

The Night Shadow

(A Cartoon in One Act)

Gordon Kalton Williams

Characters:

Allie

Pat

Billy Pratt, the visitor

THE NIGHT SHADOW

A ONE-ROOM HOUSE MADE OF TIN IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA, A HUNDRED MILES FROM THE NEAREST POPULATED SETTLEMENT. EARLY MORNING.

ALLIE IS AT THE DOOR LOOKING OUT AT DESERT RANGES.

ALLIE: Every morning I feel better. I look out the front door and the place doesn't seem so bad to me.

PAT: Hmm.

ALLIE: The hills in the early morning sun look more beautiful – veined. The same goes for evening. Morning and evening are my favourite times of day I think. I wonder if there is an actual difference between morning and evening. In the evening the soil seems to glow -

PAT: Will you shutup?

ALLIE: But I can't help it. I just feel I want to celebrate it, every morning.

PAT: You know how I feel first thing in the morning –

ALLIE: But I just want to yell it to the world. Fill up the space out there!

PAT: The last thing I want to hear in the morning is your voice, especially your chirpy voice. Just get me my coffee. Have you let it –

ALLIE: Cool? Yes, I've given it five minutes precisely, as usual.

PAT: No need for an explanation. Just give it to me. You don't have to explain everything every morning you know. Anyway, I know –

ALLIE: - exactly what you're going to say.

PAT: Pain in the arse!

SHE LOOKS OUTSIDE AGAIN.

ALLIE: Maybe it's because the house hasn't begun to heat up. You're outside all day –

PAT: - in the sun!

ALLIE: But it's much hotter in here during the day, with the sun beating down directly on that tin. You'd blister your hands if you touched the roof.

PAT: Are you complaining about this house?

ALLIE: No! I never would, you know that. Complain about this house? I've never known any other.

PAT: Good.

ALLIE: But maybe that's why I prefer this time of day. And the evening of course. When things are cooler.

PAT: Will you shutup, for God's sake!?

ALLIE BURSTS INTO TEARS

PAT: You know how I feel every morning. Must I explain it to you – every morning? Anyway, what's the matter? You didn't cry yesterday. You haven't cried for a long time, as far as I can remember. Anyway, you know how I feel every morning. It is daytime now, and as they say, 'We must step out into the "hard light of day"'. It is time to stop dreaming and weaving nice thoughts with words. *(PAUSE)* You always have trouble with Changeover. But today you are crying, which is strange. *(PAUSE)* What if I was to talk the way you do to any man I should meet today? You know what Dad used to say?

ALLIE: How often do we meet anybody?

PAT: You know that very well. Not –

ALLIE: - often, but that's –

PAT: - beside the point. You know how we were taught to behave. You don't go up to people and say, 'The sun spills its early morning light on hills, like honey, in rivulets down their slopes.'

ALLIE: But I wouldn't say that to anybody.

PAT: You said it last night to me.

ALLIE: To you, yes. And you enjoyed it.

PAT: Then! Not now. Not by day. You must adapt to daytime. You never know what might happen. You might meet someone.

ALLIE BURSTS INTO TEARS AGAIN.

PAT: What's the matter now? You've usually gotten used to this each morning. By ten past eight you've usually accepted the routine and settled down. This morning you're very unsettled. It's a matter for concern. Especially today.

ALLIE: Yes. Especially today.

PAUSE

PAT: 'Especially today'? Is that it? The inspector?

ALLIE: Yes, the visitor.

PAT: Ah, but he's not coming to visit you.

ALLIE: No.

PAT: He's here, purely and simply, to check some stock.

ALLIE: I know, but still –

PAT: Under no circumstances at all must you speak to him!

ALLIE: Why not?

PAT: Because there's no way in the world he will understand you.

ALLIE: He might.

PAT: If you come out with the sort of stuff you've come out with this morning, the poor bastard'll turn tail and run.

ALLIE: I won't speak to him like that.

PAT: You won't be able to help it.

ALLIE: I'll try not to. I promise.

PAT: No.

ALLIE: I'll simply say something nice about the weather.

PAT: Impossible.

ALLIE: I deserve a chance.

PAT: We can't afford the risk. Do you know what they say about us in town? They say we're peculiar. They really think we're mad. And they laugh at us behind our backs.

BILLY PRATT, THE VISITOR, SPEAKS.

