

## **Losing My Skin**

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I am dying now because the night before last, as I was driving in the mountains of New Mexico, I saw an Indian standing beside the road. Most people I imagine, if they heard my story, would call me a fool. And that would be alright. I have been laughed at many times in my life, though mostly as a child before I gave up on my belief in monsters.

You see, as a young boy, I was very much interested in the modern-day myths like UFOs, Big Foot and the Loch Ness Monster. By the age of eleven, I had a dozen paper-back books on these subjects and had read them several-times over. Unfortunately, with my interest came a certain gullibility that did not go unnoticed by my aging childhood friends. When feeling mischievous, they could always rely on me falling for an elaborate prank. And, of course, I had other peers who were not as kind as my friends.

Now in my thirty's, with a Ph.D. tucked under my belt and many years of training in scientific reasoning, I have rejected my early beliefs for what they are. Modern myths. I now understand that none of these creatures can stand up to a detailed objective analysis and the books I adored as a kid were written by people who were more interested in promoting the mystery and conspiracy of their subjects rather than researching the whole truth. They wrote to fantasy-loving emotional minds. As a skeptic, I know now to put forward a rational mind first to filter out the nonsense before you bother with the rest. Unfortunately, a rational mind can not always tame the terror that arises from fantasy - especially when that fantasy starts to drip on the canvas of reality.

The land that birthed my story is in the mountainous surroundings of Taos, New Mexico. I live, for now, within a three-hour's drive of Taos in the large-yet-small-looking city of Albuquerque. It was in Albuquerque that I first heard the term "Spirit Walker". Those words you would have expected me to have heard from the mouth of a Native American, but I didn't. Though many live there, I am embarrassed to admit that in the three years that I have lived in New Mexico, I have yet to have even spoke to an Indian. Embarrassed because I do have a small amount of American Indian blood from both sides of my family. Cherokee from my father and Cheyenne from my mother, though you would never know it from my blond hair and fair complexion. I guess the only hint of this ancestry that I make claim to is my inability to grow a full beard. For this reason, I stay clean-shaven. When I found myself moving to Albuquerque, I thought that I might take the time to learn more about the American Indians and, thus, touch base with a forgotten part of myself. I have not. In my three years here, I never chose to make the time. Perhaps that was a mistake.

The spring night, two days ago, was pleasantly crisp, as clean mountain air usually is. Managing the winding road up the mountain was a simple matter as the half moon, unobscured by clouds, cast a warm luminescence on the black pavement. This was to be "alone time". Time to break away from work and everything else and to spend

a couple of days of peaceful meditation with the crystal lakes and the tall pines of Taos. I had done this a few times before and have always found it rejuvenating. I work in a research lab at Sandia National Laboratories. I will not bore you with the details but let me say that I have a high-stress job that requires a large amount of intellectual focus. After several months of this, one needs to still the brain. My workouts during the week help but they do not provide the, for lack of a better word, *stilling* I find myself needing after a time. Time to sit, to reflect, to meditate on life, to be alone, to not think. And, of course, to drink in the splendor of the natural earth that Taos so beautifully displays.

The evening was very calming... until I saw him.

*"I was being chased by a damn spirit walker!"*

Those words, spoken harshly to me eight months earlier, crashed through my head as the figure appeared before me. A sudden cold tingle rose up my back, across my neck and prickled the top of my head. It was a completely childish reaction to the man and I scoffed at myself as I drove past him. I saw him for only a second, as I rounded a sharp turn. His image, however, held fast in my eyes as sudden emotion has a way of imprinting a vision in your memory. He was a tall man, easily over six foot. His skin seemed dark (although this perception could have been tainted by the evening shadows). His hair, likewise, was dark. Black actually. Long and straight. He wore a long, tan suede coat with matching pants. And I believe he wore sandals. And I also think he wore beads.

Ok, I must admit. The image I pull from my brain when I recall this man is that of an American Indian. A plains Indian wearing loose, tanned leather clothing, sandals and beads... staring at me as I drove by.

