

LEVI GALLUP

SHADOW DANCERS

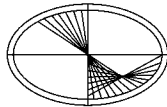


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DIVERTIR
PUBLISHING

Salem, NH

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Cover design by Rich Normandin

Published by Divertir Publishing LLC

PO Box 232

North Salem, NH 03073

<http://www.divertirpublishing.com/>

ISBN-13: 978-1-938888-02-1

ISBN-10: 1-938888-02-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013935017

Printed in the United States of America

Dedication

This book is dedicated to those who've passed before us, their unfulfilled aspirations yet lingering in their hearts, and to the hope that in rebirth they have achieved them.

CONTENTS

Prologue.....	1
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2.....	21
Chapter 3.....	31
Chapter 4.....	47
Chapter 5.....	71
Chapter 6.....	75
Chapter 7.....	93
Chapter 8.....	101
Chapter 9.....	115
Chapter 10.....	121
Chapter 11.....	133
Chapter 12.....	149
Chapter 13.....	159
Chapter 14.....	171
Chapter 15.....	181
Chapter 16.....	187
Chapter 17.....	195
Ben Swift's Journal, Chapter 1	199
Epilogue	203

Once we have followed our forebears into the wretched depths of the grave, we remain as shadows, dancing in the memories of the living.

Prologue

People have a hard time believing in anything supernatural, but the denial of its existence has no affect on its existence. In reality, it is the essence of our being. All around us the world is alive with signals, with impulses, with data. Most people have traded the ability to perceive these signals for the security of an ego, but just like radio waves, x-rays, and infrared, they are very much there. Some people are quite attuned while others are unable to perceive even the slightest hint that there is more to this world than what we can see, touch, taste, smell and hear. A multitude of people tread somewhere in between.

Multiverse theory suggests that you and I exist in multiple dimensions. Even as you read this, another incarnation of “you” is sleeping, eating, dying, giving birth, or having sex. These alternate realities can exist at any moment in time and indicate that time is not truly linear but cyclical. At any moment, we exist in the past, present and future. Often we are granted a vision of these 'other lives' in dreams or in fleeting moments of enlightenment. Sometimes these virtual expressions bring joy, peace, and wisdom. Other times they bring fear, heartache, and suffering.

There are stories told where such encounters prove to be a dire warning, a warning that immediate events are compounded upon the past or a warning of vengeful spirits on the loose and of impending doom. Sometimes the shadows of other realities cross into our own, and when they do... untold havoc can be unleashed and demons released upon the unsuspecting. This is one such story.

The Letter

Dear Friend,

September 6th...

I reckon it seems insane that I'm pausing long enough to scribble this letter because it may just cost me my life. But I'm determined that others be warned about what I've witnessed, so I'm pursuing this in hopes of making you aware of what has happened here over the past few days. As I write this it's fixin' to get real bad 'round here.

I'm sending this to you because in the event things continue to go sour I want my journal in the hands of someone who might actually believe in its contents and be willing to tell others.

I have recorded in my journal most of what has gone on which, if you have received this note, is now in your possession. When I started writing I wasn't quite sure where to begin, so I started it where I first remembered things going off in this direction.

Please don't think poorly of me or think all the gray matter has leaked out of my brainpan; I've already considered those things myself. Just know that what I have written in this journal happened, and what is happening right now is as real as it gets. And the next time you witness a whirlwind... Well just remember what you've learned here.

I hope I get to share this with you in person and to share it with as many people as possible, but things aren't looking too good right now. It seems all hell is fixin' to break loose.

Be well my friend,
Brady

Journal entry: August 29, 10:02 p.m. Things got weird today. And I mean real weird.

❖ 1 ❖

Brake! Brakesy! Get over here and sit down, you damn redneck."

I released the door allowing it to close behind me, the string of metallic bells strung across its top edge jingling as the door swung shut. The sound caused the other diners to glance up at me momentarily distracted from their breakfasts. Seated around metallic, stainless steel tables or along the ceramic topped bar running the length of the diner most nodded an acknowledgment before returning their attention to their food or coffee.

Tearing my eyes away from the shapely form of Jennie Marshall as she reached to pull down a package of paper napkins from atop a cabinet, I worked my way along the row of booths at the front of the Dustbowl Diner then veered toward the middle of the room. The diner, its interior cast in the cold, hard chrome, glass, Formica, and red vinyl décor of the 1950s era, was full of nostalgic charm. The warmth of staff and patrons was welcoming to anyone who ventured inside, and it was a familiar place for me to meet my friends. My hungry stomach growled in response to the pleasing aromas of numerous steaming plates of eggs, bacon, home fries, and toast. I grasped the vinyl cushioned back of the one vacant chair at the table where Billy Don Smith, Jimmy Joe Jackson, and Bobby 'Red' McCauley sat forking eggs and bacon into their mouths between a constant flow of words and coffee.

"Where the hell you been this morning? I thought maybe you'd gone home with that sweet little Missy Briggs last night," Billy Don

SHADOW DANCERS

chortled. He sported a broad grin, his white teeth made brighter by the contrast of two days' growth of dark whiskers along his narrow jaw. His eyes twinkled behind thick eyeglasses, and his graying black hair grew thick beneath his dusty black Stetson. A notepad and pencil protruded from the left pocket of his gray, western-style shirt. The rest of us wore logo emblazoned work shirts and ball caps paired with cowboy boots, denim jeans, and large, silver belt buckles. Billy's polished silver buckle sported an oil rig, longhorn cattle, a five-pointed star, and the word *Texas*.

Before I could respond Betty Jane Wilcox strode up to the table with a steaming hot pot of coffee. She grabbed up the overturned ceramic cup from the saucer in front of me just as I settled into the chair. Betty was a slender little gal with a full bosom, narrow waist and contoured hips covered in an apron that made all the boys' eyes follow her as she walked.

"Mornin', Brake. Coffee?" Betty asked, pursing her ruby red lips and winking one of her mascara-painted eyes.

Billy Don watched my eyes as I ogled the girl—something I did out of reflex more than actual interest. Not wanting to be left out he sat up straight and leaned forward.

"You're lookin' mighty sweet this morning, Betty Jane. How about bendin' over in front of me and pourin' a cup of your *fine* coffee." Billy Don clicked his tongue, winking in a flirtatious manner.

Betty poured coffee into my cup without waiting for my response and looked directly at Billy Don. "You hush your fresh mouth in here, Billy Don. You're too old to be talking like that."

"Too old? Hell, you come right on over here, honey, and sit on my lap. I'll show how old I am."

"You old geezer. You know you can't cut the mustard no more." She curtsied, winking at me as she refilled Red's cup.

"I might be too old to cut the mustard, Betty Jane, but I'm still damn good at lickin' the jar!" His comment caused a burst of laughter to erupt from the many truckers and oil rig roughnecks sitting in the roadside diner. Betty Jane scampered back toward the kitchen blushing and giggling nervously.

When the laughter died down I answered Billy. "No, I went home right after you boys left the Cactus Creek last night." I was referring to the saloon we all used as a watering hole after work most nights. Sipping my coffee, I reached up and adjusted the dirty ball cap atop my head. "What's on tap for today?"

Bobbie Sue Bennett, an older woman but easy to look at with her brunette locks tied up in a ponytail, and sporting her own shapely figure, approached the table giving an embarrassed Betty Jane a moment to collect herself.

"Good Morning, you bunch of wranglers. We got a chicken-fried steak with gravy and hash browns and a blueberry and ice cream waffle for specials. What's it gonna be this morning, Brady?"

"I'll stick with the ham and bacon omelet with extra onion, Texas toast, and home fries."

"Okay, honey. You want juice or anything with that?"

"Yeah, I'll have me an orange juice."

"You got it, handsome," she said, spinning away from the table and whacking Billy Don on the shoulder with the menu as she walked past him and continued toward the kitchen. "Ya'll behave yourselves out here."

Billy Don chuckled, satisfied that he had drawn enough attention to himself, and looked up at me. He pulled out the pad of paper, glanced at it briefly, and pushed it back into the Western cut pocket. His gaze returned to me as he picked up his coffee cup and took a long swallow before returning the cup to its saucer. "I need you to go out to the Snodgrass, Barbara George, and Henderson/Crabtree leases today, Brake. If that don't take you all day give me a shout on the horn, and I'll find you another."

Brake. I got the name fresh out of high school. Billy Don taught me just about everything I know about truck driving and hauling crude oil. When I was first learning to drive a truck I came up on a stop sign a little too quickly and Billy hollered at me. "Goddamn it, Brady, brake! Hit the drake, Brake!" He meant to say, "Hit the brake, Drake," but where my first name is Brady and last name Drake... Then he got to tellin' the other guys about the incident... You know

SHADOW DANCERS

how it goes. Everyone picked up on it, and since then he calls me Brake as do the others on occasion.

"Okay," I said. "That works fine for me."