PRATT: No-one ever saw much of them actually. No-one had the complete story. I heard say they'd been Siamese twins at birth, but maybe not. Anyway, how would they have gotten apart? Never saw a hospital in their lives. Anyway there they were, brother and sister, living out there together, only the two of them. One time I went out there I saw only one bed, so... Don't get me wrong! I don't care what they were up to. But they were really strange, you know, like – they didn't just live in each other's pockets, they finished each other's sentences, things like that. And still wore their parents' clothes even though their parents died twenty years back. And what really gave me the shits is all that zinc and copper out there and what'd they ever do with it?

PRATT COMES TO THE DOOR, STANDS HESITANTLY IN THE DOORWAY. PAT OFFERS NO INVITATION TO ENTER. ALLIE WAITS UNTIL SHE CAN NO LONGER CONTAIN HERSELF.

ALLIE: Come in.

PRATT ENTERS

PRATT: Goodday Pat.

PAT: Bill

PRATT: Spot of bother?

PAT: Could do with a bit of a hand. *(TO ALLIE)* Put the –

BUT SHE HAS ALREADY PUT THE KETTLE ON.

PRATT: Not too fresh is it?

PAT: Pretty hot.

PRATT: Yes, pretty hot.

PAUSE

ALLIE: Would you –

PAT GLARES AT HER. PRATT SITS.

PAT: Don't mind the heat.

PRATT: Me neither. (PAUSE) It can be a bit hard to put up with at night.

PAT: Doesn't bother me any time.

PRATT: No? No. I guess if you're used to it...

PAT: Yep.

PRATT: Although if you've been up here a few years it becomes a bit of a bore.

PAT: Don't find that.

PRATT: No?

PAT: Wouldn't know.

PRATT: Ah.

ALLIE: He wouldn't know any different. We've never been anywhere else.

PRATT: Oh? Right.

ALLIE: 'Cept once. Once Pat went away. He went to Wauchope.

PRATT: Well that's something.

ALLIE: Didn't you go to Wauchope Pat?

PAT: How's that brew coming along?

ALLIE: Oh the kettle hasn't boiled yet.

PAT: We'll have to look at the stock after this.

PRATT: Right. (PAUSE) What do you normally drink Pat?

PAT: Four-X.

PRATT: Aha. Why's that?

PAT: More malt.

PRATT: Buy it at Merv's?

PAT: No.

PRATT: Ah. Tablelands'

PAT: Mmm

PRATT: How's that?

PAT: Cheaper.

PRATT: In bulk?

PAT: Mmm.

PRATT: 'Spose if you've got a long drive it's worth it –

PAT: - to buy in bulk

ALLIE: - to buy in bulk

PRATT: Took me about two hours to get out here. That's since leaving the Mobil.

ALLIE: But isn't it a lovely drive? The hills always look so beautiful, especially in the morning. I was looking out at the hills earlier and thinking how beautiful our country can look at certain times. So often, the hills look like blue smudges, but then you get up close, and in the early morning or late evening, the extreme ends of the day, the hills actually develop ribs. And then they ribbon away again towards the horizon ending in a vaporous blue peak, releasing the plain and inviting your heart to expand and fill the vacating space.

PRATT: Right er...

PAT: I don't think we can wait for that kettle. Coming Bill?

PAT GOES AND STANDS BY THE DOOR. PRATT JOINS HIM. THEY LEAVE.

PRATT: 'Course he was okay. At least, I always thought he was okay. That was before we knew what we know now of course. But she was up in some fairyland. First chance she got she'd be standing there staring into your face, yabbering on about something. 'The hills! The hills!' Some rubbish about the bloody hills.

PAT RETURNS AND CUFFS ALLIE OVER THE EAR.

PAT: I told you, you bitch. I warned you. But you couldn't help yourself, could you? Christ, what's the use of me trying to keep the Code if you go and spill your guts out everywhere as soon as someone comes into the house?

PRATT: And you'd be sinking down into your chair, not knowing what to say back (with her staring in your face spouting absolutely nothing), just sitting there with this cheesy grin on your face, feeling like an idiot.

PAT CONTINUES HITTING ALLIE

PAT: You know what they say about us! They think we're strange enough without you carrying on. Christ! Couldn't you see the fear in his eyes? You could see the poor bastard trying to unscramble the sentences you spewed at him. He was panic-stricken, because you'd bombarded him with your...your –

ALLIE: Eloquence.

