

**Widely Scattered Ghosts**

**Collected Stories**

**by**

**Malcolm R. Campbell**

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For my two inquisitive granddaughters, Freya and Beatrice

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## Moonlight and Ghosts

THE LIGHT OF the harvest moon was brilliant all over the Florida Panhandle. It released the shadows from Tallahassee's hills, found the sandy roads and sawtooth palmetto sheltering blackwater rivers flowing through pine forests and swamps toward the gulf and, farther westward along the barrier islands, that far-reaching light favored the foam on the waves following the incoming tide. Neither lack of diligence nor resolve caused that September 1985 moon to remain blind to the grounds of the old hospital between the rust-stained walls and the barbed wire fence, for the trash trees and wild azalea were unrestrained, swings and slides stood dour and suffocated in the thicket-choked playground, humus and the detritus of long-neglect filled the cracked therapy wading pool, and fallen gutters, and shingles and broken window panes covered the deeply buried dead that had been left behind.

"Can you see anything?" asked Alice as they slipped through a ragged gap in the fence.

"Your blonde hair," he said.

She hooked her fingers through the belt loops of his jeans and stayed close.

"If you can see it, the police can see it," she whispered. "Your intuition brought us here, but I'll be the one picked up for trespassing. Is the building haunted like they say?"

"Yes, but not like they say."

"What do they say?"

"The ghost hunters have Hollywooded up their stories about the Starshine Hospital and Developmental Center," he said. "Careful—these briars aren't friendly."

"Can ghosts and cops smell blood?"

"Yes."

"We're in the heart of darkness. Once we're lost for all eternity, the thorns in my arms won't matter. We're en route somewhere specific, right?"

"My feet know the way."

He led her out of the tangle of thorns and, freed of camouflage, the pale walls of the five-story building rose up into the moonlight just short of the stars. The driveway leading to the former emergency room entrance must have been hit by bombs. Beer cans, broken glass, and unidentifiable trash were strewn up and down the cracked sidewalks and beneath the portecochere. A ripped sign over the chained doors said 'EMERG'.

"This might be a good time to run like hell," said Alice.

"No ghosts so far," said Randy. He turned his flashlight on and off quickly. "The sidewalk is relatively clear. Let's use the south entrance."

"You once told me glowing stories about your unit here," said Alice. "Why did you leave?"

"I wasn't strong enough to stay."

"Explain."

"The state chose to spend money on everyone but those labeled as retarded, the term used before 'developmentally disabled' became a better designation. When the legislature cut our funding, Starshine began to die. Programs were scaled back, salaries were reevaluated, things broke and weren't fixed, the food didn't taste as good, the staff didn't care as much, best practices were replaced by neglect, stories of abuse and mismanagement began to circulate, and the

community saw every staff member as part of a problem it had paid us to keep out of sight and out of mind. So, when my salary fell into the gutter and collection agencies began hounding me, I left and found something else.”

“That makes sense.”

“To me, yes. I had trouble explaining my going away to Brenda, Carol, Mable, Martha, Annie, Linda, Jane and Susan.”

“Look, the door is open,” said Alice. “No wonder they have trouble with vandalism.”

The south door was once painted white. Now it was a multicolor maze of overlapping and badly spelled graffiti viewpoints about sex, drugs, cops, and ghosts.

“Welcome to Starshine,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said warmly and with an equal amount of syrupy sarcasm.

“You go first so I can follow your blonde hair.”

“I think not.”

When he pushed the door shut, its scraping, squalling protest was loud enough to wake the dead. The erratic draft in the stairwell gave him the impression the building itself was gasping for breath. He didn’t hear any of the screams, cries, and rattling chains the ghost hunters promised to thrill seekers exploring the old hospital, but the wind carried muffled whispers similar to those he’d been hearing in his dreams. “Do you smell urine?” she asked.

“We’re probably standing in it.”

They turned on their flashlights simultaneously. The floor was littered with plaster, but dry as a bone. Wires dangled out of holes in the wall where lighting fixtures once lit up the stairs with 250-watt bulbs and then 100-watt bulbs. They were down to 60-watts when he left.

A clumsy sign made out of red and purple construction paper at the bottom of the stairs displayed the creativity and dark humor of a visitor:

*1<sup>st</sup> Floor – Gates of hell and Misinformation*

*2<sup>nd</sup> Floor – Thorazine and Haldol*

*3<sup>rd</sup> Floor – Damned and Misbegotten*

*4<sup>th</sup> Floor – Lobotomies and Electroshock*

*5<sup>th</sup> Floor – Cafeteria and Jumping Off Place*

“Where to?”

“Damned and misbegotten,” he said.