



darby, virginia

by david odegard

THE TOWN OF DARBY, VIRGINIA, has two identities. Located approximately 140 miles southwest of Washington, D.C., it rests along a lonely expanse between the cities of Richmond and Lynchburg. There is the Darby that the locals know—the center point of community and government for the surrounding farmlands, and the home of an empty chicken processing plant. Then there is the Darby that is the site of the only known miraculous landmark in the United States, the Morrison Well.

An estimated 1 million tourists and pilgrims visit Darby every year. There have been over two hundred documented cases of people who have been cured of a variety of maladies, including lesser forms of cancer and paralysis. However, the majority of visitors claim that the well's supernatural ability assists with less remarkable miracles: a higher credit score, the loss of five pounds, the healing of a faulty car part. No investigation by any major authoritative organization, religious or otherwise, into the reported miracles of the Morrison Well has found any definite proof one way or another. Nevertheless, people still come.

To get to Darby, one must drive down I-95 from the north and then head west on R-60. The small two-lane road that leads to Darby is poorly marked, but odds are that the car ahead of you is heading there too. The road soon becomes the main drag on which most of the town sits. In the town's center is a statue of a wounded Confederate soldier coming home. The bronze soldier can be seen for miles around, and from it one can walk to any and all destinations within Darby. Most visitors easily navigate the town as if knowledge of its street and roadways has always been a part of them, lying dormant until their arrival.

For stays lasting longer than a day, Darby offers several options in the way of accommodations. Visitors with a healthy budget will find the Angel Natalie Bed & Breakfast on Main Street more than satisfactory. Owned and operated by a former Catholic school principal, the Angel Natalie is a large and welcoming Victorian; an abundance of doilies and knick-knacks give you the feeling that you're staying with your grandmother. Reservations should be made six months in advance, because as the proprietor explains, "We're always filled up." More frugal visitors will find the prices at the All Saints Motor Lodge, located on the north edge of town, more than agreeable. No reservation is needed. Camping is also permitted on what was once the Morrison family farm, located a mile to the east of the town. It is the closest one can stay to the well and is where most of the pilgrims reside. The town's second identity, one of religious tourism, grows off the original Darby like a sticky, neon-colored tumor on a sickly body, an unnatural mutation.

Considered the best eatery in town, the Olympic Flame Diner on German Road is a great place to grab a burger and chat with the locals. The friendly nature of the region allows one to strike up conversations with most any patron; most visitors asking about the well inadvertently end up soliciting opinions on the pilgrims and their effect on Darby. And while most Darby residents will gladly oblige and offer their feelings, don't be surprised if your inquiry is angrily brushed aside with the remark, "Leave me alone, faggot."

"It cuts both ways," a man named Bernie will say when asked his thoughts on the subject. "I mean, the whole reason this town is still around is because of the well. If it wasn't for all these people coming here and spending money, Darby would dry up and blow away." Bernie will say all this while staring out the window at the end of his booth. The vinyl seat covers will make a burping sound when he leans back and takes a sip of his coffee. "I mean, Jesus, whatever happened to small towns in this country? Everyone just goes to Wal-Mart and McDonalds. No one knows each other. Shit. But that's not how it is here. People still use the grocery store that's been owned by the Simens family for generations. I don't have to worry about locking my car, cause no one's going to steal it. And

if they try, someone's going to see 'em and say something cause they know it's mine. So we're lucky we've been able to keep things the way they ought to be, but we've also got to deal with all these fuckers coming here."

You may ask Bernie whether he believes if the Morrison Well really works. "That's the thing," he'll say. "I mean, say there is something answering requests for miracles. And I get why they don't answer most of them, or should I say do answer them—it's just that the answer's 'no.' But, I mean, who hasn't begged the universe for help on the little stuff. Who hasn't sat there and said in their head, 'Jesus, please Jesus, just give me a few days until my landlord cashes that check. I just need a little wiggle room.' And then when it happens, how sure are you that some divine power really intervened on your behalf? I mean, I don't know. Maybe it's real and maybe it isn't."

For moderately priced alcoholic beverages, there's the Willow Grove Tavern, just off Ryan Street. Though a fully stocked bar stands behind the bartender, most customers order bottles of domestic beer. If you visit in the mid-afternoon, be sure to strike up a conversation with Willie Rushing. He'll be winding down from his early morning shift on a state highway paving crew and will happily give you his opinions on the theological significance of the Morrison Well.