*"I was being chased by a damn spirit walker!"*

The fact that I saw a man standing on the side of a high mountain road at 9:30 PM is not remarkable. I was headed up to a drive-up campsite just a few miles up the road. I prefer to drive to Taos in the evenings, spend the night in the back of my truck and then hit the backpacking trail first thing in the morning. This man was most likely a camper like myself. He may very well be an American Indian. As I said before, there are many in New Mexico. He may even have been wearing hand-made leather cloths for reasons that would be his. Reacting in fear to an unarmed pedestrian Indian on the side of the road may seem rather odd to you. Had I seen the same person just one year earlier, his sight would have barely made an impression. The reason I reacted the way I did was that, for several months now, I have been *looking* for an Indian on the side of the road. Not actively. Not subconsciously. But playfully in the back of my mind as if trying to scare myself like we all did as children telling ghost stories.

"If you are alone in the dark at night and you say 'Bloody Mary' three times aloud, her ghost will come to you and cut your heart out," my older sister once told me.

There were many times as a little boy I couldn't sleep because I would whisper "Bloody Mary" twice in the middle of the night and then dare myself to whisper it a third time. I would always involuntarily say it a third time in my head and hope that, because I didn't say it aloud, it didn't count.

This time, thirty years later, it was not Bloody Mary that was on my mind, it was a different ghost. The spirit walker.

Earlier this year, I had dated a woman in Albuquerque for about a month. She was a tragic woman whom I felt I had to withdraw from before she sucked me into her

seemingly perpetual folly of one unlucky event to another. She told me a story shortly before I ended our relationship - a story that I immediately discounted as imagination born from a mind that had been abused by hallucinogenic drugs and alcohol. She told me that, one night she had visited a friend who lived on a reservation near Santa Fe. While driving home, just before she was leaving the reservation land, she said that she saw an Indian, wearing tanned-leather clothing and sandals, running in the woods alongside her car. She said that the Indian was watching her, not the trees as to avoid them, and was keeping pace with the car. She was driving 50 mph. She became very frightened but quickly reached I25 and was out of the wilderness area. The Indian had not followed her to the highway. She immediately called her friend when she got home, quite upset, and told her what she had seen. Her friend became likewise concerned.

"You saw a spirit walker. You should not come back here! They are evil spirits that roam the land. They follow the living and skin them alive to make sandals out of their skins. I'm sorry. It will remember you. You should not come back!"

As she told me this story, one of the many sad stories of her life, I brought up, in a kind way, her old habit of making tea from hallucinogenic mushrooms.

"I didn't do any drugs that day! Not that week! I didn't drink. I wasn't tired. I was perfectly sober!"

"Kathy, are you sure you saw a person? Not a deer running in the woods?"

"How many deer do you know that can run 50 mph? I know what I saw. You know the kind of things that happen to me. You don't think I have been followed by evil spirits? I can't even visit my friend on the reservation without something happening to me. Can you believe it? I was being chased by a damn spirit walker!"

I know very little Indian lore but this one sounded pretty fanciful. Still, this story did send a small chill through me. The image of any man, running at 50 mph amongst the trees in a dark forest while locking eyes with you is a pretty frightening specter.

In fact, the image was strangely fascinating to me.

Since being told this story, if I found myself driving past some field at night, I would sometimes try to imaging an Indian running alongside my car.

*Look for an Indian long enough, and eventually you will find one.*

I rubbed the pricking out of my scalp and chastised my heart rate back to normal. I saw a man on the side of the road. And he wasn't chasing me.

Just starring at me.

But, of course he was starring at me. He was standing on the road and I was driving on it. He would be a fool not to be watching that I didn't hit him. So far, I seemed to be the only car on this road so just my presence was enough to draw attention. I started to look in the rear-view mirror and stopped.

What were you looking for? I asked myself sarcastically? I then did look in the rear view mirror and playfully imagined the man running after me. Not that scary. Running alongside the car in the dark woods was creepier for some reason.

