

"A MASTER." —STEPHEN KING

LOST MAN'S LANE

A Novel

SCOTT
CARSON



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LOST MAN'S LANE

A NOVEL

SCOTT CARSON

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*Thinking of Stewart O’Nan, August Derleth, Keith Robertson,
and a magical place called Bloomington, Indiana, 1999.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A CONVERSATION about earthquakes made me decide it is time I tell the truth.

Let me explain the lying first. That started in 1999, when I was sixteen years old, and became the coconspirator of a murdered man. I turned forty last summer, staring down the barrel at middle age, and much that once seemed as distant on the horizon as a mirage now feels welcome. Professionally welcome, anyhow. Nobody's referring to me as the "next" anything these days, no more wunderkind talk—though it's already been a long while since I heard that one. Maybe I'll miss those predictions someday, but I'm not sure, because the predictions were born of the truth that I refused to tell.

I had my reasons to avoid the truth. Ego was one of them. It was nice to be viewed as a natural talent. When it comes to motivators, though, I don't think anything trumps fear.

"Vain and afraid" doesn't have the same flair as "talented and hardworking," does it? But you could make your peace with it.

What about lying, though? Could you make your peace with that?

Probably not.

Is refusing to tell the truth different from lying? Most would tell you it is.

I'm not so sure.

All I know is that when it comes to telling ghost stories, people tend to regard the storyteller as a liar or a fool. Except, of course, for the hard-core believers. In nearly two decades of book tours, I've determined that there's a disconcerting correlation between ghost stories, close talkers, and halitosis. Keep the skepticism close and the Listerine closer before you tell someone a ghost story, I recommended on one television appearance. It's always easier to make a joke of the experience.

Now I'm going to find out what it's like on the other side. I'm going to find out what it's like to be the wild-eyed man with the hushed voice and the hand on your arm to prevent you from turning away, imploring you to listen, please, *really listen*, because this is how it happened. *This is the truth!* You believe me, don't you?

With a ghost story, it's always easier to turn away than it is to believe.

I've done all right telling the made-up ones. I've published a dozen books, made a living, even had a couple movies made. The people who liked the books hate those movies, but most of the people who watched the movies never read the books, so I guess it's a wash. The books that sell the best aren't the novels about ghosts. The bestsellers are the true crime stories. They please the critics, who sometimes use words like "prescient" and "perceptive" to describe my reporting. They never use those words with the ghost stories, which amuses me on my better nights, and keeps me awake on the bad ones.

I've made it this far with my secrets. I could keep going. But here at the proverbial crossroads of midlife—supposing that my body holds off illness and my truck's tires hold on to the pavement—I'm at that point where you're supposed to look back. You charge forward in your twenties, you strategize in your thirties, but somewhere in your forties you're supposed to look back. To develop a taste for nostalgia that you didn't have before, as you realize that you're going to have plenty of occasions to stare into the past whether you want to or not. Time has a way of forcing that. Sometimes the looking back is sweet and sometimes it's bitter, but in my experience it is almost always involuntary.

The past calls you, not the other way around.

I can hear it knocking now. Can feel it beside me on the porch on this unseasonably warm spring evening, with that glorious humidity that clings even into darkness, like summer is sealing winter out and taping the seams. We're bound now for the sun and the heat, the swelter of dog days, and then the first crisp night when a cool wind rustles brittle leaves and reminds you that it was all a circle, dummy, and there's only one way off this ride, so stop wishing that time would pass faster.

All of this brings my mind back to 1999, as did that conversation with the geologist. He told me there are twenty thousand earthquakes around the globe

each year, or fifty-five each day. Think about how common that is. How natural. It got me to thinking about an old crypt, and what lies beneath, and what had better stay buried.

What *must* stay buried, if what I've heard is the truth, and I'm confident that it is. Dead men tell no tales, they say, and they are wrong. Dead men tell plenty of tales.

But they do not tell lies.