Over some friendly banter we sipped our coffees, finished eating breakfast, and paid our tabs before leaving the restaurant. Just as I was about to climb up into the cab of my truck, J.J. Jackson, a life-long friend and neighbor of mine, hollered to me. I waited for him as he walked over to my rig: a sparkling and well-maintained eighteen-wheeled tanker and tractor.

"Brake, you mind swappin' one of your leases with me? I've got to pick up Felicia over in Sundown after work, and it would be a whole lot better for me if I could finish the day runnin' over to the George lease. Since you're goin' out toward New Mexico anyway I thought maybe you could do the Hobgoode lease. They pay 'bout the same. Besides, you know how you like those burritos at Taos Taco in Morton, so you'd be able to stop in and get a couple if ya' had a mind to."

"Okay, J.J., so you'll be runnin' over to the Barbara George then?"

"Yeah."

"Sure, no problem."

"Great! Thanks, Brady."

With a nod, J.J. spun around on his heels and jogged off toward his rig. I climbed up into mine and settled in.

J.J. had been born in the Flats just west of Levelland, but he and his folks moved to Broken Spoke when he was eight years old so his mama could work in the cotton gin. His first day in school a group of boys from the outer farms picked on him. They called him some nasty, racist shit and took to roughin' him up.

My buddy Eddie and I jumped to his side of things, and after givin' them other boys a thrashin' we've all been friends ever since. Both J.J. and I had a crush on a brown-eyed gal by the name of Felicia, but I was too interested in playing the field, and he was full in love with the girl. Good thing because they've been together since high school, and I still haven't settled down. He's a good man and great friend.

Having left the semi running while I was inside, the diesel engine was warmed up and ready to roll. I released the air brakes on the truck and tanker and slid the lever into first gear. As I released the clutch, the massive machine rattled, hummed, and roared, and I was soon rolling along Route 114, headed west toward Whiteface.

Tuning the radio to a country station, I started humming along to the newest song from Rascal Flats. With the sun rising steadily into the clear, blue Texas sky the cool morning air was beginning to warm, and it was shaping up to be a right gorgeous day. Forty minutes passed before I pulled up alongside the storage tanks on the Snodgrass oil lease. Jackrabbits scurried through the underbrush, the rattle of the truck putting a scare into them. The pump jack, a monster of a pump handle sliding up and down atop a concrete slab in the ground, was humming and creaking—pumping that Texas tea out of the ground and into the pair of five-hundred barrel storage tanks. The odor of crude oil was thick in the air. It's an ever-present scent in the panhandle of Texas but noticeably more pungent the nearer to a lease tank you find yourself.

Hopping down out of the cab, I lifted the lid on my toolbox and grabbed my test kit. I climbed up the ladder on the first tank and hooked the kit on a rung just in front of me. I released the lever on the tank hatch and leaned away from the lid and slowly lifted it open. The tank spewed the vile fumes of the pure Texas crude as I let it rest in an angled position.

As I lowered a sample container down into the oil, visions from a training video raced through my head: images of men who had opened the lids without leaning back and were killed by the toxic gas escaping the tank. You'd think that, since I perform this task eighteen to twenty times a week, I'd forget about those images, but they show the same damn video every year during the annual safety training courses. We get the pleasure of seeing it again and again, and I sure as hell don't want to end up like any of them. If I did I guess someone would take snapshots of me and use them to put a scare into other haulers. Personally, I feel it would be damn disgraceful if somebody found my corpse hanging on the ladder or in a heap on the ground below it.

SHADOW DANCERS

Ugh, not for me.

Drawing my sample up out of the tank, I filled a couple of test tubes, put them back in their holders, and popped a cap on them. Then I closed the lid, grabbed my kit, climbed down the ladder, and returned to the truck. I put the test kit back in the toolbox and slipped the two test tubes into the spinner and turned it on. As the tubes spun they separated the water, oil, and sediments inside.

A few minutes later the test was complete and the oil passed the purchase criteria. I wrestled the hose from the side of the truck and hooked it up to the tank before I started the pump. The smelly, black crude poured into the tanker while I wrote out a purchase tag to leave in the receipt box.

Half an hour later I was back on the road and heading southeast to dump the load at a central pumping station. Once there, I off-loaded the crude into a massive storage tank and headed on out to another lease to repeat the task. As to the crude oil, well, it gets pumped out from the pump station through a series of underground pipes and will make its way to a regional oil refinery.

The rest of my day went something like that. As I said, it was a damn fine day and payday to boot. Last run of the day was the Hobgoode lease, a desolate spot out near the New Mexico border. It was after four o'clock by the time I got the crude loaded into the tanker. I secured the hoses before climbing back into the truck. I then turned the old Mack tractor east and headed for my last trip to Brownfield station.

I barreled down a long stretch of barren highway, the pumping station drawing ever closer, as the miles passed beneath my wheels. Soon, I approached the desolate fork in the road known as Ten Mile Fork. Gazing out on the few old, run-down buildings and a rusted Texaco sign I noticed a handmade placard mounted under the star advertising a recently opened convenience store. Suddenly, I had a strong hankering for something cold to drink. My thermos full of iced coffee had long since been drained, and there wasn't another store between here and Brownfield pumping station. I pulled in and parked alongside the edge of the road just twenty feet from the

antique gas pumps. The outdated pumps still provided gasoline, but the office section of the garage had been converted into the miniature convenience store. The open automotive bays no longer served their original purpose and were now filled with junk. Except for a few outbuildings around the station and an old farmhouse across the street nothing but crop fields and a few stands of trees was visible through the windows of the cab.

Hot air engulfed me as I opened the door and stepped down onto the hard-packed, reddish brown earth. Walking away from the truck, I raised my ball cap and wiped the sweat from my brow as I squinted against the wind, blocking out the dust it was carrying across the open prairie.

The whirl of an old air conditioner buzzed above my head, and a drop of water falling from the sweating metal struck my shoulder as I reached for the doorknob. When I stepped inside I discovered that the air wasn't much cooler, but it was an improvement.

The old place smelled of fuel, oil and stale coffee. Racks of gray, metal shelving stood in the center of the concrete floor holding a limited selection of canned goods and packaged foodstuffs. A glass-topped cooler with a small selection of ice cream products hummed loudly near the front window, and several drink coolers lined the back wall of the small room. A rugged metal counter ran along one wall behind which a clerk stood in front of several racks of cigarettes. The walls were devoid of decoration but for a few ancient fan belts and a yellowed calendar, dated 1969, with a photograph of an antique Ford pickup truck.

The last year they made any improvements here, I thought as I approached one of the coolers. The selection was pretty small, so I settled for grabbing a Yoohoo from the buzzing refrigerator and crossed the room to the counter where I paid the old man. He didn't say a word until he handed back my change.

"Breeze don't seem to be coolin' things down none, does it?" the lanky, gray haired clerk remarked glancing at me over the reading spectacles resting on the bridge of his nose.

"Nah, too damn hot," I agreed. "Thanks." I tilted my face away

SHADOW DANCERS

from the rancid, tobacco-dip laced breath that assaulted my nostrils as he spoke.

"Still says a hundred and three there on the thermometer outside the window," he said, seemingly reluctant to allow our conversation to end.

"Yeah, that seems about right." I turned away and headed for the door.

"Ya'll come on back, now." The old man returned his gaze to a sportsman magazine laid out on the counter.

Nodding, I stepped out through the door and pulled it closed behind me. Once again, the heat wrapped around my body and made me think immediately of the air-conditioned haven waiting inside the cab of my truck. I cracked the top on the Yoohoo bottle and flicked the bottle cap into an open fifty-gallon trash drum before taking a long swig of the ice-cold, chocolate-flavored mixture. Savoring the liquid as it flooded my mouth and ran down my throat, I scanned the immediate landscape.

An old pickup truck, which didn't look as though it had run in years, sat rusting away near the aged Texaco signpost. But for the fuel pumps, an old shack, another late model pickup that had seen better days, and several scrap piles, not much else littered the grounds. Around the station were unplanted fields waiting their turn in the crop rotation cycle. The bare dirt was dry, and little puffs of dust wafted in ghostly formations just above the ground until they fell once again to the earth. In all directions the land lay flat all the way to the horizon. Here and there an occasional tree, or group of trees, sprouted up from the earth shading some small portion of the sun-baked land. That was all that managed to eke out a living in this desolate place. Some of the fields at the far reaches of my vision sported cotton. Their irrigation pipes spanned acres of land, and lush, green plants struggled daily in their ever-reaching quest toward the sky. Few clouds dared enter the blue afternoon sky over Texas. It was a domain occupied only by the large, yellow sun as it glared down at the earth, baking the ancient soil with its gaze.

I wiped away a smudge of chocolate from my upper lip with my sleeve, and as I lifted my head I noticed a woman. She stepped away

from the side of the building and strode across the lot toward the old signpost. My eyes were drawn immediately to her slender legs which began at the barely visible curve in her shapely buttocks, encased in tight blue shorts, and gleamed all the way down to the tops of her leather boots. I immediately sized her up to be about thirty-five years old. Dirty-blond hair fell down around her partially-naked shoulders, exposed by the cut of her lime green blouse. With the bottom of her shirt rolled up and tied in a knot just below her bosom the unbuttoned top exposed much of her ample breasts as she worked. Her body held my attention as she reached up to change the fuel price placards on the sign.

