

Standing your ground is hard when you can't trust what's underfoot. Sorting what's true and what's only wished is even harder in a place like Beaverdam, where stories sprout faster than grass on a new grave.

Beaverdam's children heard tell of the Witch Woman who lived in a ruined cabin, who would cuss you or worse if you dared knock on her door. They were warned of the Snakebit Girl, how the rattler's fangs struck her pudgy hand reaching into the nest for the hen's eggs. Rather than tell a soul of her plight, she swelled with poisoned pride, and for her silence she was buried in the sloping graveyard. They knew of the Failed Farmer who lost all in the last depression of the nineteenth century. He sold off his plow horse, but still found necessity for the useless halter: his body was found hanging from a rafter in his empty barn.

But the oldest story was of a curse that lay on the land itself. The first whites who crossed the gap encountered no Indians, but the occasional arrowhead could be unearthed in the black fields by the creek, once dammed by the creatures who lent the cove its name. Besides those napped flints, those first hunters had left behind a legend.

Royce Wilder learned about the Shadow Man when he turned seven, a

good year to scare children, the age of accountability for a child's soul, as Baptists believed, when death and eternity become real and not just pretend.

It must have been summer, since the sun was prickly hot on his bare shoulders, and surely a Sunday, since his father and uncle wore starched, white shirts instead of their soft, blue denim, sitting in the Sabbath shade of the porch, doing no more work than allowed, whittling sticks into splinters with their Barlow blades. Royce was in the yard playing a game of his own invention called "Stomp Your Shadow." He pounced catlike in the grass, trying to land on the dark puddle of himself beneath the midday sun.

"Hey, boy. You sure that's your shadow and not someone else?"

Drawn by his uncle's strange question, Royce drifted to the porch. He sat on the steps and scratched his grass-green knee. "What you mean, somebody else's shadow?"

"Never can tell. That shadow might belong to you. Might be the Shadow Man on your trail."

Uncle Dallas proceeded to spin a strange tale about a creature that lived in the forest, preying on the shadows of Indian braves passing under the gloomy hemlock shade. After snatching their silhouettes, this being would follow their footprints to the village, and under cover of night, steal the dark profiles of their women and children, but especially those of little boys. When morning came, without their shadows to stake them to the ground, all the Indians blew away in the wind.

"See, the Shadow Man stashes all these stolen shadows into caves and

closets and dark holes. Late at night—if you listen—you can hear them, all those lost voices, dying for a bit of daylight.” Dallas closed his eyes and made a mournful sound. “Whoooooo.”

Sitting in the shade, Royce couldn’t tell if he had his shadow or not. What if he stepped out into the yard and there was nothing to hold him to Earth? He was seven years old and believed anything his uncle said.

His father had been idly whittling through Dallas’ tale. Now he sat there with his hand covering his mouth, trying not to laugh. “Quit pulling the boy’s leg,” he finally said. “He didn’t sleep for a week after you told him about the witch woman up the road.”

“That’s not true!” Royce blurted.

His father’s face darkened. He had just called his daddy a liar. He fled inside and upstairs, leaving only the slap of the screen door on his backside and not his father’s hand.

He knew better than pray for protection from the Shadow Man. It was only a story, but he almost believed.