I soon arrived at the drive-up campsites. By habit, I passed the first few. These were usually occupied, though I did not see any cars as I drove by. I planned this particular trip for the middle of the week, rather than a weekend, as to have a little more privacy. I pulled into the next loop and drove around it. All five sites were vacant. I was a little surprised to see the area completely empty, but then, that had been the plan. I pulled out of the loop and drove further down to the next loop, which was also empty. I

wanted to rationalize my behavior but there was no point. I now found myself looking for other campers rather than trying to avoid them. Suddenly, the solitude didn't have the soothing effect I was seeking.

Annoyed with myself, I parked my truck, alone with the stars and started to build a fire in the designated fire ring. Once I got the fire going, I looked around at my surroundings. The night sky was a beautiful wash of stars, even with the partial moon casting its light. The circle was a small paved loop of road with five small campsites cleared of the trees. Beyond the loop, the trees were thick and, in the darkness of the evening, created what almost looked like a solid black wall encircling the campsites. There was a delicious contrast between the warm glow of the fire and the cool evening air. I opened the front of my coat to let in more of the orange warmth. Everything was still. There was no wind, no cars driving the road, no voices of other campers. I stared at the stars through the pine. It took no time at all before my thought drifted to Kathy.

Poor woman.

I truly pitied her. Her life was filled with abuse, first with her father then later self-afflicted. And then, as she fought to turn her life around, the abuse came from random chance, as if she were fated to be a life-long victim. She had told me story after story of rape, auto accidents, robberies and the deaths of friends. Every day that I had known her, the list I learned had become longer until I came to the conclusion that she could not be as unlucky as she claims to be. She must be, somehow, drawing it to her. Subconsciously or through force of will, she set herself up for disaster. Self destruction through insidious means.

Still, not all her tragedies were within her sphere of influence. Just two months before I met her, she had been diagnosed with Lupus. Lupus is a chronic, eventually fatal disease that has genetic origins. The body slowly attacks its own connective tissue causing horrible pain in the joints and disfiguring the skin. The name "lupus" comes from *lupin* or wolf. "Wolf's disease" some people call it as the faces of those inflicted, at least to some early doctors studying the disease, eventually resembled the faces of wolves.

Pondering this, I came to an ironic insight. I had quickly dismissed the idea of a "spirit walker" not because I disbelieve in ghosts. Although Big Foot and the Lock Ness Monster had been properly filed under *nonsense* in my brain long ago, ghosts pose a bit of a problem. I am not an Atheist. So, if there can be life after death, why can't there be contact between the two realms? If you believe in Heaven and Hell, don't you by default believe in ghosts? So, I put most ghost stories in the *unlikely* file. Spirit walkers, however, went straight to the *nonsense* file. Why? Though there may not be a sharp, uncrossable boundary between the physical world and the metaphysical world, I don't believe any ghost would be capable of reaching into the physical world and actually kill someone. Shadowy images, chills down the spine, even knocking a small glass over is one thing. Mutilating a body is very much another. And for what would a ghost need physical shoes made of skin? I feel a ghost, assuming such a thing exists, would have only subtle influence over physical things. Maybe it could move a spoon, maybe it could do less.

*But less is all Kathy's spirit walker had to do.*

Within a year of her sighting, she was informed by doctors that her skin was being slowly removed from her body. A plausible way for an evil spirit to skin a physical

victim - by suggesting to the body that it attack itself. Maybe Kathy hadn't outrun the spirit walker as she thought she had...

Damn it! I pushed the thought from my head. Poor woman. I abandoned her out of selfishness. It was too painful to stay with her, only to watch her slowly waste away while being incapable of doing anything about it. The more good I had tried to bring her, the more I set myself up for failure. And, if I was something good in her life, didn't that make me a target for her tragedies?

The trees above rustled. There was no wind and even if there was, it was not the gentle rustle of a breeze. Squirrel, most likely. I pulled out the marshmallows.

Toasted marshmallows are a personal tradition of mine. Certainly, they didn't taste as good as they did in the Boy Scouts, but they did still present a fun challenge - to toast every portion of the surface to that perfect crispy brown without letting it catch fire. The same thrill of shuffleboard, with a tasty reward for a job well done.

