

THE MILL



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THE LONG WALK HOME

—Kailey Sherrick—

The Wayne County Fair is the biggest thing to occur in the seemingly tranquil suburbia of Wooster, Ohio. In September, the raised cornfields become oceans of glistening steel as cars are guided by yellow-vested parking attendants on horseback. Schools across the county are closed on Monday and Tuesday, and although they label these days as “Teacher In-Service,” most teachers are attending the fair, and most of their students are showing livestock and auctioning them off for slaughter. Groups of teenagers congregate around the groaning metal struts of the Round-Up, sneaking cigarettes, trying to buy Zippo lighters with their allowance, and laughing at carnies with missing or rotten teeth. In the distance, the engine of an Alice Chalmers rumbles like thunder as the tractor pulls begin. The Wayne County Fair enshrouds the attendants with a false sense of security, because everyone knows everyone, or at least knows a relative, a friend, or an acquaintance that somehow connects them to other fair-goers.

On September 9, 2002, Kristen Jackson was anxious and agitated as she walked past the rows of white vendor tents. She had been at the fair twice today. The first time was that morning, when she played her bass drum with the Northwestern High School Marching Band at the grand stand. After Kristen returned to school to put away her instrument and then a trip home, her mother Sharon Jackson had driven both Kristen and her sixteen-year-old sister Katie back to the fair at 5:30, with instructions to meet at the main gate at 9:30, where she’d be waiting to take them home. It was now nearing 9:00. Kristen’s tennis shoes were beginning to dig into her heels, the smell of saw dust and manure wouldn’t leave her nostrils no matter how many times she blew her nose, and the fair food was beginning to churn in her stomach. She wanted to leave, but her older sister, her chaperone for the evening, was not about to leave her friends to wait with her by the gate. After an argument that resulted in her sister’s blatant disregard for her feelings, Kristen sulked

away. She walked alone, hands in her pockets, kicking at straw wrappers and cigarette butts as she waded through the faceless crowd. The fair wasn't fun when she was by herself. Her friend Christina Haley had made plans to meet up later, but she had to go home early, which left Kristen with only Katie and her group of giggling friends. Feeling displaced and unwanted, Kristen continued her path towards the main gate. She sat down on a park bench, looking down at her feet or occasionally scanning the throng of people to see if she recognized a familiar face. After fifteen minutes, Kristen couldn't take it any longer. She made up her mind that her home on North Smyser Road wasn't that far, that she could walk the distance and go home to the comfort of her pajamas and bed without waiting for her mother.

Kristen rose and walked out the main gate and down Old Lincoln Way. Her hands were still in her pockets, her thumb rubbing the raised edge of an embossed penny she had purchased at Sea World. Lost in her thoughts, Kristen's feet carried her to State Route 302. The beginning stretch of road was still illuminated by the proximity of the city lights and open fields. She pressed the penny into the palm of her hand, and then released it, running the tips of her fingers over the small impressions left in her skin for comfort. Kristen trudged on until she was startled by the rumbling of a car and the sudden appearance of headlights. She stepped off the asphalt and into the grass, creating a wide berth between herself and the road. She watched as the car whipped around the curve and continued on. Her eyes were so intently fixed on the taillights of the passing car that she didn't hear the crunching of gravel made by an approaching Jeep. It slowed as it passed, then came a halt. The reverse lights blazed, and Kristen raised her arm to block the bright light. At first, Kristen had thought it was her mother, coming back from the fair with her sister, but when she saw the man sitting in the driver's seat, Kristen didn't know what to do. She stood there, frozen, staring into the passenger window as the green fluorescent light from the radio glinted off the man's glasses.

"Hey. You need a ride?" he said, leaning over to push open the passenger-side door.

"I live right up the road. I'll be there in just a few minutes," Kristen

replied.

“Alright. Well, stay warm,” the man said. He closed the door and drove away.

Kristen breathed a sigh of relief, until she saw the Jeep turn around in a nearby farm drive and come back. The Jeep again came to a halt and the man rolled down his window. He flipped on the overhead light, illuminating his face. Kristen recognized him. He lived a few doors down from her family. She would see him outside from time to time when she took walks with her friends. His name was Joel. She didn’t know him well, but she knew his face.

“You live right up on Smyser right?” the man asked her. “I live on Porter, right down the street. You sure you don’t want a ride? It’s awfully cold.”

Kristen hesitated. It was cold, and she didn’t want to walk along the dark road any more than she had to. She glanced in at the radio. The clock read 10:02 p.m. She didn’t realize that her walk had taken so long. It was likely that her mother may have already taken Katie home and would be angry at her for leaving the fair. The sooner she got home, the better. Kristen climbed into the passenger’s seat. If she would have listened for just a moment more, she may have heard the voices in Joel’s head beginning to whisper.