I stared for a moment too long before looking away suspecting she had spotted my roving eyes. When I risked a second glance at her cleavage she knowingly met my gaze. I grinned offering her a nervous nod. The woman winked at me and blew me a little kiss making me feel all the more uncomfortable.

As she turned her back to me, her attention returning to the task at hand, I thought she cocked her buttocks just a *bit* higher than necessary as she lifted one leg and then rose up onto the concrete base to reach the higher placards. As the wind tossed her hair about her pleasant face she moved around to the other side of the sign. Once again, the woman caught me staring at her, and I was pleased to note her eyes roving over me as well. I nodded again. No longer uneasy, I openly enjoyed the sight of her. While watching glistening sweat rising on her creamy skin I began musing over the idea of maybe taking a turn at her if she was of a mind to do so.

As I tipped back the bottle for the last of the Yoohoo I noticed a whirling mass of sand headed in the direction of the signpost. I watched with some amusement as the dust devil approached the woman. She was completely unaware of the twirling dust as she dutifully worked at finishing her task.

Amused, I watched more intently, wondering what effect the wind might have on her flimsy blouse. I tossed the empty bottle into the open steel drum near the door and stepped away from the building as I sauntered in her direction. Heck, I figured the potential rescue of a damsel in distress might be worthy of some reward.

SHADOW DANCERS

The whirlwind whipped the woman's hair about her head and tugged at her top. Startled, she dropped the placards and moved away from the sign, attempting to escape the sand blasting her exposed skin. I felt a sudden sinking feeling in my gut when the whirlwind seemed to move with her, and my amusement became full-fledged uneasiness.

The wind intensified, and the women seemed as though she were paralyzed in its grasp. Her eyes sought mine and, as our gazes collided, I could read the fear in her green eyes. I jogged toward her now truly intent on rescuing her. All playful thoughts of a reward for my gallant rescue evaporated in the face of her genuine terror. But before I could reach her I lost sight of her as the sand in the miniature tornado swallowed the woman completely. The swirling tempest began to roar around her, and particles of sand pelted my face. I lifted my arms to protect my skin and squinted my eyes. Startled by the sheer force of the whirlwind, I stumbled backward while resisting its attempt to engulf me as well.

A ghastly hissing and gurgling noise followed by a sickly sound of bones popping erupted from the swirling mass of sand. The green blouse, shredded with parts of it missing, was flung from the whirlwind along with a boot and a bracelet. I began to shake. Weakness flooded me, and I felt lightheaded as sweat sprang from my pores, and my heart began to pound in my chest. I retraced my steps, retreating toward the store with the hair on the back of my neck standing on end. What happened next will stick with me for the rest of my days.

I stared at the aftermath of the bizarre event for a moment before I ground my fists into my eye sockets and blinked rapidly in an attempt to refocus. I couldn't believe my eyes. Awe was replaced by a sense of foreboding, and then fear that gripped me unlike anytime ever in my life. I felt flush, my breathing becoming difficult, as I staggered backward with my mind reeling.

Appearing from what remained of the spinning sand was a man. He was dark-skinned, muscular in a sinewy kind of way, and naked but for some kind of amulet hanging around his neck. He staggered

out of the whirlwind, seemingly in pain, and the miniature tornado swept off across the parking lot and faded away. Still unbelieving, I looked for the woman who no longer seemed to exist, and stared into the enlarged, haunting, eyes the depth of which seemed eternal and demonic. He stared at me, his gaze boring through me as if searching for my soul.

Stumbling backwards, I tripped and slammed my back against the front door as I fumbled for the doorknob. The door seemed to vanish when I gripped the knob and turned. It sprung open from the force of my body, and I found myself falling backward. I flailed, struggling to remain upright, while accidentally raking a row of canned goods off the shelf with my right arm. Gasping for breath, I lost my bid to remain on my feet and found myself sprawling on my back across the concrete floor inside. I scooted further toward the rear of the store and away from the doorway clawing for anything that might help me right myself.

"What the hell is going on?" squawked the old store clerk. "Close the damn door before the wind blows sand all up in here."

Finding a support beam, I pulled myself to my feet but continued to back away from the door while seeking the whereabouts of the creature I had just seen manifest out of the whirlwind. I stared out through the large plate glass window and located the creature as it crossed in front of the building. His rugged facial features and long, black mane made me wonder if he was of American Indian or Mexican blood, but my mind was far too distracted to really spend much time thinking about it. Despite his forceful gait the man seemed slightly disoriented as he approached the front of the establishment with an increasing sense of intensity in his movements.

"G—get..." I stammered, looking toward the aged store clerk. My vocal chords were taut, choked by the adrenaline coursing hot within my veins, and I found myself unable to continue my warning. Numb and awestruck, I stood motionless while I struggled to gather my thoughts. I felt paralyzed by the horror of what I had just witnessed.

"Get outta here!" I finally heard myself scream after numerous attempts as I frantically looked about for another way out of the

SHADOW DANCERS

store. At that moment the black-eyed creature stepped through the open doorway. His mouth opened, and the blood-curdling howl he unleashed sent ice cold shivers through my entire body.

"What in the hell do ya think your doin', boy? We don't allow no screaming, longhaired, shirtless hippies in here. Can't you read the sign? No shirt, no shoes, no service," the old man barked from behind the counter. "And where the *hell* are your goddamned pants?" The clerk's voice trembled as he backed away, cowering against the cigarettes.

The dark man turned his eyes on the aged clerk, his face still holding that vicious mask of rage. His muscles rippled and with lightning speed he snatched up a can of chili beans that I had managed not to knock onto the floor in my stumbling. The creature's arm whipped forward, and he heaved the can of beans square at the old man. Rocketing through the air as though it had been fired from an ancient cannon, the can struck the store clerk in the sternum with a resounding thud.

The old man grunted at the impact as he was flung backward into the cigarette cartons. He lurched sideways before disappearing, falling down behind the counter. The sound of items being strewn about under the counter filled my ears as I turned my focus back on the black-eyed monster. His gaze was already locked onto me, and a second can of chili beans missed cracking my skull by mere inches. Eyeing an interior door, the only other exit I saw, I ducked behind the shelves nearest me and scampered across the store.

"God-damned heathen!" The old man emerged from beneath the counter and pointed the barrel of a shotgun toward the unwelcome guest.

The gun roared just as I passed the end of the service counter and charged through the doorway. The shriek that erupted behind me made me hesitate and turn to look. *Did he get him?* I wondered.

Crouching, I crept back through the interior doorway, hoping to see that evil bastard dead. However I could only watch in terror as the heathen seemed to fly across the room and land atop the counter. The demon kicked the shotgun, and the old man fired again as it jerked

upwards, blasting a hole in the ceiling. Concrete and paint rained down on the pair. Leaping off the counter, the creature wrapped his legs around the clerk's waist and plunged one of his thumbs deep into the other man's left eye socket. There was a sucking sound as the man's eyeball popped free, and he began to wail, dropping the shotgun entirely, as he clawed frantically at his own face.

I have never considered myself to be a coward, but I was in full panic mode and too damned near messing my pants to stop and play the hero. I bolted back through the doorway and into a cluttered stock room as the old man shrieked and cried for mercy behind me. From the sounds coming from that room I could only imagine the horrendous death the old timer was suffering at the hands of this murderous devil.

Tumbling over a stack of boxes and food cartons, I ran blindly seeking an exit. After a few minutes of panicked movement I noticed the side door and tore at it, slamming my body into the frame when it didn't open. Boy did I feel dumb when I spotted the latch on the old screen door. I pushed the latch down and fell forward, rolling across the dirt, before springing to my feet. As soon as I knew what direction was up I was running for my truck.

Halfway across the front lot I heard the bellow of the .20 gauge shotgun from behind me and felt the sting of birdshot as a partial load spattered my left arm and shoulder. The worst of it swept past me and collided with one of the antique fuel pumps. I turned and looked for him, and to my horror the dark-eyed devil was barreling through the front door of the store with the clerk's shotgun firmly in hand.

Dressed now in the old man's dirty denim pants, the devil looked almost human as he fired another shot in my direction but missed completely. His gaze remained fixed on me as he ejected the shells; it took him only a moment to reload. Turning the shotgun, he pointed the muzzle at a five gallon fuel can set next to a lawn mower in the open door of the garage. The can burst sending gasoline everywhere. I suspected then that those shells were loaded with steel shot because when the pellets struck the metal and brick inside the bay tiny sparks ignited the gasoline, and flames quickly spread across the garage interior.

