

WHERE THE

*Woodbine  
Twines*

— A NOVEL —

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# WHERE THE *One* WOODBINE TWINES

Thirty years have gone by. Still, I can hear the rise and fall of the surf, and I can smell the salty, seaweedy air of that late November day in the near desolate center of old Myrtle Beach.

It all started when I, along with my soon-to-be-ex husband, left the realty office where we had just signed the papers finalizing the sale of the house we had owned up the beach at Windy Hill. He'd driven from Atlanta, and I'd driven from Charlotte to close the sale and to gather up some things I'd bought for the house back when I'd tried valiantly to like it at the beach.

"Well, that's a done deal," he said as we sauntered along.

"Yes, thankfully," I replied.

"You never did like coming to the beach."

"No. Not since the year I turned thirteen."

"Yeah, you've said that before, but you've never really explained why, exactly. Seems like a great place for a kid back then—a paradise, in fact. All the rides, the arcades, the beach, the boys."

"It stayed hot and sticky all the time. It stormed every day, seemed like, or threatened to." True enough, but I had other reasons. I remembered thunder rumbling in the distance half the time that summer, the threat of lightning. I felt always at the mercy of a hot-tempered sniper. "Besides," I told him, "you know I'm a mountain person."

Of course he knew, and because of it, he'd insisted I take the mountain house. We had done pretty well, as they say. I admit, though,

that our prosperity came more from his career as an executive for a big pharmaceutical company than from mine as a middle school guidance counselor, a career I'd chosen because I hoped I might save a few lost adolescent souls. We'd decided, amicably enough, that I would keep the house at Blowing Rock. I preferred the cool and astringent air of the North Carolina mountains to the damp miasma of the South Carolina coast.

"It didn't get hot and sticky and stormy off-season, though," he said. "It's not now. And it's certainly not crowded. Great beach-walking weather today."

True enough. At one time, I would have loved a stroll of an hour or so at water's edge. I wouldn't now, though, and I hadn't for many years. I said simply, "I don't care for the sound of the surf."

As we walked a cordial two feet apart along Ocean Boulevard in the direction of our cars, I stopped in my tracks and clutched his arm so hard, he winced.

"What?" he exclaimed.

"I think that's Catherine Wiley," I said.

"Who's she?"

"Just someone I knew for a short time, a long, long time ago."

"What's the big deal about her?"

I stared at him a while, thinking how I could distill the multitude of possible responses into the simplest and most truthful answer. Three perfect words came to mind. Still, I hesitated before I said, "She haunts me."

"She *what?*"

I let go of his arm, and we walked on.

The woman had driven up in a blue Chevy Nova, had parked it in front of the Sea Ootel, one of those older oceanfront motels that squatted between all the new gleaming high-rises. When she stepped

out, I had noticed she exhibited just the fashion sense I would expect the younger Catherine to grow into as she aged. She'd grown taller, of course, and she looked heavier—twenty years had gone by since I'd seen her last. But, as had Catherine at eleven years old, the woman wore glasses. Not the nerdish ones she'd worn as a child, the very ones I'd stashed somewhere in the attic in a box of mementos from my past. (In one of my nuttier moments during my teens, I'd taken them out and put them on, thinking I might somehow see the world through her eyes.) The glasses she wore now looked awkward, though more modern, as if she intended to keep plain an otherwise handsome face.

The woman must have sensed my stare. She glanced up and held my look for one inquisitive second—just long enough for me to note two deep vertical lines that two decades of misery had drawn between her eyebrows—before she unlocked the door of the Sea Ootel office, stepped inside, and shut it behind her.

"Homely wench," John said. "Can't understand what would make her memorable, much less haunting, as you put it."

*No, John, you wouldn't understand,* I thought but decided not to say.

We continued toward our cars. No sense in reviving the acrimony that had accompanied the unraveling of our marriage. Our sacred union had worn itself out months earlier, though the regret lingered like a sorrowful tune that I could not, try as I might, keep from playing in my mind at odd hours.

The low gray sky matched my mood, as did the wintry blankness of Ocean Boulevard, empty except for construction workers down at the Pavilion. No cars overloaded with cruising teenagers as in the summer. Streets long since swept clean of summer debris. The air smelled ever so faintly of salt and seaweed. No smells of funnel cakes, chili fries, or suntan oil to stir up old memories. The balconies of the high-rise hotels

stood like empty aerial catacombs, and the wind batting around and between them sounded like whipping flags, louder even than the surf.

I pulled my sweater tighter around me and, reaching with trembling hands into my purse for my keys, glanced back at the closed office door, at the slim lines of fluorescent light between the slats of the horizontal blinds, at the woman-shaped shadow moving behind them.

"Wiley," John said. "Do I know that name?"

"Oh, I might have mentioned them to you a long time ago. An elderly couple named Wiley lived next door to us when Dad was stationed at the Air Force base here, back in the fifties. They had a granddaughter named Catherine."

When I said "us," I meant my mother and me. She'd had me young. We'd acted like sisters sometimes, and in many ways, I'd acted like the older, more responsible one. (As a toddler, I called her by her given name, Wanda; she thought it was the cutest thing and had encouraged me to call her Wanda from then on.) Dad stayed gone so much during that time, he had hardly counted as one of us.

