



MOON LAKE

The Wicked Tree

BY MICHAEL HICKS THOMPSON

Few have encountered this tree. It's so far out in the woop woop of the Mississippi Delta you're not likely to ever find it unless you live there, or you're lost, or detoured. We were detoured.

OVER THE YEARS, WHEN TRAVELING NORTH TO MEMPHIS ON HIGHWAY 61 FROM DEEP IN THE DELTA, I'D CUT OVER TO HIGHWAY 1. There's nothing wrong with 61. But with Van Morrison or the Doors on, the gravitational pull of the Mighty Mississippi was just too much. Not that I could see her, but I knew she was just beyond that earthen mound that snakes its way beside the mightiest river on the planet.

The levee. Still a constant reminder that she once failed us. Now, twenty feet taller and as mighty as the river, she vows to never let it happen again.

On the way up Highway 1, I always took the short cut around Moon Lake instead of driving five miles farther north to Highway 49, not far from the Mississippi River bridge at Helena, Arkansas.

It was the twisting, scenic route around the southern edge of the famous oxbow lake that drew me. Moon Lake has been a mysterious place of Southern Americana for a century, made famous by Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* and other books. Or made infamous if you consider its reputation during prohibition—a regionally large, popular gambling joint with alleged rumors that it doubled as a house of ill repute.

But by the late '60s, entertainment around Moon Lake had whittled down to pretty much two establishments—Kathryn's Restaurant and Conway Twitty's place. Conway's was all about country music, beer, and, sometimes, college boys and girls shakin' it with the locals.

Before Conway Twitty became famous, he changed his name. Actors and musicians are entitled to do that. Kirk Douglas was born Issur Danielovitch. John Wayne was born Marion Robert Morrison. Can you imagine "The Duke" with a name like Marty Morrison? He'll always be John Wayne, the man with two first names.

For some odd reason, Conway chose two last names. Conway and Twitty. Otherwise, he would've remained Harold Lloyd Jenkins.

IN THE SUMMER OF '69, I was a simple-minded college student who woke up one summer morning outside Conway's place with my tail in the dirt and my back stuck to a creosote electric pole. It was already ninety degrees under the sun. The hot tar had cemented my shirt to the pole. I could not break loose.

My mouth felt like cotton. I believe the term is 'cottonmouth.' My buddies were nowhere in sight. Later, I learned they were all asleep in my brother's two-door '64 Chevy Super Sport, a beast with a 327 engine and four in the floor. A car I had 'borrowed' for the night.

After several confused tugs, I broke loose from the pole. My white Oxford cloth shirt couldn't possibly survive a backside of sticky creosote. Later, back in Oxford, it burst into flames. One match was all it took.

I digress. Fast forward to this recent trip, the one about *The Wicked Tree* my new friend Justin Gullett and I discovered.

We were eighteen miles north of Greenville on Highway 1 at Scott. We'd been in Greenville for a big meeting with potential investors in *The Rector* movie. Justin is going to direct it.

I pointed to the levee on our left. "Justin, that's where the levee broke in '27. It had rained like in Noah's day. Relentless tons of water hit the Mississippi River basin up North starting in the summer of '26. Flooding covered a dozen states, none worse than right here in the Mississippi Delta. It's why the land is so good. The soil. All that 'Northern' silt. Or whatever you wanna call it.

"But there's one thing in history unique to the Delta. Two things, actually. Whiskey-drinkin' tales. And the blues. The rich stories told by locals and writers who remember. Some folks would argue that the long tales unique to the Delta originally came from winter-time whiskey drinkin' by the plantation owners. Along, of course, from the moonshine stills in the woods and the beginning of the blues.

All these small-town blues, long past their prime, still provoke special feelings inside any Mississippi-born-and-raised boy or girl. If an Aussie, or a Frenchman, or some Norwegian, can get off on our blues music and all the stories told at blues joints, imagine what a kid who grew up in the middle of it feels. (I was born in a farmhouse but grew up in Bentonina, my upstairs window a little more than a rock's throw from the world famous Blue Front Café.)

If a visitor would slow down, turn right or left, and visit these tucked away places, they'd learn some of those stories from the horse's mouth. I can assure you that Jimmy Duck Holmes doesn't bite.

As Justin and I approached the short-cut around the lake, I told him about my big brother in the fraternity, Steve—how he and I practically flew around Moon Lake Road one night to escape a cadre of blue lights and sirens over the horizon, coming our way from both directions.

One weekend—late fall of '69—we dropped off our dates in Helena, Arkansas, and headed back across the mile-long bridge into Mississippi to Steve's home on Moon Lake Road.

But as we approached the Mississippi River toll booth, three hundred yards ahead, I asked Steve, "How many times have you had to pay a dollar to cross this damn bridge?"

A swig of beer mixed with some collegiate anger clung to Steve's words, "Too many!"

"Ever *run* the bridge?"

"Hell no. But let's do it."

Promise, those were our exact words, ones I'll never forget.

The toll booth lay ahead. The passage on each side would barely fit the width of a car, all designed to slow our vehicles down while the little man in the booth held out his hand to collect our dollar—a whole dollar just to pass over to the Mississippi side.



