

Dark and Quiet

Brian Allan Skinner

I'm one of those old-fashioned types people call a curmudgeon. I think nighttime should be dark and quiet, just as it was made. I make allowance for the occasional streak of a meteor or the scream of some critter becoming the supper of a larger critter with sharper teeth. My neighbors had no such apprehension. They annoyed the hell out of me with their security lights and God-damned wind chimes. The Red Willow County Sheriff told me if I complained one more time he'd throw *me* in the clink. Thus, Sheriff Pease forced me to uphold the law with my own hands.

As a general rule I don't like to generalize about groups of people, but nearly every last one of my nettling neighbors is a Texan or the wife of one. They drive big-assed six-wheel pickup trucks you can't see around even in the opposite lane. They manage to strut even while driving. They park these mechanical beasts in driveways to which they've affixed so-called security lights way up on a pole or at the peak of their big-assed barns. They light up half the sky, drowning all but a handful of the brightest stars in their glare. If you ask me, these gazillion-watt lights only call attention to the fact that somebody who thinks he's got something worth protecting lives there. In the dark, no one would even know you're there until they heard you close the breach of your shotgun.

I do not myself own any firearms. They would surely result in murder charges being brought against me. No rifle stock would be long enough for all the notches I'd need to carve in it. But I am not defenseless. My greatest weapon is my wits.

Feeling the underdog David to the Texas-size Goliaths, I did battle against their floodlights with my slingshot. There's no end of ammunition lying everywhere and no way to trace a particular stone back to its owner. The remorse I felt for smashing a very expensive light bulb lasted no longer than the time from the release to the satisfying tinkling of glass on the ground. I enjoyed the return of a small slice of sky to its God-made blackness.

As I like to tell Sheriff Warren Pease, he is no ordinary fool. He always interrupts me before I finish my sentence. It didn't take him but six months to figure out, after my earlier complaints, that I might have had something to do with the smashed floodlights.

"I'm keeping a tab of all those broken security lights, Shacktey, and when I catch you at it—and I will—that's what it'll cost to get your ass out of jail."

"I am deeply hurt you would think me capable of such vandalism. As far as it goes, I abide by every sensible law there is, which, fortunately, are damn few."

"Why can't you ever speak plain, Shacktey?"

"I thought I had, Sheriff. Perhaps it's your ears that are complicated."

"Huh?"

"See what I mean?" I told him.

He left with his flashy sheriff's cap in his hand as he scratched his head. But I knew that I couldn't obfuscate indefinitely even with a dunderhead. I needed to put him off the scent by tilting at wind chimes for a change. He couldn't possibly see any connection in either motive or method. I was good to go.

There was no easy fix for disabling my neighbors' wind chimes which were bad enough during the day but intolerable at night. What possible purpose do they serve? Isn't the soughing wind and rustle of leaves and the hoot of an owl or the yowl of a coyote enough? These silly chimes are like chewing gum for the ears. I'm surprised Dante hadn't mentioned them as a device of hellish torture in *L'Inferno*, except that Texas hadn't been invented yet.

My weapon of choice, considering its earlier success and my improved skill, was my trusty slingshot, but all I succeeded in doing was ringing the chimes as though they'd suffered an epileptic seizure. The nylon string connecting the chimes, and the feather that caught the wind and sounded them, remained unfazed. I'd need to fire off sharpened stones. *Might as well try to hit the string with an arrow*, I figured.

Since most of the offending wind chimes hid behind walled or fenced patios, I'd need an implement with a reach and a business end that could cut. I hated to spend the money, but I chose a cheap, lightweight tree pruner with a lobbing shear at the tip. It was perfect. The satisfaction I felt at hearing the unmusical clatter of the unleashed chimes as they hit the ground was every bit as profound as that at hearing the tinkling shards of shattered glass.

I was careful never to be seen with the tree pruner. I tried being judicious in my snipping of the wind chimes' cords and only did so under cover of dark. Still, Sheriff Pease paid me a non-social call before I'd dispatched even a quarter of the noisy disturbers of my peace.

"What you got against wind chimes, Shacktey?"

"Why, nothing, Sheriff. They're lovely, especially the ones made out of foam rubber."

"What're you talking about, old man? Who'd hear 'em?"

"Precisely, Pease."