I was checking the skewered ends of my roasted marshmallow for the proper brown color when I heard the rustle again. It seemed a bit loud to be a squirrel, but I have been backpacking enough to know to ignore these sounds. I was given that lesson in a rather brutal fashion in Boy Scouts. The noise came from in front of me, a little to the right. I looked up at the trees, in the direction of the noise and saw nothing but blue spots from staring into the flames of my camp fire. Only partially interested, I continued to stare in that direction as I ate my marshmallow and waited for my night vision to improve. I saw nothing but blackness painted with the dark shadows of trees, only partially illuminated by the fire. I skewered another marshmallow and looked back at the fire.

There!

As I looked away, I saw something near the edge of my vision, where there were no blue patterns of campfire flames. I looked back, somewhat more interested this time, but whatever I saw in the trees was instantly hidden by the blue spots. I waited again for my night vision to improve but that was taking too much time. Besides, the fire was shining in my eyes. I looked away slightly and tried to look with the edge of my field of view, where my night vision was better. As I concentrated up in the trees before me, within the complex patterns of light and shadow, I started to see something disturbing, not twenty yards from where I sat.

My marshmallow on a stick drifted towards the flames and caught fire. I quickly blew it out and stared back at the campfire. I was jumpy tonight from my silly encounter. I was going to ignore the shape I started to see in the trees. It was dark and your mind can create all kinds of things from complicated shadow patterns. Staring into the forest at night, with the corner of your eye, no less, is a lot like staring into an ink blot pattern for a psychologist. You will see what your mind was looking for. I was not going to play that game.

There was no man sitting on that tree branch.

I was looking forward to this trip for over a week. Now I am going to ruin it with head-games. I was here to relax, not to relive childhood fears. I remembered the humiliation -- the perpetual humiliation -- of that Boy Scout trip. It started the same way, with a rustle. Then a clank. I was sleeping in my tent with a fellow scout named Sean. He was slightly older and slightly bigger than I was. I neither liked nor disliked him at the time. We had been assigned as buddies since we were the only two scouts who hadn't

paired up already. We had to pitched our tent several yards away from the other tents since all the best places to pitch tents were already taken. We were not out of the line of site of the other tents, but we were deep in the trees rather than out in the open clearing like most of the others.

As we were lying in our sleeping bags, talking for a few minutes before trying to fall asleep for the night, Sean told me a ghost story about a blue mist that turned a farmer's chickens inside-out. After his story, I asked him if he believed in Big Foot.

"Ya," he said immediately. "I have an older cousin who was camping probably fifty miles from here, over at Arrowhead Lake, and he swears he saw Big Foot following them for awhile."

"What happened?"

"It just disappeared into the forest. He said it looked really scary, with fangs and claws. He thinks that it didn't attack them because there were so many hikers with him at the time. He said that he would hate to think of what would happen if he were alone."

"That's really scary."

"Ya. Good thing that happened over at Lake Arrowhead and not over here. I would be scared to camp over there."

We slept a few hours until I awoke to sounds somewhere in the total blackness of a moonless night in the mountains.

Rustle. Rustle. Clank.

Something was outside the tent. Something was walking around it, poking at our gear. The image grew in my mind. Big, hairy, claws, fangs. I had read stories of people being grabbed from their tent and dragged for miles. He was in the front of the tent now. Near the zipper. More clanking, now scraping. Those huge claws were scraping on some metal now. Any minute they could slash through the tent and grab me. Sean was still sleeping. There is safety in numbers. Maybe we could both scream for the Scout Masters. That would be pretty bold, though. Would they wake up in time? Could they get here to face down the monster? Maybe silence is best. Maybe it will go away.

Clank. Scrape.

No, it wasn't leaving. It was poking around things. It was just a matter of time before it would get curious about the tent. I lay there to total blackness, not sure what to do.

I poked Sean and whispered in a frightened voice.

"Sean, do you hear that?"

"Huh?" he said, groggy from a deep sleep.

"Shhhh! Listen, something is out there."

"What is it?"

"It could be Big Foot."

"Shut up," he said and rolled over.

"Sean, listen!"

