THE STONE STAIRS OF DEATH

by Josh Pachter

first published in *Black Cat Weekly #260* (August 23, 2026)
eligible for the Agatha, Anthony, Derringer, Macavity, and EQMM Reader awards

"Time, ladies and gentlemen," I announced.

The regulars groaned their usual groans, and the tourists looked up from their multicolored frozen daiquiris, momentarily puzzled, until they realized what the words meant and slurped the dregs of their cocktails through their bendy straws.

I spent a week in London a few years ago, mostly checking out the pub scene, and every night at precisely eleven—midnight on Thursday, Fridays, and Saturdays, ten thirty on Sundays—the barman in whichever spot I'd chosen for that evening would signal closing time with those four words. When I returned to Savannah and resumed my post behind the stick at Dub's Pub on West River, I adopted the phrase myself, figured it would bring a little class to the joint.

Did it? That's not for me to judge, but I liked saying it—and I was the captain of the late shift, so I said it, six nights a week at precisely ten.

When Johnny Mercer crossed the Moon River for the final time—on June 25, 1976—I was four days old. When Jim Williams—he of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* fame—died in 1990, I was fourteen and a freshman at Alfred E. Beach High School. When the Lady Chablis succumbed to pneumonia in 2016, I was forty and had just returned home after a bad couple of years in Atlanta.

Today, I am forty-eight, and I spend my evenings at Dub's, serving fried chicken skins to aloha-shirted couples from away who read about them on Yelp, and PBRs and Landshark longnecks to loud frat boys from UGA, and froufrou boat drinks to SCADdies in their summer dresses and dyed hair and backpacks hung like Christmas trees with miniature stuffed animals and other tchotchkes.

After an evening of slinging booze, I need about an hour of quiet time before I can get to sleep, so once the bar is spic-and-span and the day's take has been dropped into the night-deposit slot at Regions Bank, I retrace my steps to my two-room apartment—which is right above Dub's and a rent-controlled perk of my position—change into sweats and a T-shirt, and pull my armchair around to face the living-room window so I can look down at the Stone Stairs of Death.

There are thirty-three of them: thirty-three irregular steps leading from Williamson Street down to (or up from) West River, and they are indeed made of stone. They have been there for at least a hundred years, nobody seems to know for sure, and once in a while some stumblebum—usually three sheets to the wind—trips and falls, and sometimes they crack their heads on the granite and die.

Every January, I hang a giveaway calendar to the left of my window and reset the shot clock to zero. Whenever somebody falls, I draw a diagonal red line from the upper left to the lower right of that date's square. And when one of them dies, I draw a second diagonal, upper right to lower left, making a big red X through the box. In other words, I keep score.

So far, the longest death streak I have been privileged to witness has been three consecutive nights, which happened March 8-10 in 2017 and then again from February

28 to March 2 in 2019. Spring Break, both times. Seems like a lot of Spring Breakers get Spring Drunk and Spring Careless—and sometimes Spring Broke.

The longest stretch I have observed without even a tumble, let alone a death, was during the height of the pandemic, from mid-2020 to early 2022, when the tourists stopped coming and the bars and the Savannah College of Art and Design were closed and the locals did their drinking at home. That was a pretty boring time. Thank the Lord for the CARES Act, which kept me and the rest of the Dub's staff afloat while we were shut down.

Tell you the truth, I would have expected a lot more falls and fatalities right after we reopened, but for some reason it didn't happen. I guess COVID taught folks to be more careful, if nothing else. Old habits die hard, though, and eventually things returned to normal.

Every New Year's Day, I compile some basic statistics for the previous twelve months, and in the years pre-pandemic, I logged an average of sixty-four trips and eleven trips to the morgue per annum. These were just the incidents I witnessed myself during my nightly pre-bedtime vigils, of course. There were surely others that occurred at other times of the day and night, but I don't count those. You know what they say: "If you didn't see it, it didn't happen."

By the beginning of April 2023, we were at sixteen whoopsie-daisies and three funerals, which put us exactly on track for the head-over-heelers and a skootch ahead on the RIPs.

Spring Break ran April 7-14 that year, which included Good Friday and Easter, and on April 9, Easter Monday, Melani Catchpool—a SCAD senior majoring in Digital

Communication and Media/Multimedia—downed several Call a Cabs at Wet Willie's on East River. The Call a Cab is a *potent* concoction—made from Bacardi rum, hundred-and-ninety proof grain alcohol (that's not a typo: we're talking *one hundred and ninety* proof), plus plenty of cherry and strawberry flavoring—and the bar staff at Willie's recommend no more than one to a customer. That's a recommendation, though, not a house policy, and Melanie, twenty-two years old and thin as a rail, sank *three* of them, then staggered up the cobblestones of River Street alongside two equally inebriated girlfriends. They made it about halfway up the Stone Stairs, and then I watched Melani spin around and topple to her encounter with the Grim Reaper.