He removed his fancy cap and shook his head. I didn't hear anything rattle, but it worried me that I'd again become his prime suspect. I decided to hold off for a spell and let the scent grow cold.

* * *

A couple weeks later an opportunity presented itself that I'd have been a fool to pass by. At a house down my road some kid left his BB gun untended, leaning it against the door frame under the *portal*. No doubt he was prohibited from bringing it into the house. I snatched it without another thought and got all but three inches of it tucked up my sleeve.

It was the old-fashioned kind of BB gun from around the time of my own boyhood, the kind you had to pump. Whoever it had belonged to was not like the lazy brats these days who just pop in a CO₂ cartridge and let loose. I admit I was a little out of shape. My arms felt like they would break off before I'd managed to send any of the lights to Voltage Valhalla. But practice makes perfect—well, almost so.

What I liked least about the BB rifle was that you had to be nearly on top of one of these damn security lights before it'd break. Might as well climb up a stepladder and swing at it with a baseball bat. My arms gave out from pumping after only two lights. I doubted I'd make my quota by Memorial Day. Maybe some oil would help make pumping easier.

Sheriff Pease paid me another call on Friday and informed me that some neighbor kid's BB rifle went missing from the porch and now there's a rash of smashed security lights again and there's no telling what broke 'em except that some unbroken ones have got curious little round holes in 'em.

"You know anything 'bout that, Shacktey?"

"You wound me, Sheriff."

"Well, it's probably not the kid," he said. "His BB gun was stolen."

I wondered what wattage the Sheriff's bulb was.

"Mind if I look around?"

"Without a warrant?"

"Got somethin' to hide, Shacktey?"

"How many bodies do you think I can fit in this place, Sheriff?"

I waved him inside. It took him under three minutes to minutely examine every cranny. My place is just a kiva, a kitchen, and a bathroom with a shower so small there's barely room for the water to get between me and the stall.

“OK, Shacktey. But I got my eye on you. The law never sleeps. You hurt your arm?”

“Just a little stiff, Sheriff. Comes with the territory.”

He grunted and left, leaving his cap on this time. I had no idea what that portended, but I was happy he’d gone when he did. I thought my pants were gonna end up around my ankles with two packages of BBs in the pockets. And my arm ached from concealing the air rifle up my shirt sleeve for the length of his visit. I already knew who I was not going to vote for, three years ahead of schedule..

* * *

I was surveying the neighborhood one afternoon, making note of the remaining floodlights and wind chimes on my hand-drawn map, when I spotted the kid whose BB gun followed me home. I guessed him to be about eleven or twelve, blond hair, a little bit gangly. As I got closer I saw he was wearing only cut-off blue jeans and worn gym shoes with a couple of toes sticking out. He had more scrapes and cuts on him than Mel Gibson’s Jesus.

“Jesus, kid. Put on some long pants and a shirt. You can’t skateboard down a gravel road. You’ll kill yourself.”

“I’ll be in real trouble if I get my good jeans ripped or dirty,” he explained.

“So wear old ones,” I suggested.

“These are the old ones,” he said, looking down at his feet

“I see. Then go easy, uh... kid. I don’t like to see anybody get hurt. Makes me queasy.”

“My name’s Lance Parker, short for Lancelot. But if I had any friends at school, they’d call me *Lance*. ”

“Why doesn’t a good-looking kid like you have friends?”

“Because I’m really good at what I love doing—at skateboarding. I beat ‘em all. And I win every competition I enter.”

“Hard to believe,” I tell him. “It honestly doesn’t look so good from where I’m standing, Lance.”

“This is just where I practice. When I get on pavement or a ramp or a track, it’s like all resistance disappears, like I’m flying, Mr. Skacktey.”

“I never told you my name, kid.”

“I know. You’re the man who took my BB gun.”

“What? Who told you? How did *anyone* know? It was dark.”

Realizing I’d tipped my hand, I decided to come clean with him. I liked the kid for no reason I could fathom. Maybe because he was bright. He’d already wheedled more out of me than Sheriff Warren Pease did in three visits. I knew who I’d vote for, twenty years ahead of schedule—if I lived that long.

