

SHADOWS OF A FULL MOON

Billy Gardner came from a long line of gardeners. He doesn't know when the family name got shortened to Gardner, but he reckoned it must have been when somebody misspelled it somewhere along the way. With his knowledge of plants and his gardening skills, he quickly rose up the ranks to the position of head gardener at Pine Valley Cemetery, one of the oldest burial grounds in the state.

As a business, Pine Valley Cemetery proved to be a very lucrative endeavor, making plenty of money for its owners for over four generations. Originally about twenty acres at the far end of a valley, the owners were fortunate in that the land surrounding the cemetery became available in various parcels over the years. So, about the only thing restricting profits remained a healthy, living population. As part of their marketing strategy, they liked to emphasize that Pine Valley was so beautiful that you could hardly wait to live there.

Billy's skills with gardening were a vital part of keeping the landscape beautiful. The owners recognized that and gave him a generous budget. The original sections of the cemetery had many

fine old specimens of plants and trees. Billy liked the challenge of blending the new landscape with the old. He also prided himself on getting a new burial plot covered so quickly that the ground looked like it had never been disturbed.

One early spring day, when the ground had thawed enough to dig graves, Billy ran into a problem. It had been a brutal winter, and unfortunately, an abnormal number of people had passed away. Billy had to work his crew hard and long into the night to get everything covered. On that particular night, a full moon shone brightly from the eastern sky.

At about ten o'clock that night, two of Billy's crew came running back to the maintenance barn.

"Boss, you gotta come see this," said Tommy McCall. "There's things goin on out there."

"What's going on, Tommy?" asked Billy.

"Something's making weird noises and the trees ... the trees ... there's strange creatures hanging round the trees," added Johnny Rowe.

"Okay, calm down, boys," said Billy. "We'll go out and have a look." He thought to himself,

“They’re just kids and have probably never been in a cemetery at night.”

“It’s out there by those big oak trees,” said Tommy. “We were covering up old man Jones in their family plot when it started happening. Don’t you want to take a gun or something?”

“No, let’s just have a look first,” said Billy.

When Billy and the boys got back to the Jones’ section, it was deathly quiet. The air at night was still a little crisp and they could see their breath in the moonlight.

“What kind of noise did you boys hear?” asked Billy.

“It was kinda like a crunchy sound,” said Tommy. “Kinda like someone walking on dead leaves, but there ain’t no more dead leaves on the ground. We raked them up a long time ago.”

“What did those strange creatures look like?” asked Billy.

“We didn’t actually see the creatures, boss,” said Tommy. “But we seen their shadows. They was always hiding behind them trees.”

“Well, what did their shadows look like?” prodded their boss.

“They had big bodies, long, thin crooked arms, and no heads,” answered Johnny.

“Boys, boys, boys. What you saw was the shadows of the trees from that full moon up there. Look at those oaks. Without any leaves, they look exactly like what you saw.”

“Whatta you think, Johnny?” asked Tommy.

“Well, it could have been, I guess,” replied Johnny. “But some of them shadows were following us when we run back here. What about them, boss? They weren’t no tree shadows.”

“What you probably saw was your own shadows as you ran,” said Billy.

“From the moonlight?” asked Johnny.

“Yes,” said Billy.

“I don’t know ... maybe it could have been,” said Tommy.

“What about that crunching sound?” asked Johnny.

“It was probably just some animal rummaging around in those pine needles that we just put out as mulch in the new flower bed.”

“Musta just been the moonlight,” said Tommy.

“Yeah ... the moonlight,” added Johnny.

About the time that Billy had Tommy and Johnny reassured that there were no strange creatures out there, two more of his crew came running over to where they were.

“Boss, you gotta come see something,” said Matt Walker. “There’s something really strange going on where we was working.”

“Okay, okay, Matt. Let’s go.”

“It’s right over there, boss,” said Jack Thomas. “Right over there on the ground.”

“All I see is the shadow of that old sycamore tree, guys.”

“Ya gotta get closer, boss,” said Matt.

Sure enough. As the five of them got closer to the tree, the ground danced with movement.

“That’s just us, guys,” said Billy. “Look, I raise my arms, and the shadow raises its arms. See.”

