The Sundown Stranger

By Tobyn Shaw

“A magician never reveals their tricks.”

Those were the words you spoke before you disappeared into the dying sunlight in a trail of dust that followed you like the wind. Burning embers of the last of the day ate you up and swallowed you into the darkness of night as you disappeared for months at a time. How you had saved our little one-street town in the middle of the desert I did not know, that man who had killed the sheriff, a rotten-hearted bastard who all the wanderers in the bar called “One-Shot Samuel” who had wandered into town a week prior and demanded tribute. Yet like an angel you swept in, gun in your hand, and One-Shot Samuel soon became No-Shot Samuel. Without a thought of praise, you accepted the cheers of the townspeople, the looks of awe from the children at your heroism, the waves of the gentlemen swooning over that charming smile. Yet none of that I knew was real, for that glimmer in your eyes only came around for me.

Who was I, barely twenty, helping with my father’s ranch out in the endless lands of Keshetaw County? I had learned to ride a horse from the time I could walk, but you rode like you had been born on a horse. My father had taught me how to aim a gun, how to shoot, but you drew yours so quick that not a man alive could draw faster. Yet your eyes sparkled each time you saw me, and I knew you’d be back from that first time you left our little town. Countless times outlaws would blow into town, each brandishing some name, an iron, and a number hanging outside the sheriff’s office. A few foolish men had died in place of you, the bank teller, the drunkard who always picked fights each night at the saloon, Billy, the store owner's son who I’d learned my letters with at the schoolhouse. Countless sheriffs, more than I could remember, more than anyone could count. They seemed to drop like flies in the winter’s frost, like the breath of the reaper himself, coming to collect his due even from those who thrived upon it.

You’d hardly stay, riding off into dust and fire each time, the wind at your back as you faded. No matter how the people begged, pleaded. You’d return to stop the man who had robbed the bank, the general store, the saloon. Every person wanted you to stay, our town’s hero, to defend us from the savagery of these barren lands. You never lost a duel, never lost a draw, children would pretend to be you, men would tell legends. You were a ghost, a thing of legends. A guardian who watched our little town in the middle of nowhere.

I had gone to the store that late-summer afternoon, after a long night watching the cattle at my father’s behest. My thoughts of you had made me negligent, as one heifer nearly slipped away. I rode after her, returning her to her herd as I wished you’d return to us. It had been a year after all since you had come into town.

“Be wary chasing storms.” My father scolded me as I sat on the back of my horse, Domino. My brother Benjamin and our hired man Simon finished shutting the gate for the night. “Unless you want to get caught in them yourself.”

“Is that how you met mother?” I retorted, the disapproving shake on his head let me know he didn’t like my response. I wished I had never told Benjamin how what I thought about you.

“Why don’t you stay here by the corral for the first half of the night Felix? Let me get some rest for tonight.” He turned his horse to ride off towards the house. “Benjamin will be out to come get you after midnight and take the second watch. Cattle rustlers have been bad this year and the state won’t do anything about it out here. Maybe that stranger of yours can come riding into town and take care of them.”

Benjamin laughed as he fell in like with my father, the three traveled back towards the house together, chatting the whole way as the sun disappeared once again over the horizon. I took my spot near the old shed after hitching Domino to a nearby tree to let him rest and graze, my eyes on the growing twinkle of the stars and wondering if you could see the same thing. And with that I found myself drifting off into sleep until Simon and Ben came to wake me far before the sunlight had even kissed the ridgeline.

That next morning I hooked up Scout and Brave to the front of our wagon and rubbed the sleep from my night. The two great shire-horses were well-fastened, and I ensured they were each given an apple before we made our way into town for supplies. Another bright and early morning, with lots to do in the middle of nowhere. I again imagined what you were doing. You probably rose with the road ahead of you, with another adventure.

I hopped on the back of the wagon and gave a quick shout, both of the mighty creatures pulling it along around the dusty road outside of our small cluster of farmhouses and barns, down the dusty road, and across the dust-flats ahead. The coolness of the morning dissipated and the heat of the late summer sun brought forth the dry heat of the vast scrubland. I was glad to see the single-street town of Grey Springs, a sight for sore eyes after so long away from civilization and contact with another person aside from my family. I used to make it a point to ride into town once every few days, perhaps out of fear of missing you if you chanced to pass through, but the work on our farm had kept me busy. A supply run even in the arid heat felt like a vacation.