* * *

I meandered toward Lance’s end of the road and met his father who was home from work early, working only half-days at the Rip-Cut Sawmill. I handed him a paper bag containing an almost-new pair of jeans and a sturdy flannel shirt. From the resale shop. I guessed at his size.

“For the boy’s practice sessions,” I told him.

The father, who never introduced himself, thanked me and went inside. I’d never seen the blinds raised there or a curtain parted. No wonder the kid spent as much time outside as daylight allowed. I hadn’t gotten far before I heard the boy shout my name and I turned around.

“Thanks, Mr. Shacktey. These are better than my good jeans. Levi’s, too.”

He waved the bag at me and zipped back and forth on his skateboard up and down the gravel road, negotiating dips and potholes, and falling only twice. Actually, it looked more like sliding into home plate. Lance dusted himself off and began circling me.

“Why do you shoot out the lights and cut down the wind chimes, Mr. Shacktey?”

“Whoa, kiddo. The wind chimes are no concern of yours. Let’s stick to those infernal security lights. They’re light pollution and I’m the ordinance enforcer. And, if it was any of your business, the chimes are noise pollution.”

“Could we maybe share my BB gun? Sometimes I get a couple rabbits for supper.”

“Look. I’m saving you a lot of grief, Lance. If it’s back in your possession during the next outbreak of busted nightlights, you’ll be the Sheriff’s prime suspect.”

“Can I come with you during the next outbreak, Mr. Shacktey?”

“We’ll see what your folks say.”

He shook his haystack of golden hair.

"It's easier to seek forgiveness..." he began.

"...than be granted permission," I finished. "Yeah, that's the school I went to, too. Tomorrow. 10:30. No noise. No lights."

"Got it, Mr. Skacktey."

I watched him tumble down the road, holding my breath. He seemed to be made of pretty tough stuff, but he was still a kid.

* * *

I didn't see Lance out front of his place. He was probably still in bed. I knew I would've been if Sheriff Pease hadn't inadvertently deputized me to uphold the spirit of the law. Something tugged at my sleeve.

"Cripes, kid, you're going to give me a heart attack. You need a bell tied around your neck."

"No noise. No lights.' Remember?" he scolded.

"Yeah, yeah. See what I mean about the stars getting drowned out."

I saw his silhouette raise its head and raise an arm to point.

"I see Orion," he said.

"Big deal," I remarked. "Except for those damn lights, Orion would be hard to pick out. It'd be lost among so many other stars. You weren't born yet the last time an ice storm knocked out the power—for almost a week. It was glorious. The sky God made. The Dippers overflowed the sky with stars."

We drew closer, sensing our whereabouts rather than actually seeing each other. I stopped and asked Lance if he wanted to pump up the gun now that one of the lights was within range. I wondered whether he'd read *Tom Sawyer*?

"Sure I have, Mr. Shacktey? I've read most of the books in the Red Willow Library, even the ones in the locked cases, especially D. H. Lawrence."

"Books are one thing. Stop reading my mind, kid. It makes me nervous. It's impolite, like opening people's mail."

"Sorry, Mr. Shacktey."

I took aim with the kid's BB gun. *Ping*.

"Nice shot, Mr. Shacktey."

I handed him the BB gun and let him pump it again this time.

"Which one?" he asked.

"Take your pick. They're all damned eyesore nuisances."

He aimed at a light on the other side of the road.

"Too far," I said. "It'll never make it."

Ping. Glass shattered. A blossom of darkness and stars unfolded like silent fireworks.

"Nice shot, kid," I told him, though I honestly couldn't see how the BB reached the security light with enough oomph to break it.

I decided we should call it a night, two for two. On the way home, now under rising moonlight, I learned Lance's mother never left the house, afflicted with some skin disease made worse by sunlight.

New Mexico's surely the wrong place for you, woman, I thought.

"I know, but my Dad's not sure he'd find work in some new place," Lance explained.

"You're reading my mind again. Look. If you wanted to read a book of mine, you'd ask to borrow it, right? So ask me when you want to read my mind."

"I don't really know when it's going to happen. And I'm not really reading. I just know things."

"How do you 'just know'?"

"I don't know."

"OK. Enough grilling. You must be getting warm. You up for Friday night?"

"Sure. Mind if I do the pumping again?"

"Not at all. You need it more than I do," I said, watching his Cheshire grin grow in the moonlight.