I heard Sean roll back over. We couldn't see each other, even though our faces were just a foot away. But I could feel him thinking.

"You're serious," he said, amused. Then he quickly started fumbling around in the dark for the flashlight. I was silent. My fear of Big Foot suddenly dissipated and was replaced with a sudden realization. Sean found the flashlight and unzipped the tent. Hollywood would have had a giant hand reach in and grab him. But this was not

Hollywood. Somehow, as Sean bravely confronted the unknown noise, I knew there would be no monster there. Sean, not half a year older than me, was acting like an adult. I was acting like a child. One of life's lessons was unfolding before me and there was no way to stop it.

"Shoo! Scat!" I heard him say.

Sean came back in the tent and threw one of my tin cooking pots at me.

"You didn't clean your pot. A raccoon was licking up the scraps. Better keep it in here until morning when you can clean it."

He paused.

"I was only joking about my cousin and Big Foot. It was just another ghost story."

He quickly went back to sleep. I stayed awake for a long time. I knew what was to come in the morning.

Now, over twenty years later, another rustle in the woods and another monster. I looked back at the tree where I caught that glimpse of the man. Again, I saw blackness filled with slowly fading blue streaks and blotches. I looked again with the corner of my eye and examined the scene. There were shadows and dynamic patterns playing in the foliage of the trees. I could see anything I wanted to see, like seeing animals and other shapes in the clouds as they roll by you. What was my mind looking for tonight? An Indian spirit who wanted to skin me alive. I could not see much in the dark, nor could I focus on anything since I was not looking directly at my subject. But the mind is good at creating patterns... and filling in the missing spots if any exist. I was playing a game like the clever picture games where there are animals or people hidden in a scene. You can stare at them for a long time and not see anything, but once you find it, you can't help but see it immediately every time you look. Slowly, I found the pattern, pieced together the image and there he was, in the trees staring at me.

"I'm sleeping and I feel Tommy poking me. Then he says, 'Sean, Big Foot is outside the tent!' First I thought he was joking but then I realized that he was serious. He was really scared that Big Foot was out there, weren't you Tommy!"

How painful it was. Why had I assumed the noise outside our tent was Big Foot? Had I said to Sean I thought I heard a bear, he would have been much less brave that night. Even once proven wrong, the story would have ended at one telling in the morning. But not this story. This story would live on at every outing.

"And then he started crying. 'Sean, Big Foot is outside the tent! What should we do?'"

"I wasn't crying."

"Yes you were."

That morning after breakfast, we were not washed out our cooking pots. We were now making our camp "Big Foot safe". The embellishments became worse with each telling to the new scouts.

"In the morning, Sean noticed a bad smell and he looked in Tommy's sleeping bag and saw that he had wet his pants!"

It was too much for me. I dropped out of the Boy Scouts about a year after the incident and started asking everyone to start calling me Tom. I had assumed the noise was Big Foot because, at the time, I was still living in childhood fantasy. As we age, Santa Clause, the Easter Bunny and the monsters in the closet start to disappear and we

look at the world as a rational place rather than a magical one. But I had books that told me that some monsters still existed. They lied to me and I threw them all away. I grew up quickly after that. I still loved the monster movies, I just stopped believing they were true.

But now, some twenty years later, I found myself in a cock-eyed stare-down with a collection of twigs and shadows that looked like a man. I could easily put the whole thing to rest by walking a few yards to my car and getting my flashlight. But if I did so- if I took any action at all- I would lose. If I got my flashlight, I would be saying that there was a *possibility* that there was a phantom in the trees and I would be that stupid little boy all over again, looking over my shoulder for ghosts.

"Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary," I said aloud. No girl materialized to cut my heart out. Occam's Razor says that the simplest explanation is the best one and that I could ignore the image I saw from the corner of my eye, and that is what I decided to do.