Ironically, we must've been listening to "Break on Through (to the Other Side)." Remember the Doors? I dropped her into second gear and hit fifty in a few yards. All windows were down. The swirling wind inside was intoxicating. We squeezed by the man in the booth so fast I thought his arm might be in my back seat.

On the bridge, at seventy, I clutched and shoved her into third gear, then fourth at ninety. I peeked again at the speedometer. 110. We were a stupid college missile out for some non-existent revenge. We were invincible. It wasn't about paying the dollar. It was about making a point. About being free to be young and careless, which equates to being stupid and not knowing it. Like the next obstacle we faced—the 'bug man' ahead.

Back then, when you came across the bridge into Mississippi, you'd see a little shack on the roadside, no bigger than a backyard shed. Most times no humans were present. But if a man was standing on the road's shoulder, waving at you or pointing a flashlight, you'd better pull over so he could check your vehicle for bugs. No foreign bugs were allowed to piggyback inside some vehicle and spoil our Mississippi crops. (*I believe the world has changed a lot, don't you?*)

I first spotted him on high beam a few hundred yards ahead. He must've been notified by walkie-talkie from the one-armed booth man: "Some jerks just runned the bridge," I imagined him saying. "I believe they's in a blue two-doe sometin' or other. Stop 'em!"

'Bug man' was not standing on the shoulder. He was in the middle of the highway, waving two flashlights in big swooping X's, trying to stop us like we were parking some jet on the tarmac at LaGuardia. 'Cept we were traveling must faster than a tarmac jet.

As we flew by at 110+, I felt like a Delta pilot begging for take-off. Thank goodness the poor man dove for the shoulder.

The blue lights over the horizon were closing in. Steve gulped a short swig from a longneck. "Quick, take the next road to the right! Couple of miles. We gotta get off 49." His voice was deep, guttural, and meant business. He knew we were in some deep . . . trouble.

Three miles and ninety seconds later, we turned right, onto Highway 1 headed south. I could see in my mirror the flashing lights of police going up and down Highway 49. Thank goodness Steve grew up on Moon Lake. If we'd stayed on 49, we would've surely been in some serious . . . trouble.

We pulled up the long gravel drive to Steve's homestead, parked in the back, marveled at the steam coming from the hood, then headed inside like nothing had happened, raided the fridge, and went to sleep.

We had escaped.

NO, WE DIDN'T PASS THE WICKED TREE that night back in '69. But just recently, when Justin and I returned from that big meeting in Greenville, we came across it, courtesy of *Serendipity*.

On Moon Lake Road, we encountered a temporary sign:

DETOUR—BRIDGE OUT AHEAD

There was a road to the right. I'd never traveled on it.

Ten minutes later, I yelled at Justin, "Turn around. There's something you should see."

His Hummer was as wide as the skinny county road. But didn't matter. We never passed a car going in the other direction. When we made it back to the tree, he said, "Wow. How could I have missed this?"

The Wicked Tree appeared even more sinister after we studied it and photographed it from all angles. It didn't have a 'one-sided look,' like when you see kudzu smothering a tree from one side that looks like a poodle but from the other side it looks like a nothing.

This tree looks the same from *all* sides. Wicked. Dark and eerie. Split open and hunched over a dozen gravestones. 'A gargoyle in nature.' You couldn't pay me a million dollars to camp under this thing.

We needed to leave and didn't have time to inspect her like she deserved.

Two months later, I went back by myself to take more photographs and study the gravestones. I chose a sunny day in early February. After an hour of photographing, I walked up to have a closer look at the tree's trunk. It's split open, splayed out from the ground to what looks like the head of a mystic evil being.

But here's the spooky part. The open base of the tree was still in the process of leisurely sucking three graves down in the earth of the hollowed-out tree. At first, I didn't see them—three headstones lay

mostly buried inside the opening of the trunk. I saw green grass, dirt, moss, and corners of three headstones poking out of the dirt. I kicked away some heavy, moist dirt to get a closer look at each headstone. It was no use. Too buried. I couldn't determine names or complete dates on any of them. And I didn't feel good at all about a trip to the hardware store for a shovel.

It struck me that the roots of The Wicked Tree had long since reached the caskets six feet below. Horror writers would describe it like this: *The tree had rooted its way through the casket walls and consumed the bodies inside, turning them into an ever-moving corpse, a sort of twisting, living mummy of tree roots.*

Yuck. Sick, right? Even for me, it's too graphic. So I had to attribute it to somebody else. Anybody else but me. I can think of several writers who would have no qualms about writing this type of horror, page after page. (I'm not one of them. Steven King is. And he's good at it. I'll never write a description like that again. Gives me the willies.)

Fact is, I'm surprised Hollywood hasn't discovered The Wicked Tree. It would make for a creepy image in a good Hitchcock movie—a *good versus evil* thriller in the Delta.

That's all I have to say about Moon Lake and that Wicked Tree. If I go back, it won't be with a shovel. It'll be with a Bible and a cross. And Conway Twitty's place? Well, it's not there anymore. But Kathryn's is. [DU](#)