I tousled his mop of hair. I swore he'd grown a head taller in the month I'd known him. I wondered how long the jeans I got him would still fit.

"No," I said. "You may not read my mind. Good night. Thank you, Sir Lancelot, for your efforts on behalf of the forces of darkness."

He chuckled. I watched him carefully open and close his front door, and I thought what a great kid he was. I didn't care if he intercepted that one.

* * *

On our next outing, the kid and I bagged two three-hundred watters and a halogen. His ability to score the long-shots led me to suspect there was more to it than how many times he pumped the BB rifle. He propelled himself further and faster on his skateboard than the laws of physics ought rightly allow, too.

"Do you ever get afraid, Mr. Shacktey?"

"Of course, son. I'm not stupid."

"Are you worried about getting caught?"

"Not so much with Sheriff Pease on the job," I told him.

"Even with the reward?"

"What reward?"

"The *Red Willow Reporter* offered a ten-thousand-dollar reward for information about the 'string of nefarious vandalisms meant to conceal even darker deeds.' That was last week. Didn't you know, Mr. Shacktey?"

"I don't read that mouthpiece for the rich Texans taking over Red Willow. I won't tell you what it's good for. We are fighting for the common man blinded by Klieg lights and deafened by cacophony. We are fighting for darkness and quiet."

Our conversation fell off. I'd been blind-sided by that reward business. We walked on for some ways and were nearly at Lance's house before the realization dawned on me that he knew more than enough to collect the bounty on my head. Why hadn't he? It'd sure go a long way towards helping his family out of their situation.

"A friend is priceless," he said. "You are my best friend, Mr. Shacktey. Nobody at school will have anything to do with me. To the jocks I'm a nerd who raises his hand in class and knows

the answer. To the brainy kids, I'm some jerk winning prizes for skateboarding. And if any of them knew... knew...uh..."

"Knew what, Lance? Spit it out. I hope I am worthy of the trust you place in me. You're *my* friend, too. Nothing you could tell me would make me think any less of you. Well, maybe not nothing, but I'd have to think pretty hard to come up with something."

We stopped outside the path to his door in the shadow of two plum trees. He whispered.

"I like boys, Mr. Shacktey."

"That's good, Lance. Everybody should like somebody. The world would be better for it."

"I mean in a certain way. The way the other boys talk about girls, that's how I feel about boys. Well, certain boys."

"I don't know that it'll make you feel any better, kiddo, but me too. I like men."

"You're gay?"

"I like the word queer. That's what I grew up with. I'm not always so gay, like over them damn lights, for instance. But I'm as queer as the day is long, in all senses of the word."

We looked up at the stars, but neither of us found anything else to say up there.

"I think it's late," I told him. "I'll ask your Pop if I can take you to town on Saturday. I don't want them getting wrong ideas about me. Good night, kiddo."

"Good night, Mr. Shacktey It does make me feel better."

* * *

I let the kid pick a place for lunch. He picked that dreadful *Taco Brahe, We're outta this world.*™ I've had worse, far worse, for more money.

"Do you know how he died?" Lance asked.

"You're the one who reads minds. Who do you mean?"

"Tycho Brahe, the astronomer."

"The pope got on his ass, right?"

“That was Galileo,” he said. “Tycho Brahe was attending the king’s banquet in Germany and he was afraid to ask permission to use the bathroom. He held it so long his bladder burst and he died three days later.”

“And what moral do you take from that tale, my boy?”

“That it’s better to beg forgiveness than ask permission. What would you have done, Mr. Shacktey?”

“I’d have pissed under the table and blamed it on the cat.”

Lance laughed so hard he choked on his wretched taco. People’s heads turned around. I motioned to him to grab the tray and we went out to the patio and sat under an old-fashioned green canvas umbrella. We were alone.

“I worry about you, my boy. I’ve grown very fond of you. Friends watch each other’s back. I know you’re tough, Lance, but don’t pick any fights at school.”

“I don’t pick fights, Mr. Shacktey. I don’t walk away from ‘em, either.”

“Fair enough, kiddo.”

As my taco submarine seemed to grow longer, Lance’s grew shorter. He asked if I was going to finish mine.

“No, go ahead,” I told him. “It’ll be easier to walk if you fill up the other leg, too.”