SHADOW DANCERS

He then sighted the weapon in on me once more. Spinning about, I dove and rolled across the dirt as the round tore out of the barrel. Fear of being shot again propelled me as I heard the sound of more birdshot ripping into the gas pumps behind where I had just been standing. My flight mechanism in full gear, I continued the dash for my truck. Once there I sprang up, grasped the door handle, and whipped open the door of the cab only to feel a strong hand slam into me. Claw like fingernails shredded my shirt and tore my skin as they raked down my lower back before the bony fingers curled around my belt and jerked me backwards.

I reached for the tire bar, reacting more than I was thinking, and somehow my hands found the Maglite I kept on the floor next to the seat. The flashlight fell from my fingers, and I rolled backwards as I struck the ground, coming up on my feet as the fiend lunged at me. His body struck mine with such force that we tumbled across the lot grabbing and punching at one another like feral cats fighting over territory. My fingers found an amulet, and I twisted the rawhide tether tightly around his neck. The heathen stopped trying to claw my eyes out and got to his feet, trying to get loose of my grip. Seemingly more annoyed than concerned, he wrenched himself away in a singular jerk. The cord snapped, and he staggered away from me as the pressure was abruptly released. I darted sideways and scrambled across the dirt, recovering the flashlight from where I'd dropped it. I managed to get myself up on one knee when he charged. Leaping directly at the charging monster, I swung the flashlight and, with a speed and accuracy that surprised me, clobbered him square in the temple. As the flashlight collided with the side of the man's skull the cylinder dented, lens popped off, and the batteries rocketed through the air. The demon slammed into the earth and rolled over amidst the rising dust with blood pouring from a gash just in front of his left ear. The distraction gave me just enough time to get back to the truck. Leaping up through the open door and into the cab I jerked the door closed, slapped the door lock with my elbow, and released the brakes. I jammed my foot down on the clutch and popped the transmission into gear. As the big rig heaved and began to move, I stared out at the store, fearing

the bastard might already be on me. The heathen was still stunned, slowly pushing himself up from the dust and shaking his head. As I watched the rolling inferno inside the garage I prayed that he might be roasted in the flames.

Dumbstruck, I shifted the gears by instinct and drove, trying to escape the surreal event. As I put distance between myself and that *thing* my gaze returned repeatedly to the mirror. I watched in the mirror as the devil got to his feet and made his way across the yard. Approaching the front of the building, he grabbed up a chunk of burning debris and tossed it into the store. Then he stood still for a moment, watching my rig, watching me, before he turned away.

Every gained inch of ground between me and that God forsaken gas station was a moment of joy, but fear remained nestled low in my gut. I glanced again at the reflection of the station in the mirror and jumped in my seat, stunned by the sound of a horrendous explosion. I could only stare in disbelief at the fireball that erupted into the sky behind me. He had obviously set fire to the fuel pumps and the entire area was engulfed in a raging inferno. Billowing black smoke hovered in the hot afternoon air.

"Holy shit, what the hell was that thing?" I screamed, wiping sweat from my eyes and face using my left sleeve. Consciously working to calm myself, I began to take inventory of my injuries. I was well aware of the stinging slashes in my lower back where the fiend had scratched me, and I figured on at least a couple dozen pellets of birdshot were embedded in my upper back and shoulder. Quivering with sudden nervousness, I ran my hand over my sweaty face once again.

In that moment I became frightened all over again as I realized what I was holding. A tether was entwined in my fingers, and the fiend's amulet hung, swaying, just below my left wrist. Repulsed, I shook my hand violently and watched as the thing wriggled clear and flew across the interior of the cab. It landed on the floor though I wasn't exactly certain where. I made a mental note to ditch the thing as soon as I felt comfortable enough to stop. Pondering all that I had just witnessed and somehow survived, as well as considering my own possible insanity, I drove eastward.

Brake! What the hell's wrong with you? Your goddamn truck still has a load on!" Billy Don shouted as he entered the Cactus Creek Saloon and walked toward the barstool where I sat nursing a beer. His words startled me, shaking me as though I were waking from a dream, and interrupting the endless stream of images constantly replaying the events at Ten Mile Fork. Lost in thought and haunted by the memories of this afternoon, I came to the abrupt realization that I had driven right past Brownfield station and forgotten to dump the load.

"Shit, Billy, I'm sorry. I'll dump it before I go home."

"How many of them beers you had?" Hacking a dry cough, he lit and took the first drag on a fresh cigarette.

"First one. And I'll go when I'm done with it," I said defensively.

"What in the *hell* were you thinkin'?" Billy Don demanded as he hiked up onto the stool next to me and signaled the bartender with his finger that he'd take his usual: a shot of whiskey and a Coors draft.

"I wasn't thinkin'. I had a real bad time of it out in..." I whispered, as my voice just trailed off.

"Well, it don't look like you hit anything. Did you have a spill or somethin'?"

"No, no..." I said, not really wanting to talk about it. *Hell, he's going to think I'm crazy if I say anything.*

"Hey, Brake!" Red Macaulay sauntered into the air-conditioned saloon. "You takin' a load home with you tonight?"

"He had a run in with a jackrabbit, or a coyote, or something, and it's thrown him all off balance," Billy Don offered, chuckling as he glanced back at me. "Boy fuckin' howdy, Brake! Your shoulder's

SHADOW DANCERS

bleeding, and you're all scratched up back here. Did you fall into some barbed wire or something?"

His chiding tone changed to concern as his hand swept upward in an attempt to get a look at my shoulder. "Hell, Brady, that looks like birdshot. What happened?"

"It weren't no fuckin' jackrabbit, or ladder, or barbed wire," I barked before he could finish speaking. I shrugged away from him, wincing and grabbing my mug of beer. As I turned to face the two men I wanted to tell them what I had seen. But in the next moment I thought better of offering anything more. Hell, *I* wasn't sure what I had seen, or if maybe I was losing it all together.

The worsening sting from the pellets in my shoulder and the scratches across my back and hip reminded me that I needed to get somewhere for some medical attention.

I gulped down what remained of the beer and set the mug on the bar. Truth be told, I didn't want to be anywhere near the boys right now. I just wanted to think. I reached into my pocket and dug out a couple of bucks, tossing them onto the counter next to the mug, and nodding at the bartender. "Thanks, Rhonda, I'm out of here."

"Jesus, Brake, ain't no need to go off in a lather." Red frowned at me, his brows drawing together.

"I ain't lathered; I just got things to do. I'll drop that load before I head for home."

Stepping past Billy, I approached Red as I walked toward the door.

"Maybe you ought to get yourself a tetanus shot," Billy said with a facetious tone apparent in his voice. It was obvious that Billy had already done some drinking, and I rolled my eyes. Without thinking, Red patted my back as I strolled past him and headed for the door. I flinched and grit my teeth as I sped up my pace heading out of the saloon.

Jogging across the parking lot, I climbed up into my rig and released the brakes. I was unable to ignore the pain of the birdshot lodged in my shoulder. I knew I couldn't see a doctor without a report being filed, so I drove a mile out of town and pulled up in front of Melissa Briggs's house. I figured with her being a rodeo gal, and having grown up

with four brothers, she'd be none too squeamish about plucking a couple dozen pellets out of me.

Now I'll admit right here that Melissa and I have rolled around a bit and like each other plenty, but neither of us have a hankering for settling down and doing the family thing. She's quite easygoing, for a girl, and right sporting enough to be pals with.

Hopping down out of the truck, I strolled across the lawn and rapped on the front door of her brick, ranch-style house. A moment later I heard a noise inside, and Melissa opened the door. Just the sight of her temporarily erased the rest of the day from my mind. Blond and beautiful, her blue eyes gleamed brightly, and her full red lips formed a smile as she caught sight of me. She was barefooted, dressed in denim shorts, and wore no bra beneath her white t-shirt. Her physically fit body quickened my pulse which had an immediate and noticeable effect on my blood pressure elsewhere.

"Hey, Brady. How you doin', cowboy?"

"Hey, Mel." I leaned forward and kissed her hard on the lips.

"Well, you're mighty spry for a weeknight," she teased when we had stepped away from one another.

"Well, not exactly. I need you to tend to something for me if you have a minute."

"You ain't usually one for a quickie," she said with a giggle.

"You got that right." I smiled at her jest. "No, I've got me some scratches and a little birdshot in my upper arm and shoulder. Most of the pellets are just in the surface, but I need you to dig them out, if you don't mind."

"My God, Brady. What happened?"

Peeling away my shirt, I quickly made up a story in my head. I explained the 'accidental shooting in the presence of a 'friend' and then stood still as she looked me over.

"You probably ought to have a doctor look at these, Brady, but I'll take them out if that's what you want. I thought you said you just had some scratches; it looks like some big cat got a hold of you."

"Ah, nah, I fell down. Barbed wire or something I think."

"Yeah, okay, you don't have to explain it to me. Come on into

SHADOW DANCERS

bathroom where I have tweezers and peroxide, and we'll get you cleaned up."

"Thanks, Mel. As I said, it was an accident, and I don't want to get my friend into trouble with the authorities. You know how doctors are. They've got to fill out reports and all, and my buddy doesn't need this on his record. I really appreciate you doing this for me."