CHAPTER ONE

DRIVER'S EDUCATION

February 1999

“I said, ‘What you wanna be?’ She said, ‘Alive’ ”

OUTKAST

“DA ART OF STORYTELLIN’, PART I”

1

I GOT MY DRIVER'S license on February 11, 1999. This would be easy to remember even if I didn't have the speeding ticket with the date on it.

But I do.

My mother drove me to the BMV that afternoon, which was a Thursday, and she talked about the weather the entire way there. It wasn't idle small talk; she was a meteorologist, and that day was closing in on a February heat record in Bloomington, Indiana. We'd had snow only a few days earlier, but we drove to the BMV with the windows down, welcoming the 70-degree air like a gift, which is the way those days feel in a Midwestern winter, a jump start for your draining battery.

My personal battery was running high already—this day had been a long time in coming. If you didn't take the formal driver's education course, you needed to wait six additional months to apply for a driver's license. This was the state's way of bribing teenagers to take driver's ed—and my mother's way of buying time before releasing me to the world in a “two-thousand-pound killing machine.”

Finally, the wait was over.

I wasn't worried about the written portion of the test, and while I expressed high confidence about the driving portion, let's all admit that our heart rates picked up at the phrase “parallel parking” when we were sixteen. I took the driving portion first and passed without trouble. Even nailed the parallel parking—no small feat in the Oldsmobile Ninety Eight my mother had given me, which was the length of a hearse. On to the written test—twenty-five questions, multiple choice, fill-in-the-answer bubble on a separate Scantron sheet with a

No. 2 pencil. I cruised through twenty-three before a male voice boomed out, “It’s Miller Time!”

I heard my mother’s laugh in response. Melodic, practiced, unsurprised. When you’re Monica Miller the meteorologist, you can’t go long before some dimwit producer decides to affix a famous beer slogan to your segments. People often recognized her, and they loved to indicate it by shouting out, “It’s Miller Time!” When you’re sixteen and this is the way the community responds to your mother’s presence, it’s not a great deal of fun.

Particularly when your mother is beautiful, and it’s mostly men shouting at her.

I didn’t bother to turn around at the exchange, so I never saw the cheerful citizen who recognized my mother, only heard him, and then my mother’s on-cue laugh, but the distraction was enough that when I filled in my test circle, I missed the twenty-fourth line entirely, and filled in the twenty-fifth blank on the accompanying Scantron sheet. I then dutifully answered the next question in the twenty-sixth line, stood, and handed my exam to the bored clerk.

“You are allowed two mistakes out of the twenty-five questions,” she intoned in a voice that said she could—and maybe did—recite this in her sleep. “You may return no sooner than tomorrow to retake the examination.”

“Great—gives me extra time to figure out a way to cheat,” I said, a remark designed to make her smile. It did not make her smile. She lined her answer key up beside my test and peered through the top halves of her bifocals as she scanned the results. Her red pen made little taps of contact with each correct answer, a nice, steady rhythm.

Slow ride, I hummed softly, take it easy...

The clerk’s red pen paused. Hovered above the test.

I leaned forward, frowning, and immediately saw the mistake. There was no answer to question twenty-four.

The clerk’s mouth twitched with a barely concealed evil smile.

“Mr. Miller,” she said, in a voice exponentially louder than she’d used previously, “you have missed question twenty-four by failing to answer it.”

“I did answer it. I just got out of order.”

“You have also missed question twenty-five,” she continued. “And it is my duty to—”

“What happened was I filled in the wrong—”

“*It is my duty,*” she snapped, glaring at me over her glasses with a look that effectively severed my vocal cords, “to inform you of the correct answer. Question twenty-five reads: ‘If you encounter a law enforcement officer whose command differs with the signal at an intersection, what do you do?’”

The easiest question on the whole damn test. A question that half the kindergartners in the county would answer correctly.

The clerk smiled at me.

“The correct answer,” she said, still loud enough for the room, “is option C: ‘Obey the command of the law enforcement officer.’ You selected option B: ‘Honk and proceed with caution.’”