The next night, April 10, David Glazer—a thirtysomething nerd computer programmer on his yearly vakay, perhaps hoping he might get lucky with a nubile Spring Breaker—got *un*lucky and followed in Melani Catchpool's footsteps … or should I say her flight path? He was heading *down* the Stairs, not up, and he apparently hadn't yet begun drinking. He made it a third of the way down and was actually holding onto the metal railing that divides my side from the far side when I saw him let go and lose his equilibrium and take his final swan dive.

And then on April 11, Otis Deveraux, a seventy-year-old homeless man who spent his days singing hymns for handouts at the foot of the Waving Girl statue in Morrell Park and his nights who-knew-where stopped to catch his breath on the broad landing ten steps up from River. I watched him pull a dirty bandana from his hip pocket and wipe the sweat from his brow, and then he coughed once and flew backward, nearer my God to Thee.

So that was tic-tac-toe, three X's in a row, and on April 12 I settled into my armchair after my shift and peered out the open window in a state of eager anticipation. We were one corpse away from a fourpeat, ladies and gentlemen, and maybe tonight would be the night someone broke the record.

Traffic on the Stone Stairs was disappointingly sparse from the time I settled in around eleven until eleven forty-five. I was beginning to think about packing it in and heading off to Slumberland when I saw a shape appear out of the darkness up and to my left, turning off Williamson and starting down.

The head of the stairway is shrouded in shadows at night, and I couldn't tell at first whether the Lone Descender was male or female. Even when the figure emerged into the pale light cast by the single bare fixture attached to the wall halfway down, I wasn't sure. A gray hoodie with the hood raised concealed its hair and face, and its baggy jeans and scuffed tennies told me nothing. The big red O bisected by the words Ohio State on the front of the sweatshirt suggested an out-of-towner, but I have known occasional Savannahans who for reasons unfathomable to me prefer the Buckeyes to the Bulldogs—even after last year's Peach Bowl, a nailbiter in which #1-ranked UGA came back from a scoreless third quarter and a 24-38 deficit to defeat #4-ranked OSU 42-41 (and then, if you don't mind some hometown bragging, trounced #3-ranked Texas Christian in the national championship game 65-7, the most lopsided margin of victory in college football history).

But I digress. The person on the Stone Stairs of Death at eleven forty-eight the evening of April 12 could have been male or female, drunk or sober, local or a tourist

from Columbus Ohio or Columbus Georgia or anywhere else. None of those demographics made a damn bit of difference.

What mattered was whether or not he or she would make it to River Street alive or dead.

I chewed my lower lip nervously. The figure seemed steady on his or—ah, hell, let's just say *its*, okay?—feet, apparently confident enough in its balance not to need the metal railing.

I held my breath, watching, waiting.

Four steps above the landing.

Three.

Two.

I shot a glance at my calendar, the three red X's glowing side-by-side in the dim light cast by the table lamp on my left, an Unholy Trinity that seemed to *beg* to be promoted to a—what would you call it?—a Quaternity?

I looked back out the window, and the figure's left sneaker came down soundlessly on the stone landing, only ten steps from safety.

I felt like I imagine Bulldog coach Kirby Smart must have felt, deep in the fourth quarter of that semifinal game against the Buckeyes. With less than a minute to play, quarterback Stetson Bennett threw a gorgeous ten-yard touchdown pass to Adonai Mitchell, putting UGA up 42-41. Then OSU's C.J. Stroud led the Buckeyes back to Georgia's thirty-one-yard line, setting up a fifty-yard field-goal attempt with three seconds to play. Kirby Smart's heart must have been in his throat as he watched and waited for kicker Noah Ruggles to take his best shot … and that's how I felt as I watched

the figure in the hoodie swing its right foot onto the ninth step from the bottom, heart in my throat, the game—the season—on the line.

Forcing my pulse to slow, keeping my eyes on the figure in the hoodie as it swung its left foot forward, I reached down with my right hand into the pocket of the caddy draped over the arm of my chair. My peashooter was right where I always keep it, and I brought it to my mouth. I already had a tiny pebble tucked into my cheek, and I worked it into the peashooter's opening with my tongue and took careful aim—this one was for *all* the marbles—and blew.

And unlike that poor sucker Ruggles, I *nailed* my field goal, got Brutus Buckeye right in the forehead. The figure staggered, its hands flew up, its hood whipped back revealing a full head of ash-blond hair. So she was a woman, after all, woman or girl, and her legs splayed out beneath her and she pitched forward and down the last six steps, her head smashing not into granite but the iron railing meant to keep climbers safe.

I usually wait for the ambulance to arrive and the EMTs to pull a sheet up over my latest victim's head, just to be sure, but this time there was absolutely no doubt: whoever she was, she was gone, as dead as Ohio State's hopes for its ninth national championship.

An imaginary crowd roared as I gave myself a fist pump and drew a big red X inside the April 12 box on my calendar.

A new record, ladies and gentlemen!

Now maybe I could make it *five* in a row on April 13….