That decision vaporized the moment I had made it. As my eyes were looking away from the image, I could swear I saw him reach up and shake the branch above him. My eyes shot back to the trees and the blue splotches, though now dimmer, obliterated the shadowy phantom. I decided to wait out my night vision. I had seen it make the rustle. At least, I think I did. My eyes were looking away and I caught just a flash. Actually, all I saw was some non-descript motion from the corner of my eye followed by the rustle which means, really, I saw nothing. Now, again, I found myself staring at the trees. And there it was. I still could not look directly at my subject, but I didn't have to use the extreme periphery of my field of view this time, either. The image was convincing, but it was all so silly. I had lost. I knew it wasn't real but I also knew that I would have to investigate. After all, what if it was a person? I saw one man standing by the side of the road. What if there is another sitting in the trees? And if there was a man, he was playing some kind of game with me that I didn't want to be part of. It seemed like a poor excuse, but it was enough to let me save some face as I decided to get my flashlight. After all, I was sitting in a very secluded area all by myself. No sense in getting robbed or worse.

Before I could move, the figure disappeared. Actually, it didn't disappear as much as it changed. It just... didn't look like anything anymore. I stood up and shifted my position around the fire so that the light from the flames weren't shining in my eyes anymore. All I saw were trees. I sat back down, not sure if I had won a victory or not. It was all very curious. One second, a convincing image of a man. The next, nothing - without even a change in the lighting. I tried to mentally piece back together the figure I saw just a moment ago. My night vision was still improving, though the area was still very dark. The shadows would shift slightly back and forth with the dancing of the camp fire and, at the right time, I could see where the shadows and branches could meld to form a man's torso. That bump thing on the tree trunk could be the head. And there... those tree limbs - maybe they were broken branches - those would have been his arms. I could not find his legs but there, when the shadows were right, there was my Indian sitting in the trees.

No, he was not sitting, he was crouching. The pieces were fitting in better now. He was crouching down on the limb, both hand and feet close together, as if ready to pounce down upon me. The figure would start to fall apart, but then would come back



together with more detail. I could see its face, looking comical at first, but then twisting to something predatory. I knew this was an exercise in imagination. I would not be seeing these kind of details if a real man were crouching in the dark. I would be seeing his eyes glowing like that.

My fascination started to turn into something else. That ... thing ... started to look real again. I sat frozen, my mental battle returning with a new ferocity. The very moment I resolved that the figure was nothing more than a trick of light, it would subtly resolve into a convincing menace. But, when I grew frightened enough to take action, I would see a flaw in the shape and the whole image would seem to collapse, leaving me a fool.

“Aren’t you Tommy Holland?”

“I’m Tom Holland, yes.”

“I heard you once wet your sleeping bag in Boy Scouts because you thought you heard Big Foot outside your tent.”

I would not be that fool again. I looked away. Enough with the mind games. Think about something nice, and your mind will see only beauty in the evening woods.

Rustle. Grunt.

Did I hear a grunt? It was soft. So soft, I could have easily imagined it. Damn it! I looked again, and again it stared back at me only to melt away before I could stand up. I found myself paralyzed by indecision. Perfectly paralyzed... as if it were reading my mind and shifting its form to foil my every decision the moment I made it.

The face I was looking upon, each time it appeared, grew more hideous, more ravenous, less human. I found my hand closing on a small rock beside me. How could I be imagining such horrible detail? As I started to lift the stone, the face started to melt away and the figure blend back into the trees.

*It is reading your mind. It's trying to stop you from throwing the rock.*

"Enough!" I screamed, jumping to my feet and hurling the stone into the trees. I expected my outburst to destroy my monster. I expected, as what happened on that demeaning in night in the Boy Scout camp, that the simple act of confrontation would bring reality crashing back in and leave me a little boy afraid of harmless noises in the dark woods. I expected the stone to pass through the trees without incident.

It didn't. The rock, though striking nothing but branches caused a violent burst from the limbs that seemed too large to have come from the impact. And in that burst, did I hear a howl? What caused those branches to move like that?

I took a few steps towards the trees, but the figure was gone. I waited a few moments, heart beating loudly in my throat, but it did not re-materialize. I could not see it.

I no longer knew where my adversary was.

"This is silly," I told myself aloud, blood rushing to my face. "There was a squirrel in the trees and you managed to scare it with the rock. That was the reaction you saw in the tree limbs."