At 9:30, Sharon Jackson stood right outside the main gate, tapping her foot impatiently as she waited for her daughters to arrive. She spied Katie wading her way through the crowd and flagged her down. She and Katie stood, waiting for Kristen, and she listened to Katie relay all of the things she and her friends had done, the boys she had talked to, the rides they rode. Sharon snapped at Katie when she mentioned that Kristen had went off on her own and was upset that Katie hadn’t included her sister. Sharon looked down at her watch. 9:45. Where was Kristen? This wasn’t like her at all. Kristen was reliable, always on time. A cold panic began to churn in Sharon’s stomach. She and Katie decided to go back into the fairgrounds and look around. By 10, Sharon flagged down a Wayne County Sheriff’s officer and asked for his help in finding Kristen. The officer shrugged and said he’d see what he could do, mentioning that young kids usually run around on their own at the fair, and that she would turn up. By 11:00, Sharon was jogging

around the emptying fair, calling out Kristen's name. By 1:30, a group of officers and close friends were searching the deserted fairgrounds with flashlights. There was no trace of Kristen to be found.

It was 2:30 in the morning when a Jeep rumbled into manual car wash. Joel Yockey, a man with thinning hair and large-rimmed bottle cap glasses, began to scrub out the interior of his trunk and vacuum the carpet. The voices had quieted now. He could still hear them murmuring softly in the back of his head, but they weren't trying to direct him. When she had entered the car, they came out of hiding, whispering in his ears, "*Rape the girl. Hurt her. Kill her.*" He had tried to resist, but soon found himself speeding, passing Smyser Road, and continuing on. Kristen had protested, asking where they were going, why they had passed her road. He reached over and grabbed a handful of her hair, yanking her head toward him, and told her to shut up. He turned onto Overton, a small back road where the trees encroach upon each other, their limbs creating a cathedral ceiling, choking out any light that might permeate their branches. He parked in an access drive to one of the surrounding farms and ordered her to remove her clothes. She pleaded with him, saying that her parents loved her and would pay him any amount of money if he would take her home. The voices were screaming now, they drowned out her desperate cries. Joel raped Kristen, and when he was finished, he tried to snap her neck with his bare hands. Her small body seemed stunned by the attempt, twitching once, and then falling still. When he realized she was still breathing, he grabbed a vinyl rope from the back of his Jeep and strangled her. He took her body back to his parents' house on Porter Road, and used a mattock to dismember Kristen's head and limbs from her torso. The lukewarm blood barely flowed from her body as he cut her. Small specks were still clinging to his glasses from his attempts to remove her head. He drove to a remote marsh land called the Killbuck Wildlife Area, locally known as the Shreve Swamps. Killdeer shrieked in the darkness as Yockey's feet sunk into the sodden earth. He stepped towards the edge of the deep green water and disposed of Kristen's head and limbs. He then drove about a mile away and threw away her torso, discarding it as easily as if it were a used tissue. Now, he was cleaning out the evidence, whistling to

himself as Kristen's blood swirled around a rusted car wash drain.

The police were at Yockey's doorstep in four days. Joel was the first logical choice when hope for her return was lost, as he was the closest convicted sex offender to her home. In 1986, Yockey was convicted for the rape of a seventeen-year-old Wayne County girl and had served fifteen years in prison. When he moved back in with his parents, the laws at the time did not require the neighbors to be notified. A cadaver dog, brought in by the FBI, began to bark as it neared Joel's Jeep. Kristen's Sea World penny and blood were recovered from inside the vehicle. Yockey surrendered without a fight. A search party made up of community members, FBI agents, and local law enforcement found Kristen's head and limbs in the Swamps, but could not locate her torso. It wasn't until December of 2002 that Yockey revealed the location of Kristen's torso, clothes, and mattock to his defense attorney. He pleaded guilty to aggravated murder, rape, and kidnapping in order to avoid a trial and to escape the death penalty. During his sentencing, Kristen's family was given the chance to confront their daughter's killer. Mark Jackson stood in front of the three county judges who presided over the hearing, with Sharon beside him. He looked at Yockey, who sat stone-faced, never looking up from his hands, and told him, "Your entire life has been devoted to do the evil works of Satan, and now that has come to an end. So burn in hell, you bastard. You've earned it."

Yockey was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. He served only five years of his sentence at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville. Yockey died in 2007 after being transported to the Ohio State University Medical Center in Columbus. The cause of death was due to a torn bowel, which caused pancreatitis and a massive infection which subsequently stopped his heart.