I saw in the boy’s blue eyes a cloudless sky reflected in a clear pool. Beneath the fear was a fierceness that said the fear didn’t matter. We understood each other in the same instant. It was hard to tell which of us was the other. I certainly saw myself in him. At times, when I’d glance over at him, he’d quickly turn his eyes away, as though embarrassed to be studying me so intently. Perhaps he’d seen a bit of his future in me. I think I haven’t done too bad.

Dropping him off beside his path, I saw eyes and fingers peeking between the blinds. I asked him if he thought a little money might help his parents’ situation. He shrugged.

“I don’t think they want another life or they’d get off the sofa and open the blinds,” he replied.

“I see, my boy. My door is always open to you, as long as it’s OK with them.”

“Thanks, Mr. Shacktey. I know they love me. I just don’t always feel it.”

"Have you told them yet what you know? Always remember that anyone who is unable to accept you the way God made you is not worthy of you."

"I know. I'll find a good time to tell them. I'd rather make my own mistakes than someone else's."

"You're right. I admire you, Lance. You're a good, sturdy boy."

He smiled. He extended his hand and I shook it. Yep, a good, sturdy boy.

* * *

By late summer, Lance and I had dispatched the last of the wind chimes and security lights. Sheriff Warren Pease knew we were in cahoots, but never chanced to catch us in the same place at the same time. He let it slip once that he preferred dark and quiet himself, and his visits fell off.

Lance and I had gotten to know each other pretty well on our hunting expeditions. I was becoming his mentor: the one I never had I let it slip I could read his mind, too, when I mentioned the boy at school by name that he had a crush on: Antonio.

"Is it only queer people who can read minds?" he asked me silently.

"No, everybody can do it a little bit, and other abilities, too. But nobody wants to be different. It's scary. You learned that lesson at school. But it's easier to be different if you're already an outsider. What've you got to lose if no one likes you already?

"So they slowly forget all that they can do. Most adults, I'm afraid, are nothing more than deteriorated children. You must fight never to grow up."

"I will, Mr. Shacktey. I want to be just like you."

I smiled at him. "I suppose you could do worse," I said.

* * *

Once school was back in session, I worried about my protégé continually. I knew he could handle himself one-on-one or even two-against-one. I was concerned about even more uneven odds. But all he got was a shiner and a fat lip. The other kid fared worse, I'd heard. And that was Lance's last year. He skipped the eighth grade.

Lance had an easier time in high school. He came out to a couple pals. By then most of the kids had begun to realize that most of what their parents and teachers told them was horseshit. The other queer boy and girl in his grade stuck to themselves, but Lance mixed with

everybody. That made me very proud to know he was thinking for himself. Maybe I was beginning to rub off on him.

In addition to his athletic skills on the skateboard, Lance loved his studies and excelled at them, and read astronomy books on his own. He graduated after sophomore year. I worried that he was maybe too smart and was growing up too fast, until he'd do something moronic like surf down a mudslide on the rusted hood of an old car. He made it, but the jeans I got him did not.

He consulted me on his college choices, but what did I know except that I loved him to pieces and wanted the world for him. Though I saw him as my young friend, he'd begun calling me "Uncle." I wasn't sure I was worthy of the honor.

I found a little spare change at the bottom of an old shoe box and with that, plus his skateboard winnings, Lancelot Parker decided to go to Princeton, majoring in astrophysics. I haven't a clue except that it's about what makes stars tick. Lance could name more stars and point them out than anybody I ever knew.

Now I had a new worry. What if Lance found the East to his liking and decided to stay there? What if he met somebody there? What if his real reason for choosing Princeton was to get as far away from dusty old Red Willow as he could?

He visited at Christmas and took summers off to work at the *Mila-grow Nursery & Greenhouse*. I'd begun to think he just liked getting dirty. A boy of his talent. But he was the happiest human being I knew. It was hard to argue with that. And the work kept him trim and fit. He was going to make someone quite a catch some day.

Lance's parents remained as uninspired by life as ever. He joked that he was going to bury them inside a sleeper sofa. He sent them money and I left things at their door on occasion, so they lacked for no material good. But nothing fired them up. Lance overheard me one time wondering whether he was adopted. I knew he'd wondered the same thing.