“It’s just the moonlight,” said Tommy, as if speaking from authority.

“Yeah ... okay,” said Jack. “But even before we got close, you could hear the tree talking.”

“Talking?” asked Billy. “What did it say?”

“I swear it said ‘Nevermore’, boss,” said Matt. “Ain’t that right, Jack?”

“Yeah, you remember that time your sister told us about ...”

“It was probably just some old raven, guys,” interrupted Billy. “They make nests down in hollow branches all the time.”

“Yeah, it was probably just the moonlight,” added Johnny.

“An old raven,” said Matt. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Okay, boss,” said Jack. “But what we seen next weren’t no old raven.”

“What’s that, Jack?” asked Billy.

“The Samuel Newsom grave where we’re supposed to be laying the new sod, well ... what we seen was this misty kinda creature come up out of the ground and pick up two pieces of sod off the pallet and lay them on the ground.”

“Sounds like a ghost to me,” said Tommy.

“You ever seen a ghost before?” asked Johnny.

“No, but I know you can’t take no picture of them,” replied Tommy. “And I know that ghosts don’t have no shadow.”

“Who told you that, Tommy?” asked Johnny.

“This photographer what took the pictures at my cousin Elbert’s wedding,” answered Tommy.

“Come on, boys,” said Billy. “Let’s go up to the grave and have a look.”

As they got closer to the gravesite, Jack said, “Look, boss. There’s those two pieces of sod on the ground.”

“Samuel Newson?” asked Tommy. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“Wasn’t he the head gardener of this place a long time ago?” questioned Johnny. “Yeah, old Hard Man Sam. That’s what they used to call him. My daddy worked for him for a while. Daddy always said Hard Man Sam was a hard man to work for. He always had to have everything done just like he wanted it and usually ended up doing it himself.”

“Yeah ... seems like I remember my daddy talking about him, too,” said Jack. “They used to say that when he died, they wouldn’t need any headstone. His head was so hard that they could just bury him with his head out of the ground and it would last longer than any old stone.”

“Whoa ... boss,” exclaimed Matt. “Would you look at that. That ghost is coming back up outta the ground and he’s grabbing another piece of sod.”

“Is that a ghost, boss?” asked Johnny.

“It’s ... it’s probably just the moonlight,” said Tommy.

“Okay, guys, we need to call it a night,” said Billy. “I think we’re all so tired, we’re just seeing things. Let’s get on back to the barn and go home.”

“Amen to that, boss,” said Matt.

The following morning Billy took Matt and Jack back to the Newsom gravesite. Knowing that they might still be a little spooked, he wanted to help them get started. When they came up to it, the three just stood there, frozen on their feet. The new sod now completely covered the gravesite. Billy finally walked over to take a closer look. Whoever did the work did an excellent job. The installer left

no gaps or pieces overlapped, and they did a good job contouring the edges to fit the existing border grass. With all the little patch pieces well cut and fitted, it was a professional job and far better than he had seen any of his crews do.

“Look, boss,” said Matt. “There’s a machete sticking up outta the leftover sod on the pallet.”

“Okay, boys, I can’t explain this, but we’ve got lots of work to do. So, let’s move on over to the new section where we’ve got three sites to cover.”

“Okay, boss,” said Jack. Turning to Matt, he said, “I hope there ain’t no ghosts over there.”

Later in the morning, Billy took the forklift back to the Newsom site to pick up the leftover sod and move it to the new section. When he reached the site, he found the machete gone from the pallet and now sticking in the ground in front of Samuel Newsom’s headstone. He got down off the forklift and went over to retrieve the machete. Pulling on the machete handle, he couldn’t get it to come out of the ground. He tried rocking it back and forth, but it still wouldn’t budge. After about ten minutes of tugging, his hands started to hurt. He pulled out his little notepad from his shirt pocket and wrote down, ‘Buy a new machete’. Then he got back on

the forklift and started to leave. He momentarily stopped the machine and pulled out his notepad again. He wrote, ‘Make sure the Samuel Newsom gravesite gets the VIP treatment with maintenance’.

As he pulled away, he cast a final look at the grave and said to himself, “It must have just been the moonlight.”