Laughter erupted. One man repeated my answer for his wife. Another woman snorted and clapped. I didn’t dare turn around to look at my mother. I stood there imagining the responses from my friends when I informed them that even after a six-month wait, I still didn’t have a driver’s license. I was so lost to my horror that it took me a second to realize the clerk was still speaking.

“You have missed only two questions, which means you have passed the test. Please follow me over to the back of the room so we can get a photograph for your driver’s license, Marshall Miller.”

I’d passed.

I also spent four years carrying a driver’s license photo in which my face was so red, it looked freshly sunburned.

When I finally looked at my mother, she was smiling that 100-watt, television-approved smile of hers.

“Honk and proceed with caution,” she said, and handed me the keys.

We laughed about it then, and we laughed even harder in the car on the drive home. If we’d had any idea how much of our lives would soon be lost to my interactions with law enforcement, we wouldn’t have cracked a smile.

I dropped my mother off at home, knowing that I wouldn’t see her again until breakfast the next morning. She’d been offered the prime-time broadcasts on numerous occasions when I was younger, declining them each time, but

when I turned sixteen, she agreed to move from days to nights, guaranteeing a better paycheck and a larger audience—and requiring a hell of a lot of trust in her teenage son. I was determined not to screw it up. I was the only child of a single mother, and if you can make it to sixteen without disaster in that dynamic, you're carrying at least a little bit of extra maturity. Extra concern, anyhow. I did not want to disappoint my mother.

I also genuinely did not believe that I would.

There's no confidence like a sixteen-year-old's confidence in the future.

I dropped her off in the driveway of our simple two-story colonial on its tidy lawn. We lived on Raintree Lane on the north side of town, west of what was then State Road 37 and is now Interstate 69. It was a neighborhood of modest but well-kept homes and mature trees and I appreciate it more now than I did then, but I suppose that's true of a lot of things.

I made about a thousand assurances that I would be careful, gave my mother a one-armed hug without relinquishing control of the steering wheel, and then pulled out of the driveway, headed for the Cascades Golf Course, intending to hit a few buckets of balls at the driving range on this strangely warm day, but mostly ready to experience my freshly minted freedom. I put the windows down, and that unseasonable warm air flooded in. The ancient Oldsmobile didn't have a CD player, so I had a Sony Discman resting on the bench seat beside me, connected to the stereo through an auxiliary cord that ran to the tape deck. Badass. With my mother out of the car, I turned the volume up on Tupac's "2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted." Badder-ass.

Beside the Discman rested not one, not two, but three massive binders of CDs, divided into three categories: rap mixes, rock mixes, and make-out mixes. The former two, unfortunately, saw more airplay than the last. I let the Oldsmobile's speakers blast all the bass they could handle and bobbed my head in rhythm, and had Pac still been alive, he'd have no doubt laughed his ass off at me, but in that moment, alone behind the wheel, I didn't care about the old car or the shitty stereo. I was a free man, no chaperone required.

Life was good.

I made it four miles before the colored lights came on behind me.

It was more frightening than it should have been, maybe. I'd never been pulled over; hell, I'd never been alone in a car. Police were the ultimate authority figures, like principals with guns.

In the adrenaline rush of the moment, I forgot a key rule from the BMV study guide: when one is pulled over by police, one is to pull off the road on the right-hand side. I opted instead for what struck me as the clearest area: the wide expanse of grass that ran between the road and the fairway of the thirteenth hole of the golf course. This required crossing a lane of oncoming traffic, a maneuver that I executed without so much as a turn signal.

The siren went on. A single, bleated chirp that chilled my blood.

On a normal day in February, the course would have been empty and even the driving range closed. Because we were chasing that heat record, it was busy, packed with cabin-fever sufferers taunted by new sets of Christmas clubs. Wonderful. I had an audience.

Four miles as a free man. A good run while it lasted.

I parked the car and waited while a muscled-up officer with a crew cut approached. The window was already down, and he leaned in and studied me, seeming torn between anger and exasperation. His stiff uniform shirt strained around his chiseled chest and arms as if determined to escape it. His name tag identified him as CPL. MADDOX.