"You see, the thing is that most people who first hear about the well think it's granting wishes," he'll say, a lit cigarette in his hand, with a breath of wispy smoke hanging around his mouth and nostrils when he speaks. "But that's not it. It's answering prayers. I figure it's a direct line to God." He'll then look around the barroom filled with vacant stools. "Everyone prays the regular way," Willie will explain, holding his hands together in the universal gesture of prayer. "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." He'll do this in a childish voice, a grown man channeling a little boy. "You see, God's just flooded with those types of prayers all the time. Everyone in the world prays to him like that and they're waiting in line to get answered. But when you write something down and drop it into the Morrison Well, it jumps to the top of the list—directly to the big guy. And if it's the right kind of importance—not too big and not too small—then he'll answer it in just the way you hope." Willie will then take a long drag that finishes his cigarette and stamp it out in an ashtray while exhaling a plume of smoke. "God's funny like that. You'd think he'd be fair and equal, but he's fickle. Plays favorites. It's just like getting things done with people; it's all about who you know."

"But how do the prayers get from the well to God?" you might ask him.

"Oh, that?"

And while pulling a fresh cigarette from the pack with his teeth as smoke from the last one still hangs in the air, he'll look at you and say, "Natalie Morrison."

For a history of the Morrison Well one only needs to visit the museum built on the site of the Morrison farmhouse. Having lost the original to a fire in 1982, a replica was raised in its place and filled with artifacts and exhibits of the well's history. A large glass display case takes up what was once the dining room and adjacent kitchen. Inside the case lies a miniature version of the very house in which it resides and the surrounding area. Benches line the room and on the wall is a button with a sign that reads, "Push to begin."

When pushed, motors whirl and gears crank under the display as the lights dim and a voice emanates out from a set of hidden speakers. "This is the story of how a little girl became an angel of God," it says. A series of lights turn on and give the illusion of sunrise just over the horizon of the miniature Morrison Farm. Sound effects play over a light clarinet track to give the impression of dawn. Animatronic dolls move out onto the floor of the

display case and their tiny mouths open and shut as the recorded dialogue and God-like narrator tell the story of Natalie Morrison.

The performance lasts for close to a half hour and is dreadfully boring. The dialogue between the characters is stilted, the narration borders on comical, and the animatronics are woefully outdated and in need of repair. The production is only entertaining if a doll becomes stuck for a moment, sending the whole cast of robotic actors out of sync with their corresponding recorded lines—giving the miniature version of a burly man the voice of young girl or the spirit of a neighing horse possession over a tiny woman.

Still, through the haze of distracted attention, the tale of Natalie Morrison registers. Born just after the Second World War, Natalie was the only daughter of a family that was an island of poverty in Darby's postwar economic boom. Her family's home lacked electricity and running water. Joseph Morrison, her father, didn't care for money or status, much to the chagrin of his wife Catherine. Despite a home life lacking comfort, Natalie was a happy child who amused herself by playing alone in her father's fields. This is conveyed by the mechanized reenactment by the little automated Natalie doll skipping and singing around the display case. On one such jaunt, the narration tells us, Natalie fell down a forgotten, dried-up well. The miniature Natalie doll slides down a track and disappears into a tiny well cut out of the display floor as her recorded voice screams.

For an entire day and night, the people of Darby looked for Natalie. An army of the motorized dolls explore the miniature farm calling out her name while Natalie lays deep in the display case and whimpers. It was only after Dr. Evans heard the muted sobbing while cutting through the Morrisons' field that the search party was finally alerted to Natalie's location. They raised her out of the ground just in time for her last breath. Joseph and Catherine Morrison never recovered. They sold the farm and left Darby. This is the point of the story where the display darkens again and the narration moves ahead.

Years later, a new family is living on the farm. The case fills with torn paper to represent the winter snow. And like the Morrison family before them, the farm's newest tenants suffer a tragedy. Their young son, about the same age as Natalie, was caught out in the surrounding woods when a heavy snowstorm suddenly hit the area. A second wave of shredded paper falls on the miniature farm. The boy's mother, fearing that her son was going to freeze to death, knelt and prayed by the well, asking Natalie to help guide her son home. The mechanical melodrama never explains how she knew to ask the dead girl's help, though it does show her miniature incarnation kneeling beside the well. The following day the boy returned to his mother, just as a search party was setting out in an effortless rescue attempt, and told of how a little girl showed him the way home. After the show has ended and the lights come on and sting your eyes, a staff member will open a door at the back of the house and herd the audience toward the well.