The summer Lance turned twenty, back from school with only a semester to go, he brought a nice Hispanic boy to the house, Antonio. It might have been the same boy from his grade school. I'd invited Lance for supper and he asked if he could bring a friend. They worked at the *Mila-grow Nursery* together so I figured he was just a working buddy. I saw they'd brought a flat box tied with string like a pie might come in. I opened three beers and checked the oven.

There was an unmistakable warmth in the way they looked at each other, a smile that never left their lips. Takes one to know one, I guess. It was the look I saw on my partner Julio's face up until the moment he drew his last, and I closed his eyes. It made me feel good that Antonio also addressed me as "Uncle."

Though the conversation and chatter was easy, there was something Lance was not telling me or asking me. It bothered me, but I gave him a while to spit it out before probing his mind uninvited. I set the rice-and-bean casserole, tortillas, and the asparagus salad on the table. They dove into the meal as though they'd just come from a day's work in the field.

"So, how much?" I asked Lance.

His mouth dropped open. Antonio's eyebrows went up in bushy black question marks.

"I wanted to ask you after supper, Uncle. After I finish my masters and come back here, Antonio and I want to buy *Mila-grow*. Nicolás offered it to us before he told anyone else."

"I see," I said, though I did not.

We ate in silence until they'd nearly finished their second helping and the baking dish and salad bowl were scraped clean, practically ready to put back in the cupboard.

"So you get a masters degree in astrophysics from Princeton so you can dig in the dirt and propagate petunias?"

"This is what I tried to tell him, Uncle, but he is stubborn."

"Thank you for telling me that, Antonio. I didn't know that about him."

They both laughed. Lance cleared the dishes away and his friend set out the dessert, cherry jack *empanadas*, with green chilies in them. He'd made them himself.

Lance and I continued our silent conversation. It appeared Antonio could pick a little of it up, like the person who can sign a little. I learned Antonio was quite a baker, but when I tried to tell him that would make him very welcome in our small family, he didn't pick it up.

"OK, so you like to get dirty. Why Princeton, then?" I asked Lance out loud.

"The more you know, the richer your life becomes. You know that, Uncle. You taught me that. The night sky contains many more wonders than I ever knew. It is deeper and blacker and more mysterious than I ever imagined. I will not forget that just because we run a tree nursery."

They left the last *empanada* for me. I brought out my dusty bottle of tequila and three small glasses. They each refused a third shot, but I went on to a fourth. I was celebrating Lance and Antonio finding each other. My concern that Antonio was six years older and had only graduated high school seemed to vanish the more I saw how lovingly they behaved to each other.

"I also bought a very large telescope from a Benedictine Order House in upstate New York," Lance said. "The nuns will hold it until I can pay to have it shipped here, where the night is even darker at the *Mila-Grow Nursery*."

"I'll see what's left in my shoe box. Would thirty thousand do it, boys?"

"Certainly, Uncle. Plenty. You'll get it back very soon: in a year or two. It's just so we don't have to get a mortgage when the business is just starting out."

"All right. When do you need it?" I asked, though I'd already seen the date circled on his mental calendar.

"By the first of the month, Unc. Antonio's getting the rest from his *abuelo*."

"I see. You know, Antonio, that pastry is also accepted here as legal tender. It'd be a way to pay down the loan a little quicker."

"Por supuesto, Tio," he told me.

I didn't know much Spanish, but I understood what he meant. They stood up to leave.

"You boys can spend the night, you know. Stay in your old room, Lance."

"Thanks, Unc, but that's just a single bed. I've been staying at Antonio's when I'm in town. He's got a *casita* out on the mesa."

"All right. Be careful going home. Antonio, you drive, please."

He nodded to me, and hung his arm around Lance's neck as they went out to the truck. Lance turned around.

"I see there are a couple of new floodlights down the road. Want us to take them out?"

"Please, Lance. I can't walk that far anymore and it's all I can do to keep up with the latest infestation of wind chimes."

"You got it, Unc."

I watched the headlights from Antonio's pickup bounce up and down the road and then suddenly disappear. I heard a shotgun blast, followed by another a few minutes later.

After that, the only sound I heard was the sighing of a cool breeze through the piñon. The sky was once again black except for the lights God put up there. I thought maybe there was a new star I hadn't noticed before. I was sure Lance would know.