*Where is it?*

Slowly, I walked to my truck and got out a flashlight and a gallon of water. I had to turn my back on the tree where I had seen the figure and that made my heart race even more.

I turned on the flashlight and made a sweep of the area. Nothing but trees.

"You see, there is nothing there."

*So where is it?*

I knew myself. I knew what I was going to do. I was defeated. I walked to the campfire and started to extinguish it with water. As I did, I could see the darkness of the forest quickly close in on me. I swept the area again with the flashlight, but the beam of light was narrow compared to the broad illumination of the campfire, making the search claustrophobic.

Again I turned my back on the trees and walked to the truck. I climbed in, shut the door and turned off the flashlight. The night darkness rushed in and surrounded the truck. I reached into my pants pocket to get the car keys, but when I sat down, my pocket had folded in a way to make it difficult to reach the keys. The bend in my waist pulled the pocket tight so I had to struggle to get a finger on them.

*This is it! This is the Hollywood moment with the guy in the car struggling to get his car started. This is where it leaps forward and pushes its face against the windshield. That face! I saw it in the trees. That horrible face!*

I wrenched the keys from my pocket and started the car. It did not fail to start the first time, as Hollywood would have dictated. No face appeared at the last second. I flipped on the headlights and instantly the darkest before me was blasted backwards thirty yards. I paused. I was leaving Taos. Maybe just for that night, maybe for longer. That didn't matter. What mattered was that I could not control my fears that night and I was running from a rustle in the trees. Or maybe it was some strange loner that was playing games with me? It wasn't worth it to even find out. I pulled onto the main road and headed down the mountain, by headlights spitting the darkness ahead of me, only to have it rush in from behind.

*Is it following me?*

I wasn't going to look in the rear view mirror. It was humiliating enough that I was going to ruin my trip because I got scared of the dark. I was not going to humiliate myself further to check to see if there was an Indian chasing me down the mountain.

I found myself driving too fast. My tires screeched around a tight bend in the road and I forced myself to calm down.

"You want to die? You want to die over a squirrel?"

*That was no squirrel. The branches moved too much for a squirrel.*

I wanted to look. I wanted to look in the mirror to verify that nothing was there. But I was also driving at night down a winding mountain road. And though I had slowed, my eyes still needed to be fixed on the road ahead. It was difficult to steal a glance in the mirror. But then, maybe it wasn't behind me.

*Maybe it was running beside me on the narrow road, its ravenous face just feet from mine.*

I turned my head ... and I saw an Indian.

Not to my side, but to my front. He appeared as I rounded another curve, standing by the side of the road. I caught him out of the corner of my eye, as I had just taken my eyes off the road. I reacted badly by pulling hard on the steering wheel. My truck glanced off the rocky mountain wall as I turned too sharply. The impact was not hard but I could feel my front tires lock under the pickup as one of them burst. I tugged at the wheel to regain control but it was frozen in place. I could see a sharp curve ahead of me as my truck started to slide sideways towards the embankment.

A scream forced its way through my clenched throat.

The screeching of tires and the grinding of asphalt was suddenly replaced by a metallic explosion. The world spun violently. Having been too hurried to have put on my seatbelt, I bounced within the cab, thrashing helplessly against punishing blows to my body as my pickup flipped into a barrel roll moments before it reached the guard rail. Then, as quickly as they started, the blows inexplicably stopped. The deafening noise grew softer and I slowly (in my recollection, it was slowly) realized that I was flying above the truck. I could see my pickup from my unusual vantage point tumbling fiercely as it left the road. The driver's side door was flapping open limply like a broken limb. The truck did not fall far as the road ahead made a hairpin turn and doubled back. It slammed into the opposite embankment, just a few feet below the guardrail and began sliding down the mountain. I had the curious thought, as I flew towards the same embankment, that I wished I had a video camera so that I could show my friends what an interesting view I had of my own accident.

I had time for only that one fleeting thought.