"Son, what in the hell were you doing, crossing over here?"

"It seemed safer for both of us," I said. This was up there with *bonk and proceed with caution* in terms of poor answers.

"Safer? On the wrong side of the road?"

"There was lots of room to park."

"Are you trying to tell me that I'm *wrong*, son?"

"Not at all, sir, I'm just... the thing is, it's a big car."

"Does it steer itself?"

"Pardon?"

"Does it steer itself?" His eyes were the same dark blue as his uniform shirt, which was pressed against pectoral muscles that looked like they belonged to a creature from *Jurassic Park*.

"No, sir."

“So let’s stop blaming the car for your decisions.”

“Yes, sir.”

“It is not a 500 Benz,” he said without a hint of emotion.

“No, sir. It’s an Oldsmobile.”

“Do you think the district attorney is really a ho?”

My lips parted but I didn’t offer any words. I was stunned and confused—and then, oh-so-belatedly I realized my music was still playing. Tupac’s “Picture Me Rollin’.” Pac was describing his Mercedes and expounding on his theories about the personal lives of the law enforcement members who’d put him in custody.

I am going to jail, I thought as I punched the stereo power off just as Tupac offered a few words to the “punk police.” I wondered how handcuffs felt.

“It’s a song,” I said. “I mean, not a... you know, the lyrics aren’t mine. They do not represent my views.”

“Oh. I was confused. The voice sounded exactly like yours.”

When I looked at him this time, I thought I saw the barest hint of a smile. Then it vanished as he said, “License and registration, please.”

Shit.

“I, uh... I only have this.” I showed him my temporary license. The real one would be mailed. And now, no doubt, dropped directly into the garbage disposal by my mother.

Maddox eyed the temp. “You got this *today*.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Off to a heck of a start.”

“Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir.”

He lowered the temp license and fixed the steel-blue eyes on me again. “Registration?”

I found the registration, wondering how long it would take for my mother’s insurance rates to soar. Teenage males were more expensive to insure even *without* points on their licenses.

“Please wait in the vehicle,” Corporal Maddox said, and then he returned to his cruiser.

I wanted to punch something—mostly myself. I hated the tight-throated sensation and the rapid heartbeat and the echoing words of my ridiculous exchange with the state trooper. All of it so stupid. All of it something a kid would do. I did not feel like a kid either.

At least, I hadn't until those colored lights had come on.

I looked in the sideview mirror, trying to make out what Maddox was doing. I deserved a ticket. But he'd smiled—almost—when he made that remark about confusing my voice for Tupac's. Was he smiling like a jerk—or someone who'd give a kid a break?

The driver's door of the cruiser swung open, and Maddox stepped out. It was only then that I realized someone else was in the car. Not another cop, but someone in the back, behind the grate. A blond-haired girl wearing a teal polo shirt with a white logo and script over the left breast. Her hair was tied up loosely in a bandana that matched the teal-and-white shirt. The combination was immediately familiar to me: the uniform of the Chocolate Goose, a local ice-cream shop that had been in business for generations and was a townie staple in summer. The logo on the polo shirt would show a version of the Mother Goose character, complete with reading glasses and a babushka and a chocolate ice-cream cone held jauntily in one wing. It was strange to see the outfit in February. The Chocolate Goose was strictly seasonal, opening on Memorial Day weekend and closing on Labor Day. The girl, who looked about my age but wasn't familiar, seemed to stare directly at me as if searching my face in the mirror. She looked the way I felt: frustrated and foolish and a little frightened. Maybe more than a little.

Then Maddox swung the door shut, and my attention returned to him, the girl's face relegated to a faint outline seen through dark glass.

Maddox approached, holding my license in his right hand and a ticket in his left.

"Mr. Miller," Maddox said, passing me the license and registration, "this is not an ideal day for you to receive a traffic ticket, is it?"

"No, sir."

"Points on your license before you even get started. Not good."