PAT: How dare you endanger us? Don't you remember the time those kids came out here and threw stones at the walls?

ALLIE: Stop hitting me!

PAT: I'll teach you, you bitch.

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LATE EVENING. ALLIE IS STARING OUT THE DOOR, RUBBING SOME BRUISES. IT IS A BEAUTIFULLY MILD DESERT NIGHT.

ALLIE: Isn't it lovely when it cools down? When it cools – and calms down. And there's no more wind. No more dust. And the night is clean and cool. Though bits of heat are still trapped in the branches of the trees, the fearsome enemy daylight is dying and his heat is bleeding from the stones. And you, you bastard, have stopped hitting me.

PAT: That doesn't happen every night.

ALLIE: It shouldn't happen any night.

PAT: It wouldn't have happened tonight if you'd behaved yourself.

ALLIE: I didn't misbehave.

PAT: Now come on –

ALLIE: I only spoke to him.

PAT: Spoke? You declaimed. You might as well have been spouting Shakespeare for the damage you did.

ALLIE: Nonsense! You just wanted to gag me.

PAT: For no reason?

ALLIE: For no reason.

PAT: Rubbish. Did mum ever talk?

ALLIE: The stars in the night sky look like the tail end of a brush-stroke – stipples sprayed by swirling bristles. Somewhere, far away, where we can't see, a giant painter has plopped his brush back into a can and is about to slap on another layer which another world will see. Somewhere else, far away, where we can't see, the people are dazzled by the opaque white of the night sky.

PAT: On the other side of the world, I believe, the night sky looks just like it does here, even though it'd be nice to think otherwise. It's true, or at least, what I saw at Wauchope leads me to think that this is the case.

PAUSE

ALLIE: Pat, why must you be so harsh with me?

PAT: Why do you think? To stop you. It seems the only thing that will stop you going on with this inappropriate gushing of words.

ALLIE: Inappropriate?

PAT: Don't you understand it depends on the time and place? Allie, you're thirty five years old and you still haven't learnt the pattern of our code. It depends on when and where you talk like that, and to -

ALLIE: Whom. Is it so important?

PAT: Do you want to arouse their suspicions?

ALLIE: Why does it matter so much?

PAT: Don't you know?

ALLIE: Is it because you can still feel mum and dad are watching us?

PAT: No! Of course not! You know it's not that. I mean, I haven't forgotten our parents' lessons. I still have the scars on my back to prove they made their point plain enough. But I know myself how dangerous it would be to arouse these people's suspicions. I have seen their hostility with my own eyes.

ALLIE: But what could they do?

PAT: Haven't you seen enough of their violence?

ALLIE: Their violence! That was only kids.

PAT: Not once, not twice – several times they came out here. Their parents must've known. Did they stop them? Don't tell me. You want to 'reach out to them'. You think these people have something to offer.

ALLIE: I don't know one way or the other.

PAT: But it is not worth the risk of finding out.

ALLIE: How can you be so sure?

PAT: After all, what can they give us? Don't you realise that most of them have never gotten their minds above nuts and bolts?

ALLIE: Maybe that doesn't matter.

PAT: Doesn't matter?

ALLIE: Maybe there are other things that they would have to offer that would be just as enjoyable.

PAT: You are crazy. Without any reason to hope that you are right, you want to give these people the chance to pry into our life.

ALLIE: We could gain something.

PAT: It's more likely we would lose all.

ALLIE: What would we lose? Every day I end up thinking life is shit. Do you know that? Stuck in this tin shed –

PAT: This is our home.

ALLIE: - talking to myself, looking at the same bloody bleached landscape –

PAT: This is our home!

ALLIE: - scooping out dust from the window-frames in handfuls when I dusted the day before.

PAT: How dare you complain?

ALLIE: What sort of a life for me is this?

PAT: Stop complaining, you ingrate!

ALLIE: I would rather be dead.

PAT: How dare you say that, you hysterical bitch! I ought to smack you across the mouth for such filthy thoughts. What's gotten into you lately?

ALLIE: That's how I feel.

PAT: Then pull yourself together.

ALLIE: I can't.

PAT: You must try.

ALLIE: Why?

PAT: (*SHAKING HER*) You must *try*. (*LONG PAUSE*) Isn't our time together in the evenings important?

ALLIE: I live for the morning and the evenings. It's the days I worry about.

PAT: But don't the evenings make up for them?

ALLIE: How do you mean?