"Who was it that shot you if you don't mind my askin'?" she said as I followed her down the hall.

"I'd rather not say, Mel."

"Anything for you, Brady," she replied, patting me on the rump. "Now sit down here on the toilet, and we'll get this over with. Turn your back toward the light over the sink, so I can see what I'm doing."

Using tweezers, cotton swabs, and a little bit of hydrogen peroxide Mel removed the pellets dropping each one into a little cup she had placed next to the sink. The sound of the pellets striking the bottom of the cup confirmed my belief that it was steel shot. Once all of the shot had been removed she sanitized the wounds, including the gouges in my lower back, and covered everything with an antibiotic ointment, gauze, and adhesive tape. The minute the gauze and ointment went on I started to feel worlds better.

"There, that looks good to me," she said soothingly as she patted my shoulder lightly. Then, tugging on my shoulders, Mel pulled me around to face her. I found my face pressed firmly into the exposed flesh of her chest. She had pulled down the low-cut t-shirt and allowed it to ride up under her beautiful breasts. Ruffling my hair with her fingers, she smothered me playfully and began kissing me. Within minutes my pants were around my ankles, and she was planted firmly on my lap. I thanked her thoroughly before I left, and she was grateful I'd shown up to ask for the favor of her care.

Forty minutes after arriving at her door, and after promising a longer stay during my next visit, I left Melissa's house and hopped back into my rig. The pumping station was south of there by a few miles, and as I headed in that direction I marveled at how much better she'd made me feel.

Those few moments at Melissa's house had made me nearly forget about the incident at Ten Mile Fork, but as I sped along the roadway I wondered what had happened there. Those thoughts filled my mind as I watched the setting sun cast eerie shadows across the pavement and the miles and miles of fields around me. What kind of weird shit had I seen? The warmth of my visit with Mel faded, and I spent the rest of the drive to the pumping station and back watching for dust devils.

Two-and-a-half hours later, I pulled up in front of my house. It was located in the little town of Broken Spoke, Texas, a town settled in the mid 1800s where most of its residents descended from the original inhabitants. The downtown storefronts had long been vacated, the trains no longer stopped when they passed through twice a day, and tumbleweeds were known to blow down Main Street. Many residents had succumbed to the ease with which we can travel and the seduction of the flashy, lower-cost franchise businesses in the nearby cities and towns. Small, independent businesses couldn't compete, and the once-dazzling lights of our village center had slowly faded to gloom. Save for those working at the school, the cotton gin, and the franchise convenience store near the highway most of our residents worked in farming or for employers outside of town.

Setting the brakes and hitting the kill switch, I hopped down out of the rig. I had gone ten steps toward the house before I remembered the thing I'd ripped from the devil's neck. Walking back to the truck, I stepped around to the passenger side and opened the door to retrieve the necklace. Stuffing it into my pocket, I strode across the barren earth that served as my front lawn, leaped up onto the porch, and headed through the front door. The house I shared with my mother was a single story ranch with faded yellow vinyl siding that was still in good condition despite the sun's merciless baking.

"That you, Brady?" my mother called out from the kitchen as I entered the house. I glanced at the television where my mother's favorite crime drama played out its familiar plot. She spent most evenings seated in her wingback recliner watching a full slate of television dramas and sitcoms. And most nights I lovingly woke her

SHADOW DANCERS

and urged her to go to bed about the time the news anchors began to rattle off the headlines during the late newscast.

"Yeah, Momma, it's me."

"You feeling all right? You look a little pale," she said, looking up at me when I walked into the kitchen.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I sauntered over and kissed her lightly on a rose-colored cheek. A thin woman, her fifty years have been kind to her despite the endless hours she spent working at the local cotton gin. Her long, reddish hair, still pulled back in a ponytail, smelled of cottonseed. Dressed in denim pants and a white blouse, the woman moved effortlessly about the kitchen. Smoke curled towards the ceiling from the cigarette resting on an ashtray next to a half-empty bottle of beer on the small table.

Opening the refrigerator door I grabbed a beer, opened it, and took a long pull from the bottle. It tasted fantastic after the day I'd had, that was for sure. As I closed the door with my hip my mother turned and smiled at me.

"I'm making myself a snack. You want somethin'?"

"No, I'm fine. I'll be in my room for a while," I said as I stepped past her and made for the door.

"My Lord, Brady. Are you bleeding? What happened to your shirt? You look like you've been hit with a load of shot! You want me to call a doctor?"

"No. I'm fine, Momma. I fell into some barbed wire at one of the lease sites. Nothing to worry about," I replied as I continued down the hallway to my bedroom.

"That doesn't look like barbed wire to me. You in some kind of trouble?" Her voice followed me down the hall, and I glanced back to see her giving me the narrow-eyed look that said: *Brady, you're in trouble.*

"Momma, don't worry about it. I was out with some friends and moved when I shouldn't have. It ain't nothin'. Besides, I already had it looked at, and it's just fine."

I stepped into my room and closed the door behind me before she had time to argue my story. The fading sunset cast heavy shadows

on the wall of the small, densely furnished room. Flicking on the light switch, I glanced about still feeling uneasy and out of sorts.

My bedroom was a hodgepodge of various things I'd collected over the course of my life. There were a few childhood toys and things that I didn't want to throw out: my trophies from the high-school football team, my baseball bat and glove for when the boys and I played Babe Ruth, and my collection of books and magazines. The walls were papered with posters for the Cowboys, and the floor carpeted in dirty clothes. The small, cramped space was kept cool by an air conditioning vent in the wall making the space livable compared to the raging heat outside.

Roger, Momma's last boyfriend, had installed central heating and air conditioning when he retired last summer. He'd been fifteen years older than she was and had retired with a pension from a large company over in Lubbock. Three months after his retirement party, he was killed driving home from a fishing trip. They'd all stopped off for a final round before splitting up to go home, and Roger had one too many. He'd crossed the centerline and collided with an oncoming tractor-trailer.

Damn shitty thing if you ask me. It ain't that he and I were close, as I never really cared for the man, but my mom adored him. They were set up to do a little traveling and spend some quality time together. Anyway, we buried him over across the railroad tracks in the old bone yard, and Momma went back to work at the gin.

Reaching into my pocket, I retrieved the amulet as I sat down on the edge of my unmade bed. The item felt odd in my hands as I turned it over and examined it. The braided cord was attached in two places to what actually appeared to be a pouch. The whole thing was decorated in an odd pattern of bone beads and porcupine quills. Now I'm no expert, but I decided immediately that it was something American Indian, and the leather looked old and cracked.

"It's not an amulet at all," I mused aloud, "but some kind of medicine bundle."

The tanned leather pouch was circular in shape and stitched tightly around the outer edges. Curiosity about the contents of this

SHADOW DANCERS

little bag filled me. Setting the empty beer bottle on the corner of my dresser, I pulled my pocketknife out of my jeans and began carefully cutting at the threads holding the bundle together. Before I could get very far a chilling surge of energy flowed through me and halted my investigation. The scowling face of the Indian flashed in my mind's eye, and a wave of fear swept through me. I hurled the pouch across the room where it landed atop some papers and slipped down through a pile of my belongings coming to rest somewhere near the desk. My heart pounded for a minute while I stared in the direction I'd tossed it. A sick feeling in my stomach overcame me, and I decided to let the damn thing stay where it had fallen for now.

I got to my feet and closed the knife slipping it back into my pocket. I sauntered down the short hallway and into the kitchen where I opened the refrigerator in search of another beer. I was disappointed to find only milk and soda in the icebox and was reminded of the fact that I had intended to grab some after work.

"Momma, I'm going over to Benny's for a beer," I called out, glancing into the living room where she sat watching the television. She rocked quietly in her chair, nibbling on tortilla chips and bean dip, completely immersed in the show. Hearing no response, I headed out the back door.

A few minutes later I approached the back door to Benny Rodriguez' house. Benny is known locally as a bootlegger. Living in a "dry" county (a county where the sale of alcohol is illegal) a bootlegger is really nothing more than a person who resells beer and liquor purchased in a nearby county where it's legal to buy alcohol. Benny was our party guy in high school. He always had booze and the best weed. He had continued that trend into adulthood and now served the members of our community with a convenience that was greatly appreciated. Inflated prices notwithstanding.

After downing a few brews at Benny's I returned to our backyard. In the twilight of the day's final hours I sat down on the bench of our wooden picnic table. Popping the cap off one of the six Lone Stars I had brought back I sat there for quite a while pondering what I had stumbled into today. As memories of the bizarre event toyed

with my emotions I prayed silently that I may never see anything like it again.

Four beers later, and feeling pretty good, I decided to go in to bed. Just before turning out the light I remembered how my grade school teacher had me start a journal after my daddy abandoned us. I was pretty upset over that ordeal, and she thought it would help me get things off my mind. Seems it worked pretty well for me then. I rummaged through some old things from my high school days until I found a mostly empty notebook.

Not knowing where the heck this ordeal might lead, or if documenting what happened might disprove my insanity at some later date, I have begun this journal.