He gazed down at the golf course, seeming to follow the descending slopes down to the dark wooded valley that traced Griffy Creek into the heart of downtown Bloomington. His big chest swelled. I wondered how much he could bench-press with those arms and that chest. I wondered if he was as intimidating to that girl in the back of his cruiser as he was to me.

“What’s your father going to say when you show him this?” he asked.

I didn’t answer. He shot me a hard look.

“What’s he going to say, Mr. Miller?”

“He’s dead,” I said.

I was afraid that he would ask how it had happened. It was hard to explain that I didn’t know. Harder to explain that he might not be dead at all. He was to me, though. That’s the way it feels with a father who bailed before you were born. Closer to dead than alive, but more hurtful than a dead man could ever be.

“I see,” Maddox said. He seemed to mull over something, and then he separated the two halves of the ticket—one original, one carbon copy on pale pink paper. He handed me the copy.

“I clocked you at 39 in a 30,” he said. “That’s the first violation on the ticket. The second is for improper lane movement. These are lessons you shouldn’t have to learn the hard way.”

I couldn’t come up with anything to say and didn’t see the point in trying. The consequences were already in hand, and that question about what my absent father would say sizzled in my brain, temporarily as troubling as the ticket itself.

“That copy is yours. This one is mine, property of *Corporeal* Maddox, until it is filed with the court.”

He’d drawn his rank out in an odd Southern drawl, as if enjoying the flavor of it. I kept staring at the ticket. His thumb had left a grimy print on the bottom corner, probably from the carbon paper. It looked like ash, though. Appropriate, for the document that would burn my freedom down.

“Sometimes,” Maddox said, “I forget to file them.”

It was as if the ticket in my hand had gone from traffic citation to lottery winner. He was granting me mercy.

“*Thank you,*” I said, looking up from the carbon-stained ticket.

“For what?”

His broad face was empty, the eyes still cool, but I was sure he knew exactly what I meant. He was giving me a break.

“For the second chance. I won’t screw it up.”

“Did I say you have a second chance? I said sometimes I forget to file paperwork with the court. I made no fucking promise of it. Where the *fuck* did you hear the words ‘*second chance*?’”

I was so shocked I couldn’t even begin to answer. I’d heard adults swear, but I’d never had an adult swear *at* me. Not like that.

“You make assumptions,” he said. “That’s a dangerous way to live, Mr. Miller. It is a better way to die.”

A better way to die?

I glanced at the golf course, this time *hoping* that I had an audience. Everyone had their backs to me, heads bowed over their balls or tilted to watch them in flight. I suddenly felt alone and afraid.

“Do you know what I hear when you say *second chance*?” Maddox snarled. For the first time, I was aware of the gun and baton on his belt.

“No, sir.” I managed to murmur this.

“I hear a little prick who thinks the world owes him kindness.”

A police officer had just called me a prick. No one was listening to us and there was no one I could call for help. I didn’t have a cell phone. I had only a few friends who did, and they weren’t with me. I was alone. The only person who was still paying attention to us was the girl in the back of the police car, and she was also alone—and worse off than me.

For now.

Maddox let the silence spread out like his massive shadow. He hadn’t asked a question, and I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t speak.

“Driving a car down a road filled with strangers who are just trying to get home safe,” he said at last, “is *responsibility*, Mr. Miller. Not a joke, not fun, not a privilege. It should feel damn serious to you. Nobody is promised a second chance at getting home safe. You will learn that.”

The ticket was trembling in my hand now.

“Go on your way,” Maddox said. “Now.”

He turned and walked away. I sagged in the driver's seat, the carbon copy in my hand. Right then, I didn't care if he filed it or not. I felt as if I'd glimpsed the chasm between the kinds of consequences that existed in the world. There were tickets and there was violence.

He wouldn't have hurt you, I told myself.

Right? No way a police officer would have hurt me. There were people not far away and...

What if there hadn't been?

I looked in the mirror in time to see him settle back behind the wheel. In the half second before the driver's door swung shut, I saw the girl in the back seat again.

She'd started to cry.

I would have remembered her face even if I never saw it on a MISSING poster.