We did not live on base; we rented a house twelve miles out in the green gloaming of the South Carolina lowcountry. Before then, like most wives and children of servicemen, we had always lived on the base wherever the brass had sent us, within the protective arms of the military establishment, within the solid social order of others who shared our peculiar way of life. But that time, back in the summer of 1957 when I turned thirteen, we thought living out in the countryside in the lush live oak splendor held promise as the healing balm of Gilead, the last hope for healing for us.

"I knew Catherine just a few weeks," I told him, "but it's always bothered me that I never knew what became of her."

"So what? You never knew what became of most people you knew growing up."

“But this was different,” I said. “*She* was different.”

I watched the doorway and windows of the motel office. The blinds stayed closed. The vacancy light glared. Doubt set in. I remembered the time, years earlier, when I’d stopped in Conway on my way to the beach house at Windy Hill, and I’d noticed a kerchiefed woman, a fifties cartoon of a woman in cat-eye glasses, pushing her shopping cart to her car in the parking lot of a supermarket. Heart thumping in anticipation, I had let down the window of my car and called out, my voice heavy with awe, “Catherine?” But the woman’s quick, easy smile said no. I’d made the mistake again after that, in another place. Would this be the third time?

“I guess it’s really not all that likely it’s her,” I said, “but I don’t think I’ll rest until I find out.”

“Why not go ask her?”

I hesitated at the curb, thinking I could step inside the door and pick up one of those small paper tide tables with the motel name and logo printed on top, the kind of advertisement beach motels sometimes kept stacked in kiosks in their offices. “Are you, by any chance—?” I would ask. How simple.

John trailed me as I started across the street, but before we had made it past the center line, a shadow appeared behind the door; the straight line between two slats of the blinds widened at the middle.

“She’s peeping out at us!” John said in a loud whisper, feigning excitement. “Maybe she recognizes you.”

My heart hammered. The door opened, and the woman, head bowed as if to avoid eye contact, stepped out. She fiddled with one of those plastic “will return at” clocks, hung it in the window, and locked the door behind her.

John poked me in the waist with his elbow. “Speak to her,” he

said. She hustled toward the blue Chevy Nova, eyes to the pavement. John raised his arm and yelled “Hey!” but she sped up and tucked herself inside the car. As she drove away, I thought I saw her adjust the rearview mirror to better size us up.

“That’s one hell of an attitude,” John said as we stood there breathing the exhaust. “If she runs the place, she sure lacks the personality for it.”

I watched the car until it made a left turn off Ocean Boulevard, then I stepped toward the motel office, close enough to view the “will return at” clock. It promised that she—or someone, anyway—would be back at the office at four o’clock.

“Well, I guess that’s a done deal,” John said. “You’ll have to live the rest of your life not knowing. Sorry.”

*You have no idea*, I thought, *no idea*. And if he had known me—or, in all fairness, if I had allowed him to know me—he would have read the dejection etched on my face.

We approached our cars, which were parked side by side. Jagged shadows from the fronds of a palmetto palm played across the hood of my tan Buick.

“Well, my sweet,” John said, “I suppose you and I have successfully driven another nail in the coffin.”

“What coffin?”

“You know. The coffin that contains the body of our dead marriage. Bones of what might have been.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. There’s no reason why you couldn’t have kept the beach house. I hardly ever went there and I never stayed long, so it’s not as if it would bring up bad memories.”

John winced. “And to think I flattered myself by thinking you stayed away because you didn’t care for the ocean.” He looked at his watch. “It’s eleven o’clock. You game for an early lunch before we

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take off? I'm sure there's something open, something for the local people at least. How about Buddy's Grill, for old times' sake?"

I looked at my own watch as a short prelude to announcing I had to go, but then surprised myself by hesitating. True, I hadn't cared much for the beach, not in the years since I'd known Catherine. The last night John and I stayed at Windy Hill, I remembered, we had lain in bed with the window open, and the same surf that rocked him to sleep submerged me in my dreams. I'd woken up, choking back a scream, bathed in sweat. I'd slipped out of bed, tiptoed into the living room, and turned on the television low enough to avoid waking him, loud enough to drown out the surf.

And Myrtle Beach, itself. I'd gone out of my way to avoid its gaudy commercialism, traffic, and crowds. Of course, I'd made the few obligatory visits there during my late teens and early twenties. I had met John during one of those visits—our always tenuous relationship had developed during walks on the pier, late-night talks at Buddy's Grill, fun at the funhouse, shagging up at Fat Harold's. The sickly nostalgia those memories stirred up made me want to leave. Yet, though still desperate to get the last threads of our entanglement neatly snipped away, every paper signed, every piece of property divided, every possible connection severed, now the thought of our going our separate ways in separate cars—he to Atlanta, me to Charlotte—seemed too abrupt, too final.

"All right," I said, for all those reasons. But I had another, a more important, reason. "I want to stay around a while, anyway. I want to be right back here at four o'clock, just to see, just to make sure. . . ."

John shrugged. We started down the empty street toward Buddy's Grill.