I pray this is the only entry.

Journal entry: August 30, 11:29 p.m. If yesterday weren't enough, things got downright scary today.

❖ 3 ❖

Damn it," I muttered, hearing the ringtone of my cell phone from where it lay on the passenger's seat of the truck. I had just climbed the ladder on the crude oil storage tank to test the oil for my last lease of the day. I was hot, tired, and I just wanted to get this last load to the pump station and head to the saloon for a drink. "Well, they can leave a message, or it ain't that important." Since a cell phone had been attributed to starting a fire over in Houston it was regulation that we had to leave it inside the truck while performing our duties outside the cab.

I collected my samples and stowed them in the carrier before I closed the lid on the tank and climbed down the ladder. Slipping the tubes into the spinner, I checked for water and sediment and was writing my purchase ticket when the phone rang again. Annoyed, I leapt up into the cab and snatched it up off the seat.

"Yeah," I said, flipping the phone open and raising it to my cheek.

"Brake? It's Billy. You might want to stop what you're doing, and get home as quick as you can. Seems your momma had some trouble this afternoon. There were shots fired, and I guess somebody got killed at your house."

"What the hell?" I was stunned by the sudden news. "Billy, what happened?"

"I don't know no more than that, but you better haul ass over there. Where are you at anyway?"

"I'm at the Larkin/Caswell lease just north of Levelland. It's gonna

SHADOW DANCERS

take me forty minutes to get home. I just wrote a purchase ticket, but if it's all right with you I'll come back tomorrow and load her."

"That's fine, Brady. Just get home to your momma."

"Yup, plan to. I'm fixin' to call over there. Thanks, Billy," I replied, as my nerves splintered, and I was haunted by yesterday's events. Some part of me couldn't shake the idea that this was related to what I'd seen.

I hung up and immediately punched the speed dial to ring my house. Pulling the door closed, I hit the release buttons for the brakes and slipped my rig into gear. As the truck jerked and grunted its way clear of the tanks the phone stopped ringing and a man's voice answered.

"Drake residence."

"Who the hell is this?" I demanded none too amused that there was a strange man answering my home phone.

"This is Sheriff Hugh Baker." The man's voice was gravely, similar in tone to Billy Don's. "Who might *this* be?"

"This is Brady Drake, Sheriff, and that's my phone you're talking on. Where's my mother?"

"She's right here, Mr. Drake. Some paramedics are taking a look at her seeing as she got a little banged up this afternoon. I think she's gonna be all right. Look, I'd rather not discuss this over the phone, but I'd like to ask you a few questions. Where are you?"

"I'm on Route 385 north of Levelland, but I'll be on Route 114 shortly and expect to get there in about half an hour. I reckon it can wait until then?"

"Yes sir, that's fine. We'll still be here. I'll talk to you then."

Tapping the end button, I tucked the phone into the belt clip and focused on getting home. As I turned west at an intersection in the middle of Levelland, my phone rang again.

"Yeah?"

"Brady, I just got a call from Texas Highway Patrol and..."

Just then a grungy-looking punk with his ball cap on sideways swerved in and cut me off. He was so close I could see the gold chains around his neck and hear the pathetic excuse for music he was

listening to on his half-blown stereo. Having to respond to the situation in order to avoid slamming my rig into his piece of crap car full on, I shouted into the phone.

“Yeah, Billy, I gotta go.”

Dropping the phone into my lap, I cut the wheel while tapping my brakes and veering around a woman in a small sedan. With a lot of luck and a bit of skill I missed her, cleared the intersection, and followed the offending vehicle out of town.

“Asshole!” I hollered, experiencing a renewed sense of outrage as he sped away from me. I pulled the cord on my air horn a few times just to let him know how I felt about it. Pissed off and worried about my mom’s well being, I stomped down on the accelerator getting every ounce of speed I could out of the rig.

While my anger at the kid faded I wondered if he was just another self-absorbed jerk speeding through town for the hell of it, or if maybe someone he cared about might also be in trouble. Maybe he, too, had seen something horrible and his seemingly senseless act was somehow justified. Despite my own prejudice I accepted the fact that maybe his problems were no less than mine. However, I wasn’t endangering others. This reflection wouldn’t mean squat to most people, but it suddenly meant a lot to me. And I usually ain’t all that deep about things.

I fumbled around for my phone on the seat between my thighs. When I found it I snatched it up and slipped it back into the clip on my belt watching as the jackass in the hot rod disappeared down the highway in front of me.

Cars whizzed by me heading east as my truck rolled west on Route 114. Pump jacks, cotton fields, combines, and distant farmhouses filed by as I stared straight ahead desperate to reach my momma and our home.

It had been our home since my dad run off when I was about nine. He was a jack-of-all-trades and professional at none. My dad liked to drink beer, fight, and chase women. He had only worked when the spirit moved him, and that wasn’t all that often. Seems no matter what he did my mom just ignored it and took care of us both.

SHADOW DANCERS

My mom had always worked two jobs, and she tolerated him because “Well, he ain’t been right since he came back from the war in Vietnam.”

My Aunt Mary, my dad’s sister, said “He weren’t never right” and that my mom just made excuses for him because he was the only man she ever loved. Anyway, it’s been Momma and me ever since the day he didn’t come home from some roughneck job over near Odessa. He called me a couple of times the following year, and both times he was two sheets to the wind. He had babbled on about protecting me by being away or some shit. I don’t pretend to know what he was talking about, but that’s a whole other story. Besides, we ain’t heard from him since.

I turned off the highway and drove into Broken Spoke, Texas population two hundred and eighty five. Even just getting onto East Street I could already see the lights of the ambulance and police units parked outside my house. Passing the convenience store and the large silos of the cotton gin my truck rattled and rolled down the street toward the little house I’d known my entire life as home which now looked like something out of a crime show segment on television.

Yellow tape ran from the handle of my parked pickup truck to the small desert willow tree on the other side of the yard, just in front of the house. The screen door, which appeared to have been ripped off the front of my house, lay in the yard off to one side of the small porch. The doorframe seemed slightly out of sorts, and one window to the left of the door was missing its glass pane. Only shards of its original whole remained. The local sheriff’s car, a deputy’s car, several Texas Highway Patrol cars, and two ambulances sat in various spots around the front of the house. One ambulance was pulling away as I pulled my truck off the road and parked in front of my neighbor’s house. Hopping down from the cab, I hit the ground and ran toward my house.

“Hey, hey! Slow down there,” a young Texas Highway Patrol officer barked as I approached the house.

“Where’s my momma?” I demanded, heart in my throat.

“You need to stop, mister.” His hands came up in front of him as a second officer came to his aid.

Stepping away from their outstretched hands I felt the anger rising as I clenched my fists at them. "Look, this is my house, and my mother is in there somewhere. Just get the hell out of my way!"

"Let him through," bellowed a large man dressed in the uniform of a County Sheriff. He stepped down from the front porch and walked in my direction. He was a tall man with thick-rimmed glasses parked on the nose beneath his Stetson. The guy looked like a preacher who might have lost his way with the Lord and went into law enforcement.

"Go ahead," said the second highway patrolman as I pushed by ignoring his light grasp of my arm and shoulder. I sprinted across the sun-baked remnants of my front lawn.

"Easy now, young man. You must be Brady Drake. Claudia Drake is your mother?"

"Yes, I'm Brady Drake, sir. I need to see my mother."

"Mr. Drake, I'm Sheriff Baker, we talked briefly on the phone." The big man didn't seem inclined to let me go just yet.

"Yeah, Sheriff. Where's my mother!" I sputtered in a tone bordering on hysteria.

"Mr. Drake, your mother is being looked after, and you need to slow things down here so as we can have us a talk."

"Brady!" My mom called out from off to my right.

Turning, I was relieved to see her sitting calmly just inside the back door of the remaining ambulance which was parked close to the house. A paramedic was working on her applying gauze and bandages to a bloody crease on the left side of her scalp. Her wrist was splinted, and I was shocked to see her blouse open, her bra-covered breast exposed, and white tape around her midriff.

Running to her and ignoring the Sheriff's orders that I "get back there this instant" I carefully hugged her as she began to sob.

"My Lord, Brady, it was terrifying! I've never been so scared in my life. He came out of nowhere. He had big, scary eyes, and he looked awful, and..."

"Easy, Momma, easy," I said, patting her gently on the arm and kissing her lightly on the forehead while I made sure to stay clear of

SHADOW DANCERS

the paramedic's hands as she worked. Momma's reference to the "big, scary eyes" caused a knot to form in my stomach.

"She's fixin' to be fine," the woman assured me as the scissors in her left hand snipped the final piece of tape. "We're going to take her in for some tests, but she doesn't seem to have any life-threatening injuries. Some of her ribs are cracked, her wrist is severely sprained, possibly broken, and this head wound is likely to have caused a mild concussion. We'll be taking her to Covenant Hospital in Levelland. Things should check out just fine, though, and they'll probably release her after that. You're welcome to follow along and retrieve her once we're through."