As you walk from the house, you'll see that the old fields are now a combination of campground, shantytown, and bazaar. The sheer size of the crowd is shocking, and if you don't say it, you will no doubt hear someone else ask, "Where did all these people come from?" The thoroughfare that snakes from the reconstructed farmhouse to the well is dotted with every conceivable variation of Christianity announcing itself via a colorful banner hoisted atop a flagpole. Such markings are meant as meeting points for congregants and often stand alongside an open-air tent where daily services are held.

No specific organization initially claimed authority over the grounds. Local government bodies (including the Darby Sheriff Department) were, and still are, weary of enforcing rules and ordinances here; and no congregation was willing to assert itself as the dominant

force, fearing reprisals from the other groups. Out of this void grew the Darby Chapter of the Order of Natalie. Without the Order the area would be overrun with squalor; they provide clean drinking water, bathroom and shower facilities, medical aid, and provide most pilgrims with an overall sense of safety. These services are paid for by a type of tax that the group collects from merchants, entrepreneurs, and the larger church congregations. Members of the Order are recognized by their black uniforms and red berets; they will happily address any questions or concerns.

Walking down the wide dirt pathway toward the well, the sense of organization fades with each step. The church groups and missionaries give way to the merchants and entrepreneurs. You first encounter the larger outfits with colorful booths stocked with quality T-shirts and plastic molded statues of Natalie Morrison that glow in the dark. These merchants are followed by individual vendors. "Sacred paper for the writing of your prayer, sir?" one may ask as he rudely, but gently, grips anyone walking past, flashing a grin that mixes pleading with greeting. "It's been soaked in Holy Water and then dried," he'll say when asked what makes his product sacred, "and then blessed by a minister. It's only two dollars a sheet. What do you say?" Most of these vendors expect some sort of haggling with potential customers and call out last-minute prices as you walk away.

What follows is the raw carnage of belief. The ground is littered with visitors too weak to finish the journey, overcome either by illness or emotion; they thrust out envelopes and scraps of paper with their prayers so that other pilgrims can drop them into the well. The roadway becomes lined with people lying prone on the ground, but cleared from the direct path of foot traffic. Crutches and canes keep them company in the dirt. They reach to you as you pass like Calcutta beggars, fingering the cuffs of your pants. "Please," they say, "drop in a prayer for me." These are the saddest of pleas and simply read, "Help me get up." It is customary to take two or three if you are able.

The line for the well forms some thirty yards away, though the wait isn't very long. This is when most visitors compose their prayers and nervously begin scribbling and scratching out their requests. Do not be surprised if someone asks to use your back as a hard surface to write upon, nor should you be afraid to request the same from anyone else. The last group of individual businessmen make their rounds here, offering (for a nominal fee, of course) to help with the grammar and language of your prayers. The air buzzes with people speaking out drafts of their requests.

"Everything is so hard for me. Nothing ever goes my way, not even something simple like getting a good haircut. Please give me one nice thing. Just one. I don't care what."

"I'm always running late for work and other appointments. Please Natalie, ask the Lord to help me."

"I've forgotten where I placed the diamond ring my mother left me. Please God, help me find it."

The Morrison Well is protected by a chain link fence and members of the Order of Natalie stand guard at the entrance. This is to keep things calm and orderly as well as to prevent people from trying to dive into the well, something that a surprising number still try. One by one, visitors are allowed to walk in and deposit their prayers. As you wait your turn, you can't help feel the excitement that has built up throughout your journey. Your hands will shake and your heart will pound loudly throughout your entire body. It's more than likely that you'll weep ever so lightly, the soft tears running slowly down to your lips where you will recognize their salty taste. And then the person in front of you will walk out of the restricted area and the guards will motion that it is your turn.

The well has been kept exactly as it was. It'll strike you that it looks nothing like you imagined. There is no stone wall surrounding it like the wells in cartoons. It is nothing more than a dark mouth in the earth that opens itself up without much fanfare. It's easy to understand how a little girl running along would fail to notice it and fall right in. When you slip the envelopes and folded notes that contain other people's entreaties to the divine, you can hear them fluttering down into the earth. Then you hold your own plea in your hands and contemplate it. You'll wonder if it will be granted. You hope so. Then you drop it ~~in~~ into the well and watch it vanish into the darkness. ●