the introspective. For years my dream has always been the same. It begins with buzzing. Not the buzz of a silenced cell phone or the irritating clatter of an old-fashioned doorbell. Organic and familiar, the buzzing rattles my brain and stretches down to my toes. Acute awareness overtakes me and suddenly the dull light of an abandoned room gives my mind's eye sight.

The space is empty. No furniture, no books, no bedding—only windows with sheer, faded yellow curtains. The windows have been painted shut. I know this because I try to open one every time the dream visits me. My skin prickles and faintly stings. The greased soles of my bare feet slide uncontrollably in fatty, foul decompositional fluid. My body radiates from the vibration of the buzzing and prickling, tickling. My arms flail. My hands slap but never deliver relief.

As always, I fall. Then I lie on my back in a thick layer of the fetid fluid, increasingly covered with large green flies—buzzing, buzzing. The more I thrash, the more I seem to attract the little beasts instead of repel them. My scream is choked by their presence in my throat, blocking my airway, and my throat is drenched in liquid human putrefaction. I eventually swim toward the reality of my life, awakening, yet knowing that dream and reality are separated by so slim a margin.

Unable to breathe, I jar myself from sleep, trying to avoid a death I know the flies bring with them, struggling for air and reassurance that I have not joined the legions of all of those I have examined, all the deaths I have tried so feebly to explain.

Words such as *surprise*, *shock*, and *astonishment* are soon exorcised from a death investigator's daily lexicon. You cease to raise an eyebrow when a man perforates his colon and subsequently his scrotum while masturbating with a broom handle stuck up his asshole. A daughter slapping the face of her dead father, who had abused her for years, holds no investigatory revelations. You shrug and say "Next!" It's like working in a busy deli, only with not so fresh or innocuous-smelling cuts of meat.

Like most investigative practitioners, I had convinced myself—in the spirit of moral nihilism—that there were no absolutes; therefore, no surprises. Relativism always trumps whatever horror you are currently confronting. It tames the natural urge to turn and run away or to beat the shit out of someone. Relativism consumes those once stout of heart enough to walk through the doors of investigative uncertainty and, years later, squats and defecates them out as the most cynical of all human beings.

Horror was not in Roxie Killian's daily lexicon. She never noticed the worst in anyone. In fact, she was the first beautiful woman I had ever seen. She always wore a string of pearls around her neck and rouge on her cheeks, and smelled of the Camilla face powder she liberally patted on her face every morning. As a small boy, I had thought my great-aunt looked like Eva Gabor from television's *Green Acres*, but unlike Mrs. Douglas, Roxie was not out of place in a rural terrain.

Roxie spoke with a demure Southern lilt, a drawl that had been refined by higher education—she had been one of the first women to graduate from Louisiana Tech University. Grandmother Killian told me that Roxie had been proposed to on seven separate occasions by seven different men, but she never married. Instead, she chose to be a schoolteacher and remained one for forty years.

Polite and exacting in all her affairs, Roxie never wanted to offend and always put a Christian face on her every utterance. She and her sister, my granny Pearl, would display their Christian

Methodism by taking trips to Carville, Louisiana, where they worked at the only mainland lep colony in the United States. They would come home detailing how “blessed” we were to be intact, declaring that the Lord had chosen us, in his providential wisdom, to bear witness to his faithfulness.

For all their reflections upon the mercy seat of Jesus, Roxie and Pearl were Southern women beset by one shared affliction: gossip. And Roxie and Pearl employed a complex system of communication that allowed them to wear their best face for the Savior and still satiate their need to skewer the public. Their system had been perfected while growing up with an alcoholic father and a heavy-handed, overly religious mother.

“Eirthay Ettinggay away Ivorceda.”

Yes, Pig Latin.

Then would come the obligatory deep-throated grunts, as they passed judgment while I rode the backseat of Great-Aunt Roxie’s ‘68 Chrysler Imperial.

“Ouyay owknay eshay aughtcay imhay ithway olday astynay omanway anday eythay ereway unkdray asay Ootercay Ownbray!”

Clearly they were oblivious to the notion that Jesus was very likely fluent in Pig Latin.

That ‘68 Chrysler—long, white, and festooned in chrome—was a shiny barge fit for a queen. It was the sisters’ sanctuary of rumor and hyperbole, free from the scrutiny of the Sweet Lord Jesus of the subjects of their slander. They cruised the northern Louisiana countryside, speaking their preferred dialect, until I fell asleep. The Imperial was huge and luxuriant, built back when owning a Chrysler meant that you had “arrived,” and to arrive in an Imperial just put an exclamation point at the end of the statement.

Great-Aunt Roxie kept that car immaculate with the help of her “hired man,” an elderly black man who cut her grass and tended to the chores around her home. The Imperial was equipped with a whisk broom and vinyl trash bags that hung from the dashboard’s control knobs and the window handles in the back seat. I was never allowed to drink Cokes or eat potato chips, which Granny would let me do in her car. This car was a shrine to Roxie’s independence. She had never needed a man, and the Chrysler Imperial epitomized this.

Interestingly, though, there were two other things her car was always equipped with: a full tank of Texaco Gold Star gasoline and the biggest empty clear-glass Pepsi bottle you could buy from Swaggart’s Grocery. The bottle always remained empty, gently rolling around on the rubber floor mats in the back seat. It was there expressly for me.

The two sisters were not stupid when it came to little boys. Roxie had taught them for forty years and Granny had raised them. To be certain, little boys hate naps and will do anything possible to avoid them, but after the whining and protesting, and extracting promises from both women to take me to TG&Y for a toy, next would invariably come the “I need to pee-pee” proclamation.

Without missing a beat, my granny would spin around, grab the bottle, and instruct me to stand up. In any other car this might have been tricky. But the backseat in that wide Chrysler, sailing over the rough country roads, was the approximate size of a gymnasium. I would unzip and do my business into that handy glass receptacle, and in one swift move, without disengaging for more than a beat from her coded conversation with Roxie, Granny would tell me to “lie back down” while rolling down the front passenger-side window and pouring out the contents at fifty miles per hour. These ladies love their gossip.

Everything was subject to their critical observations and embroidered with the singsong rhythm of their language. Although I had been subjected to the abuses and vices of my father and grandfathers,



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