PAT: The evenings are the best time of day.

ALLIE: But you've never minded the days.

PAT: No. But the evenings are best.

ALLIE: You say that? Why?

PAT: Because they're more...romantic.

ALLIE: Romantic?

PAT: Yes, they're the part of the day that adds some meaning to our daily life.

ALLIE: You admit that?

PAT: Yes.

ALLIE: What would you say it is that adds the meaning I wonder?

PAT: Your speech. Allie, I love the way you speak. I don't ever want you to stop speaking the way you do.

ALLIE: But you've just asked me to stop.

PAT: Not altogether. I just want you to be more... circumspect in company. Do you see the difference? We need to safeguard this secret? If people knew we had this thing – this source of enjoyment, they would take it from us.

ALLIE: I don't see why they would necessarily.

PAT: Because they hate us and they want to hurt us.

ALLIE: I don't believe that.

PAT: It's true. I've seen them. When I went to Wauchope. Evil in their eyes. Evil intention in –

ALLIE: - their hearts? What rot! The only person who hurts me is you.

PAT: Only for your own good. (*PAUSE*) I'm sorry. I'm sorry if I hurt Allie, but we're just barely tolerated out there and you must realise how precarious our existence is. (*PAUSE*) How's dinner going? Nearly ready? (*PAUSE*) So what will it be tonight? Tell me about the way the white ants build their mounds. Tell me about the way the night shadow draws a mauve lid over the day.

ALLIE: No.

PAT: Well just give a straight recitation. What about some Taylor-Coleridge, some Swinburne perhaps, maybe some Keats? Hmm?

ALLIE: No.

PAT: What then?

ALLIE: Nothing.

PAT: What?

ALLIE: Nothing.

PAT: Allie, you're not serious. No, you can't be serious. Changeover is too important, for the both of us. But you can keep it from me if you like. I'll enjoy anything you do. It's enough for me to bask in the tone of your voice, the way you alter rhythm and tempo of line. (*PAUSE*) I do appreciate your recitation Allie.

ALLIE: Not tonight.

PAT: But you know how we both enjoy it?

ALLIE: Not tonight.

PAT: Why are you being so silly? You know you won't be able to deprive yourself.

ALLIE: I deny myself every day.

PAT: All I'm saying is, put off enjoyment till evening. Save yourself for then.

ALLIE: I assure I will be able to survive the night without recitation.

PAT: We'll see.

ALLIE: You're the one with the problem.

PAT: It's just as important for you.

ALLIE: You forget. It's in my head.

PAT: And -?

ALLIE: - you can't read my thoughts when it comes to recitation.

PAT: I can do my own recitation. I've got stuff in my head: 'Of Man's first disobedience and the fruit...and the fruit...'

ALLIE: Not hour after hour.

PAT: '...Of that forbidden tree...whose...whose...'

ALLIE ...after hour...

PAT: '...first taste...

ALLIE: ...on your own.

PAT: '...brought Death...into the world...' You –

ALLIE: - bitch! Dad beat that out of you –

PAT: Bloody bitch!

ALLIE: - after he caught you trying to memorise that anthology.

PAT: You'd better shutup.

ALLIE: That's one survival lesson he taught you too well.

PAT: I'll kill you.

HE LUNGES AT HER AND SQUEEZES HER TIGHT. SHE STRUGGLES. AFTER A SHORT WHILE, HE BREAKS AWAY, HOLDING HIS NECK.

PAT: Oh Christ!

HE TURNS AWAY. SHE SLUMPS TO THE FLOOR

PAT: I felt that. It was awful. Like a ping in my neck, as if a string broke. Did you feel it? I went dizzy for a second. I didn't mean to squeeze so hard. I'm so...sorry. Allie, Allie! Stop clowning. Cut out the teasing. Allie! Allie! Get up.

HE TRIES TO REVIVE HER.

PRATT: 'Course no-one noticed for ages. Next time I went out there I thought he looked a bit strange but I was just glad not to have to bloody talk to her. Anyway, finally the cops went out. Didn't do anything but. Seems they'd never been in a census, so no-one'd notice if one of 'em was missing. And they figured the poor bastard had suffered enough. There he was, just walking around whimpering – like a bloody forgotten animal. Imagine, the poor bugger, out there, wandering around with a rotting body somewhere about, living like a bloody animal. No-one to talk to.

ENDS

G.K. Williams, Darwin © 1987