The town was as lively as ever, the few that roamed the street raised a friendly hand, a welcoming smile reserved for faces that were known in town. It was the type of town where everyone knew each other by name, small, close-knit even with the nearby farms. A single church stood opposite the saloon, which was beside the general store. The Sheriff’s office and town hall stood beside each other at the end of the street, where the road forked off from one another. Just a few buildings down from the church was the shipping yard for the railroad, used only for the train that passed through once every few days.

I drove my wagon past the saloon and down the dirt road between the general store and another building to the left. Around back I brought it to a halt with a low, “Woah!” to Scout and Brave. From there, I tied the horses and headed round the front of the store and stepped within. Mr. Green, a kindly older man greeted me. After giving him the list and money my mother had given me, his boy Paul helped me with my supplies, loading them out the back door and into the back of the cart. Just as a thought, mother knew just what she could get with what she gave. I was not given a cent back. As we finished I glanced to the spot behind the saloon, the same place I had last seen you.

My father was right, you were a storm. One who blew into town when trouble ran amok, moving on when it was over. Leaving this place behind to recover as if nothing had happened. There were times you did stay, only once or twice I recall. Parties were held in the saloon over victories, with drinks in your name. Yet nobody truly knew your name. They were drinking with a ghost for all they knew, a stranger. That’s what they called you. The Stranger.

I was nineteen when you visited last, when your and my eyes met for that singular moment, for the first time you didn’t look over me with that simple charming smile, but towards me, and into my soul. You didn’t buy me drinks, nor did you try to win my heart. A simple kind word, a gesture of friendship is all you showed. You offered to let me see the world, to ride with you across the red desert sands, between the cliffs and plateaus, to a place where you say the mountains meet the sea, and all that is red turns to green. That place seemed like something out of a book to me, a fantasy that didn’t seem real. I knew I had to learn your name.

“The conjurer is the only one who can bring an end to their illusions.” You spoke to me in almost a whisper. You refused to give even your name to me. You spoke only riddles, nothing but them. Like some poet from a more proper world. It was mere moments after that you offered me a place by your side, a chance to see what you had offered, to learn your name. I didn’t know what to say. I found my stomach leaping into my throat. You told me to think about it, and that when you returned, you would expect my answer. Again, you rode away, only this time into the rising sun. I didn’t see you go but climbed atop the back of Domino with my iron at my side and my saddle bag packed, hoping to give my answer then. However, I found you were gone. None had seen you leave, and so I returned home and slipped back into bed with thoughts on my mind, and without any of my family knowing I had been so eager to ride off.

The thundering of hooved broke my thoughts and brought me back to reality. My head turned as Scout and Brave whinnied and pawed at the dust skittishly. A crack filled the air, echoing through the streets. My mind raced instantly at this thundering storm that had broken the still silence of the landscape. I left my wagon and with my hand on the grip of my weapon I circled the edge of the general store and crossed the street.

The commotion seemed to be coming from the train yard, gruff voices shouting inside. Those on the street fled indoors, out of sight as curtains were drawn and shutters closed. The air was still aside from voices that shouted, I watched Sheriff McCashland and his deputy, a young man named Ted cross the street on foot with weapons in hand. Ducking behind the stacks of crates and scattered horses. Only two men, I knew there had to be at least double that inside.

Things seemed quiet for the moment, and I could only watch from afar as I heard McCashland shout out. “We know you’re in there! The fun’s over! In the name of Keshetaw County, step out with your hands raised high to the sky! Surrender or we’ll have no choice but to shoot you!”

A voice laughed inside, distant but I could make out what he said. “You and what army, Sheriff? That boy you got at your side looks barely old enough to know how to shoot! How about you lay down your arms and put your hands to the skies, or we’ll shoot you!”

There was no time even considered before the front doors swung open, before the two could even process. A man came stumbling out, not some gunslinger but one of the yard workers. The two looked as he ran out, panicked, and a lound *“crack!”* split the air as the deputy fired off a round in surprise, gunning down the worker in his panic. A form followed suit, adorned in a coat as black as night, dusty and dirty, a wide hat over his face and a bandana covering his mouth. He raised his iron high as McCashland turned and struggled to meet him, two more stepped behind and soon that gunfire took to the air.

My heart raced fast and I knew this was the moment. You had told me to be ready, for whatever your world had in store. This was the test sent by god that I knew I had to pass, and so I drew my own iron and took aim from around the building.

*“Crack! Crack! Crack!”*

My ears rang as the revolver leapt in my hand, I held steady like my pa had taught me. Ted was on the ground unmoving, Sheriff McCashland had fallen back behind a crate. One of the outlaws dropped, from my shots or the Sherriff’s I wasn’t certain. That ringing in my ears from the thunderous sound matched my heartbeat as I ran forwards, closing distance I leapt behind the crumbling cart as bullets whizzed past me. Voices that I didn’t care to hear shouted, I breathed in the hot air ruggedly and rose again as one of the men tried to round the cart to get a shot on me. His hazel eyes were wide, mouth agape as I turned my iron on him faster than he could me and pulled the cold metal trigger.