"Thank you, ma'am," I responded.

Tossing the implements of her trade back into her kit, the woman turned away as a second paramedic approached to help her pack up. I was grateful to have a moment to console my mother.

"He was horrifying, Brady. That man just burst into the house; he tore the door right off. I ain't never seen a man as scary looking as he was, Brady. I swear I never have. My God, he looked like the devil himself. And poor Donny Jones..." A muffled shriek left her lips with the memory. "Poor Donny! He *killed* Donny, Brady. He was so strong. He took Donny's gun away from him then twisted him like this," she said, miming the movement in the air with tears running down her face, "and snapped his neck like he was nothin' more than a rag doll." She then started to sob as the paramedic came up alongside us.

"I'll take her from here, Mr. Drake. She's fixin' to be right fine. You come along and fetch her later on, alright?"

"Give me another minute, will you?" My mother looked up at the paramedic hopefully.

"Brady, we need to talk with you." We were interrupted by the local constable, a stocky man with red hair, mustache, and twinkling blue eyes. He was shadowed by the impatient shadow of the sheriff who was skulking behind him.

Being a small town we have Constable Edward Wharem who handles minor things like traffic tickets and so on. He has always worked a regular job and is available mostly on nights and weekends.

Any serious problems are handled by the police from Levelland which was only ten miles away or by the county sheriff department. In a case like this both departments felt compelled to get involved along with the Highway Patrol. Then again, this was a murder, and those weren't real common in our neck of the woods.

Constable Wharem and I had grown up together. We'd dated some of the same girls, played sports on the same teams, and even managed to get hauled in together when we were in junior high school for toilet papering the tree on the principal's front lawn.

"Yeah, Eddie. Okay."

"Let's get you to the hospital, Mrs. Drake." The paramedic gently guided her deeper into the vehicle.

"Brady, you ain't in no trouble, are ya?" my mother asked, reaching out to me with her good hand.

"No Momma, I ain't in trouble." I grasped her hand and squeezed it gently. I looked her in the eye, attempting to reassure her that everything was gonna be okay, before letting her go. "You go along with them. I'll be along to fetch you once I've talked with the Sheriff. I promise I'll be along shortly."

She seemed resolved to go along to the hospital, and I turned away as the second paramedic closed the doors.

"Damn strange thing," Eddie said as we walked together toward Sheriff Baker and his ring of deputies. "You any idea who might have done this, Brady?"

"No, no idea. It's awfully weird; I honestly can't believe it." In the back of my mind I had a feeling that it more than likely related to the strange shit I had seen yesterday.

As we approached the sheriff the ambulance pulled out of the yard, with its lights shimmering. "Mr. Drake, we ain't accustomed to having violent crimes like this in Broken Spoke. And only a damn few of them in this county, for that matter. You got any idea why someone would break into your house, accost your mother, and kill the neighbor when he came to her aid?" Sheriff Baker was obviously annoyed by my response to him earlier. I struggled to find the words to reply as I got within a few feet of him.

SHADOW DANCERS

The Indian immediately came to mind, but I found it hard to make it all fit together. The pouch I'd taken from him seemed like the probable reason, but I wasn't positively sure it was him who had done all this. If it was him... Well, I was feeling real damn reluctant to try and explain something that I neither understood nor quite believed. So I did the one thing I've always done when unsure of where the situation might be headed: I denied any knowledge of anything.

"No, I can't think of any reason or *anyone* for that matter. What happened anyway?"

"You ain't tied up in liquor, drugs, illegal immigrants, or anything like that, are you Mr. Drake?"

I didn't care for the Sheriff's accusations, but at the same time I tried *real* hard not to take offense to it. I knew he was just trying to figure things out, but if that Indian was the guy who killed Donny the Sheriff wouldn't believe any attempt I might make to explain it.

"Hell no!" I said, truly annoyed while hoping to put on a convincing performance. Even though I was answering truthfully deep down I was feeling guilty knowing what I knew. "Look, we're the victims here. I have no idea who did this, but I would appreciate it if you would tell me what the hell happened here. And what the fuck happened to poor Donny Jones?"

"Well, you can help things a whole lot if you would mind your language. As a lawman and as a Christian I'm not accustomed to having innocent folk cursing at me. Guilty bastards yes, but not good, God fearing folk. You think you can control that, Mr. Drake?" Sheriff Baker's face betrayed his disdain.

"Yes sir, my apology," I sputtered, hoping to avoid any further suspicion. Hell, I hadn't done a freakin' thing, but I was still feeling guilty. And that alone is a damn sure way to end up going to jail.

"Fine then. According to the report your mother gave me some half-naked young heathen sporting long, black hair and strange black eyes ripped the screen door off the hinges, kicked in the front door and entered the house. She said it seemed like he was looking for something. When Claudia approached him he attacked her and likely would

have killed her if Donny Jones hadn't seen the bastard enter the house and come a runnin'."

"Well, you know Donny," Constable Wharem interjected. "Always packing his .38 revolver. He went in and pulled the gun out of his boot before he ordered the intruder to step away from your mother. Then the bastard grabbed her by the wrist and flung her across the room at Donny. She slammed into him and knocked him down. Claudia guessed it weren't ten seconds before the intruder had taken Donny's gun, snapped his neck, and flung him across the room."

"Seems Donny had called 911 on his cell phone," Sheriff Baker interrupted, shooting Constable Wharem a glare, "while he was running toward the house. My deputy there, Bobby Dawson, was patrolling south of town when he got the call from dispatch. He says the man skedaddled, and he caught just a glimpse of him before he disappeared in the cotton field over yonder. They've put out an APB for a man about six feet tall, long black hair, Mexican maybe, and wearing denim pants and no shirt. The son-of-a-bitch has Donny's gun."

"You know anybody that matches that description?" Sheriff Baker asked as his eyes probed mine to see if there was anything else I could be hiding.

"No Sheriff," I said, letting it roll smoothly off my tongue, "can't say that I do." The way I said it, it didn't feel like a lie to me.

Another patrol car arrived in front of the house, and we all turned to watch as a Texas Highway Patrol officer sauntered up to us with another trooper right on his heels. He looked at the others before turning his attention to me. "You Brady Drake?" the man asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Drake, I'm Sergeant Dickens, Texas Highway Patrol. Kind of a coincidence arriving here to find your place is a crime scene seeing as I've some questions about a situation happened yesterday down near Plains at a little spot called Ten Mile Fork. You were down that way yesterday, weren't you?"

Sweat broke out on my scalp, and I felt as though the world was crawling up my ass. There wasn't a damn thing I could do at that

SHADOW DANCERS

moment but to answer the man as best I could. "Yeah, I went through there. What's this all about?"

"Did you stop at the old Texaco station there? And, if not, did you see anything unusual while you was passing through?"

I felt guilt welling up, seeping out from under my skin, and I feared the flush sensation I was feeling in my neck and face was going to give me away. Despite the fact that I'd done nothing wrong I lied anyway.

"Ah, nah, nope, I don't remember seeing anything."

Sergeant Dickens stared at me, and, despite the shadows caused by his sunglasses, I sensed doubt in his glowering eyes.

He knows I'm lying.

"Odd thing Mr. Drake. Seeing as a combine driver spotted your rig flying up the highway away from Ten Mile Fork just seconds after an explosion that about rocked the whole damn county. He said it was a bright orange cab with the blue Smith Oil Transport logo on the side. I called the company and talked to your boss, and he said you were the only driver in that area yesterday. So how is it that the entire gas station, farm house, and fuel pumps were blown sky high and you didn't see or hear anything unusual?"

Must have been why Billy called me that second time! I thought, remembering now that he had mentioned the Texas Highway Patrol before I dropped my phone.

Panic crept up my spine. Vivid memories of the wind driven mini-twister, and what happened after flooded my mind's eye. Right about then a part of me wanted to tell the whole truth.

The moment passed and I realized no one would believe me. I just couldn't tell them about what really happened out there at Ten Mile Fork. Had I not seen it myself I wouldn't believe it either.

So how the hell was I going to convince the Texas Highway Patrol that I saw what I saw and not look like a damn idiot telling lies? Or, worse, like a killer covering his tracks. Add onto that trying to convince them that now some demon was here breaking into my house, beating up my momma, and killing one of my neighbors. Hell, just thinking about it, I felt as though I was only two lug nuts shy of the wheels

coming off, and the whole damn mess would send me careening down the highway to the nut house or prison.

"Hell, I don't know. I had the radio turned up pretty loud. Maybe I just thought it was part of the music. I don't know!" I muttered defensively.

All six of the lawmen looked at me with an expression that said they thought I was plum full of bullshit, and they didn't like my tone of voice. I suppose the way I was twisting and looking off didn't help my case any. But, that was my story, and they must have realized that I was sticking to it.

Rocking for a moment on the balls of his feet with his cowboy boots grinding into the dust where my lawn ought to be Sergeant Dickens fiddled with his hat for a moment and spoke again. "And, just so I can clarify this in my mind, you're *sure* you didn't stop there at the gas station?"