I was traveling higher and slower than the truck, having been thrown up and out when my car door, sympathetic to my plight, flew open. I missed the embankment, grazing the top of the guardrail and hit the asphalt. Again, I was tumbling only this time without a metal cage to protect me from the asphalt teeth. I hit the mountain wall and bounced back onto the road.

I laid still, face up. My body felt as if it were on fire. All was still and silent except for a ringing in my ears. After a moment, I opened my eyes, my eyelids being the only muscles I could move without intense pain, but I was blinded by a stream of blood flowing off my forehead. I could not see, but the soft crunching of leather sandals reminded me that I was not alone.

Step, step, step. They were unhurried steps and they were very close.

I blinked several times to clear the blood from my eyes but my vision was still badly blurred. I could barely see the outline of his figure standing over me. All I managed to say was "help".

His whole body began to glow. I heard a strange, inhuman screech and he dropped out of my sight. Something grabbed my ankle with such force that my bone snapped. It jerked my leg forward, dislocating my knee and my hip and dragged me with incredible speed down the road. My coat, which I had unbuttoned earlier at the camp, bunched up under my neck protecting my head but leaving my back to be ravaged by the asphalt like cheese on a grater.

It soon stopped. I was again motionless on the pavement. There was screaming. My entire body was going numb. The pain was being replaced by an uncomfortable deadness. But there was screaming. Oddly enough, it was not my scream. It was a woman's scream. My eyes were watering and the tears washed some of the blood from them.

I blinked, and blinked again.

My foot, I could now see, was wedged within the metal bumper of an old VW Volkswagen. It looked very bad. A woman had her head thrust out of the window, her face twisted in horror as she screamed at the site of me. A man leaped from the car and ran towards me. He was yelling things but I could not understand a word of it. My head

felt light and my body cold as the numbness overtook the rest of me. I gave up caring and passed out.

The rest of my story is difficult to convey because I have been only partially conscious ever since. I remember hospital rooms and doctors. I am aware of the fact that my right foot is no longer part of my body. I also heard that I required skin grafts over 63% of my body but they would like to delay the reconstructive surgery until they are sure I would survive. In addition to my family, the man driving the Volkswagen came by to visit me once. He talked to me, but I do not believe he knew I was listening as I gave him no reason to believe I was conscious at the time. He apologized, practically in tears, and told me how he had never seen me. He hit the breaks suddenly because he saw a man standing in the road but the man dashed over the side and disappeared down the embankment. He stopped only when he felt a bump and heard something dragging. He told me that the police found my pickup but no one has found the man in the road. The police want to ask me about him when I can speak. He seemed like a nice man and I appreciated the visit. If I live, I will do something nice for him. He started to tell me some other things but I lost consciousness for real before he finished.

What would I tell the police? I rolled my truck because I got scared after throwing a rock at a squirrel and the man was just an innocent bystander to my childish fantasies? Maybe. But, in between the multiple surgeries and the drugged haze that follows them, when I replay the scenario in my head I can't help but wonder about a few things.

The accident was so very... choreographed. The Indian appeared right at the moment I took my eyes off the road and he was standing at the perfect place for me to roll my pickup. My car door flew open at the precise time to hurl me completely over a ravine and back onto the road. If I repeated that accident a hundred times, I doubt it would have happened again. And I doubt there is another turn on that entire road sharp enough to make such a flight even possible at all. Yet I made it, and my truck did not. I was conveniently removed from my truck and my truck removed from the road as to not stop the oncoming traffic. Traffic? The only other car I saw that night was the one that just happened by just a few moments later, the driver being distracted by the same man who caused me to roll my truck. I don't know the likelihood of my ankle being caught in the bumper after the car ran over my foot but I will say that my leg must have been well placed for this event.

It makes me wonder why I had been so fascinated with the Spirit Walker story in the first place? Kathy lived a life as if an evil spirit was following her around. Maybe that spirit had found me through her and was waiting for the right time to set up the scenario. I had been camping by myself a dozen times. So why was I so frightened that night?

I have told you all that I can. Everything can be explained away with a rational mind. You can call me a fool and you would be right. But what I also know is this.

One night, I thought I saw a Spirit Walker. And that night, lost my skin.