I winced away, the weapon leaping back in my grasp as another loud “*crack!”* shook the very air around me. I pressed my back up against the wood of the wagon, voices shouting as boots ran across the wood. A few more gunshots, a shout of pain. I found the courage to turn and face my act, the act I had completed for you, but tore my eyes away and moved to the front of the station. The sheriff sat, blood soaking from his arm, the great man with his heavy beard grit his teeth as he looked up at me. “Get him… Get that snake!” He groaned angrily as he looked behind me. A horse thundering by with that man in the black cloak on the back riding down the main street.

I turned my attention, standing in the middle of the street as I looked after him. I wondered where you were, when you would arrive? You had saved us in the past before, and if this was truely my test of valor. I raised my revolver after him, the snake who clutched a bundle under his arm, and with a moments hesitation, I breathed out, focused, and I fired one final time.

*“Crack!”*

Window shutters began to open, curtains were drawn as faces peeked out, each watching that empty street as the horse rode off into the distance. The town looked down upon The Snake, the man I had gunned down, the one who would prove myself as your equal. Whispered voices that mumbled my name, that mumbled my doing. Each stood in awe at my actions as I breathed a sigh of relief. What I had imagined would feel like a sensation of freedom felt crushing. Was this truely the life you lived? It wasn’t what I thought it would be, and that breath of fresh air I thought I would breath as I lowered my weapon was stagnant like the hot dry air, and stank of death.

With his fleeing horse on the horizon, I watched a form appear. Your form, trailing dust and sunlight on the horizon as you rode in behind the storm that had just followed. The town still remained still as you rode down the single road of Grey Springs, golden hair flowing from beneath your beige hat, duster worn and tired from the road, sun-kissed freckled cheeks and intense steel eyes watching as you brought your stark-white horse to a halt right over the man I had just killed.

“Seems I’m a bit late.” Your words came with an almost amused tone to them, as you stepped down off your horse with such fluid grace. You stooped to grab what was under his arm, what he clutched under him even in death, a book. You dusted its surface off and looked down at me. “Such a shame as well, This maked things harder than they have to be.”

“You came, just like I thought you would!” My heart leaped at the sight of you, it was like seeing an angel before me. I felt everything slipped, had it been fate that I had been able to prove myself on this day? To let my actions be seen by you rather than just told? “I… I’ve made my decision, I want to go with you, to that place you promised we could see.”

“Would you now?” You gave a soft chuckle, as if I had said something funny. “Well, you’ve certainly grown. You seem like an honorable young man, defending your town without a thought to your own safety.” You turned and tucked that book into your saddle-bag, I blinked.

“What are you doing? What are those?” I was bewildered. “Shouldn’t we return them to the station? They must be important.”

“They are.” You turned to look at me with a smile, one that was gentle, kindly. “However, you know I can’t reveal every secret to you. “Do you remember what I said when you asked my name, last time we met? The conjurer is the only one who can bring an end to their illusions.”

I blinked, I didn’t want my faith to waver in that afternoon sun. The sheriff’s gasp caught me off guard, and I turned to see him panting. “Those are… The ledgers for shipments… Without them what comes through his country is… Off records and can be… Stolen! She’s…” He struggled for breath, and as my eyes returned to hers she gave a small chuckle and shook her head.

That was the moment that you struck, and I realized who the real snake was. Not the outlaw who had met his end at my bullet, and all the mask that veiled the devil’s face slipped. I saw in your eyes through those lies, how you had played the town. You had gained our favor and now had gunned us down like a sick dog. Yet even as your lead pierced my heart, I knew you couldn’t stand long after. With the movement of my hand, following those loud, earth-shattering sounds that cracked the air around me, I raised my hand and with it brought death and fire. Your illusions were broken, and we fell into the street together. The devil and an angel, the hero, and nobody.

The iron the same as your gun filled my vision, that darkness creeping in as the truths of the world were unveiled before me. The truths of deceit, of naivety, the sun above and the earth below, hot and cold. That view of the ocean that had been promised so long ago, the place where stone met water, where the lands of red earth turned green with promise, I saw it now splayed out before me, that staining of red fading. The fire that burned within cooled like my body, and in the distance, we rode off into the sunset together a final time, into a sky of cool purple. Where a promised land awaited us.

“A magician never reveals their tricks.”