"No. I told you I don't know anything about the place. I just passed through there on my way to the pumping station."

"Uh-huh." The sergeant turned his head and looked at Sheriff Baker. "Hugh, I'm going to leave him to you, but don't let him go too far. It's more than likely we'll be coming back to have another chat with him *real* soon."

Turning back to me, Sergeant Dickens lowered his voice and drew his sunglasses down, so I could see the look of distrust in his piercing gaze. "Mr. Drake, I think you're hiding something, but until I find out what it is I'm going to have to let you go on about your business. You make sure you stick around, you hear?"

Not wanting to antagonize the officer further I simply nodded my head.

Pushing his sunglasses back up his nose until they covered his eyes, he turned, and together the two highway patrolmen stalked off toward their cruiser. Sheriff Baker stepped closer to me.

"Young man, if I was you, I'd want to get this out in the open. Seems whoever it is that came in here weren't screwin' around if you catch my meaning. Seeing as he got run off it ain't likely he got whatever it was he came after, so it's real likely he's fixin' to come on back.

SHADOW DANCERS

Your momma might not be quite so lucky next time, and I don't believe you'd fare much better if he's as nasty as he sounds. That said, is there anything else you can tell me?"

The thought of running into that dust devil again was less than appealing to me, but I didn't believe for a minute that trying to explain things to this cop was going to be of any help. Especially now, after I had denied knowing anything about it.

"I told you I don't know anything!" I snapped.

His eyes narrowed, and he stepped backward. "Okay, fine, it's your funeral, boy. But if you decide to fess-up you go on and give me a call. Eddie, you keep an eye on this place, and my men will do the same."

"You bet, Hugh," Constable Wharem responded.

With that the Sheriff turned and strode away.

Eddie watched the sheriff and deputies as they returned to their cruisers. Then he looked me in the eye and gripped me firmly by my good shoulder. "Brady, you take it easy. I've got to go. I'll keep an eye on your place, and if this bastard returns we'll nail him. You need anything, or you feel as though you need to talk, you call me. I'm sure that we all will get through this whatever it is that's going on."

Knowing he had his own doubts and was reaching out to me anyway I was doubly grateful for his friendship. "Thanks, Eddie."

He nodded before he strode across the lawn and climbed into his Ford pickup truck.

Relieved to have the questioning behind me, I tried to go into the house, but the officer at the door wouldn't allow me in until they had dusted for prints and finished investigating. Reluctantly, I left the front porch and sauntered over to lean against the side of my pickup truck, where I stood waiting sheltered from the late day sun by the shade of a cottonwood tree.

I stood there for about an hour, watching, waiting, and fearful one of the officers would leave the house with that tiny sack.

Why was I worried? Damned if I know, but I felt drawn to it now for some reason. I guess part of me also hoped that the creature had found it and was now gone from my life. Either way, I didn't want

to see that Indian artifact leave the house in the hands of one of the officers because it was also likely to initiate another round of questions. Then again, I was probably overreacting. They didn't have a clue what I saw yesterday. It was more than likely that they would pay it no mind since similar, although less authentic, items are available at powwows and tourist shops over in New Mexico.

It occurred to me as I was standing there that I had thought of this guy as a dust devil, and I began to wonder if that was the reason those tiny dirt twisters were referred to as such. Seemed reasonable to me that anyone who had seen what I had would make just such a correlation between the two. Interesting bit of information to consider I guess, but if that was the case why hadn't anyone ever mentioned it? Huh, funny I should ask that question.

After another forty minutes of coming and going the police investigation unit finally packed up their gear and left me standing alone in my yard.

Relieved to finally have my home empty of people, I headed inside. What I saw stopped me, and I could feel a complicated mix of sorrow and rage pooling in the pit of my stomach. The entire front room had been ransacked, and the furnishings completely destroyed. Lamps were broken, end tables and chairs overturned, and the cherry coffee table lay split in half and upturned on the carpet. The television, its thirty-two inch screen shattered, lay sideways on the floor. Blood stained the center of the plush, beige carpet, and a bullet hole was clearly visible in the center of the wall at the back of the room. I headed into the small hallway at center of the house and looked into the kitchen where the table had been overturned and food and dishes scattered about the floor.

Turning back to look at the massive blood stain, I thought of Donny Jones. Donny was a small, tenacious man who worked hard and had raised a family of five. He was a man I had known all my life. I never would have suspected he would die in the middle of my living room trying to protect my mother.

Things have taken a real strange turn since I stopped for that damn Yoohoo.

SHADOW DANCERS

I stepped past the bathroom and pushed open the door to my bedroom. Nothing inside had been disturbed; it was as I had left it: in its usual organized disarray. I strode across the room and began digging through the mess around my desk. After a couple moments of rooting around I spotted the pouch pinched between the side of my desk and a stack of girly magazines.

I reached out, grabbed the medicine bundle, and managed to finger the lanyard from the angle I had. Not wanting to dislodge the magazines or move my desk, I decided to carefully work the little medicine bundle free. It came loose after a moment or so, and as I squirmed out from beneath the desk the lanyard wrapped around my fingers and the pouch dangled beneath them. At the contact with the thing I felt an eerie chill overtaking me. It caused a tingling sensation in my fingers, and I felt a presence, then a sort of connection. At least that's the best way to describe it. Standing there with the medicine bundle swaying below my hand I wondered what the hell I was going to do with it.

My first thought was to take it out back where I could start a fire in the burn barrel and destroy it. But then I considered that I might need it for proof later on? And what might happen if I *did* burn it? I stood there, numb with indecision, for a long while. Each idea that surfaced was dismissed just as quickly as the last had been and none of them would work.

Then the thought occurred to me that he must have some kind of connection to the damn medicine bundle like it had some kind of homing device or something, because how else would he have known where to look for it? He couldn't have a clue as to my identity, so it ain't as though he could have looked me up in the phone book.

I finally decided to just wrap it in something and keep it with me in the truck until I figured out what to do with it. At least that way my momma wouldn't be exposed to him again.

Remembering a blue velvet bag I had kept from a bottle of Crown Royal whiskey a friend had given me, I rifled through my desk drawers until I found it. I dumped out the Sacagawea dollar coins I was storing in there and placed the pouch inside. Pulling the drawstring tight, I

made my way through the house. I stepped outside and pulled the broken door closed behind me causing the damaged hinges to give out a protesting screech. My eyes scanned the area nervously as I jogged across the yard and tugged open the passenger side door of my truck. I shoved the blue-wrapped pouch into the tool satchel I kept behind the seat and then climbed back out of the truck.

I felt a certain amount of relief after getting the thing out of the house. Leaping to the ground, I locked the rig and returned to my pickup. Thirty minutes later, I stood in the emergency room of Covenant Memorial Hospital in Levelland, waiting patiently next to my mother while the administrative staff discharged her.

The rest of the night was fairly quiet, and Momma was home. I couldn't say for sure that she was *safe*, but at least she was home. As for me, I felt as if I was going mad. Stark raving, Loony Tunes mad. Every second that ticked by felt as though it was an hour. Every creak of the old house, every noise outside or whisper of the wind set my nerves on edge. I didn't know what was coming next, but, deep down in my guts, I feared it wasn't going to be good. I wished I knew what to do about it, but... shit, I think I hear something.

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When a dusty whirlwind wraps around a pretty girl on the plains of northwest Texas, short-haul trucker Brady Drake is amused by its entertainment potential.

But when she disappears into the rapidly intensifying twister his sense of amusement turns to terror. Hunted by supernatural beings and persecuted by law enforcement, Brady fights for survival while uncovering secrets within his own family. One fateful stop at a desolate convenience store sends Brady Drake careening down the highway on a thrill-ride that will frighten him to the brink of insanity.

Engage yourself in a journal written by a desperate man facing powerful events he has no way of understanding. Accompany him as he encounters proof that life is an eternal journey, and that one does not escape the evil deeds left behind.

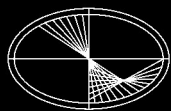
Heed one man's warning that immediate events are compounded upon the past and that vengeful spirits lurk in the shadows of our souls. Sometimes these shadows manifest into the physical world and when they do... untold havoc can be unleashed and demons released upon the unsuspecting.



About the Author: Levi Gallup was introduced to the paranormal at a young age. By the age of four he was already deeply affected by reoccurring dreams and lucid visions. Levi was inspired to write after numerous experiences one can only describe as supernatural. His works of fiction are based upon actual events. His desire to understand these events led him to pursue studies in theoretical physics, ancient cultures, and numerous religions.

Mr. Gallup served in the U.S. Army and furthered his education through college. He has worked in numerous fields, but has a lengthy background in graphic design, writing, and business management.

Both fiction and non-fiction works from this author offer opportunities for introspection, entertainment and discussion. He believes others will identify experiences similar to those in their lives and discover clues that will answer their own questions. It is his hope that people will approach his work with openness, and come away with a deeper awareness of the essence that is our spiritual and physical being



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