

"THE WORLDS, PERHAPS, OF SPIRITS"
The Sheridan Tapes - Season 01, Episode 01
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Written by

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Based on story and characters from
"Homestead on the Corner"
By Trevor Van Winkle

INT. OSLOW COUNTY PD - DETECTIVE'S OFFICE - DAY

BEEP. A small, quiet office, with only the sound of the A/C fan and the hum of conversation through the door.

SAM BAILEY

Detective Samuel Bailey, Oslow
County Police Department --
Homicide Division. Recording on
April First, 2019 at... 1:05 pm.

(beat)

Before we begin, there's just one
thing I need to say. I have no
patience for the unexplained, or
the things people call
"unexplainable," "supernatural," or
"paranormal." That's all just a
lazy way of saying that the real
explanation is too difficult -- or
too horrible -- for them to accept.
I don't have that luxury. My job is
to look the facts dead in the face
and find an explanation -- one that
will hold up in a court of law. And
the simplest explanation is almost
always the right one. There is no
place for ghost stories and "close
encounters" in this investigation
or any other.

(beat, then, slightly
embarrassed)

Hopefully that explains my --
outburst, when I was assigned the
Sheridan case. I'm sure that's on
my personnel file by now -- as if
it could get any more problematic.

(beat)

Anna Sheridan. New York Times best
selling author of -- you guessed it
-- supernatural horror. Missing for
nearly six months now. About the
coldest case I've ever seen. People
call her "the female Stephen King."
I haven't read any of his books
either, so that's probably true.
It's not like I hate her or
anything -- I'm not one of those
nutcases who thinks she's the spawn
of Satan or something like that.
I'm just not interested in her
work. At all. Which is entirely
irrelevant to my ability to solve
this case. It's actually better
that way. Given the...

(MORE)

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)
Circumstances of her disappearance
and the... Subject matter of her
writing, someone with a more vivid
imagination might decide she'd,
well... "Pierced the veil," so to
speak. Found the way to the other
side and crossed over.

Sam falls silent for a moment.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)
(statement of fact)
Anna Sheridan is dead. That's all
there is to it. There hasn't been a
new lead on her case in more than
half a year. And the sign on my
door says *Homicide*, not "mysterious
and explained disappearances,"
so... Anna Sheridan is dead. No
matter what her fans think. The
only questions that matter are who
killed her, how, and why. And
without a body, physical evidence,
or any record of her movements
prior to October 20th, I don't
think any of those answers will
come easily -- or quickly.
(beat)
What I do have -- the only thing I
have -- are the tapes.

Sam reaches under his desk and drops a heavy leather case
onto his desk.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)
Apparently Miss Sheridan started
using a cassette recorder to make a
kind of... Personal diary and
travelogue. She'd been using a
digital recorder up to that point,
but as far as I can tell, those
recordings went missing around
2009. And if she used it as much as
used the tapes, well...

Sam runs his hands over the cassettes in the case. They
clatter loudly against one another -- there must be a hundred
tapes in here.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)
...Her publisher's probably out a
few dozen novels worth of raw
material.
(MORE)

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

They've actually been hounding me for the tapes, saying they want to make an audiobook or some kind of podcast out of the recordings before they put out her final book. Apparently you have to publish *In Memoriam* very carefully. Too soon and it seems like grave-robbing, too late, and everyone's already moved on. I had to tell them more than once that as long as this investigation is ongoing, any "literary ambitions" will have to wait.

Sam pulls out a tape.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(SNIFFS)

God, these things reek of weed.

(beat)

So far as I can tell, these aren't in any kind of order. They're all labeled, but I can't make any sense of Sheridan's filing system -- if she had one. They all have a label with five numbers on them -- maybe a date-time stamp, or based on location or... Really, I can't tell if there's any logic to it at all. This one is the first tape in the first column on the left, but it's labeled 1-6-87-8-4.

(beat, with an edge of nervousness)

Only one way to tell, I guess.

It takes him a moment to clumsily feed the tape into the player.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(dismissive)

Geez, my hands are shaking.

CLICK. A crackling magnetic static plays through the speakers, and the voice has a low-fi quality when *she* begins speaking.

ANNA SHERIDAN

(staring up at the sky in almost breathless wonder)

The night sky really is beautiful out here.

(MORE)

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)

I suppose that's a universal constant -- maybe the only one. No matter how far away from home you are, no matter how different the constellations might look from where you're standing, you can always look up on a clear, dark night and feel like you're about to fall right into it -- the terrifying, endless expanse of nothingness. Strange how something so dead can be so beautiful. Then again, I guess it's not. Dead, that is. But one day it will be: one day all the stars will burn out, go dark and silent... at least that's what all the math says. One day, everything will be so dark and so cold that no new stars can ever be born. The old ones will blink out one by one, like candles going out, and then -- nothing. Silence. Darkness. Void.

(beat)

I wonder if there will still be ghosts out there when that happens? What happens when the planet is gone? Or will the Earth linger too, when it finally dies? A shadow Earth under a black and starless sky. Maybe that's what people mean when they talk about purgatory... or hell, maybe.

Anna falls silent on the tape, then gets back on track.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)

But that's just -- incidental. A passing observation. The night is beautiful everywhere, but especially here. I thought I wouldn't be able to handle mountains again after what happened in Wyoming, but it seems that wound healed faster than I expected it too. Still, I made sure I switched off my phone before I came up here, just in case. And I might have... Forgotten to tell anyone where I was going. I know I'm being bad, but they'd just insist on keeping tabs on me if I told what I was doing.

(MORE)

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
Besides, I can take care of myself,
and this isn't a business trip,
after all -- I'm just coming up
here to clear my head. To relax.
Although...

Anna breaks off. She thinks for a moment, then...

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
(shaking her head, trying
to get the idea out of
her head)
No, no, I'll leave it alone. I need
to... I mean, I really should just
rest. My last book tour was a
goddamn nightmare all to itself,
not to mention what I had to go
through to write it in the first
place. Still... No. Sleep. Need to
get some sleep.

CLICK. The tape stops. CLICK. The recording resumes.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
(lying down in her tent,
irritated)
I can't sleep. I just can't. It's
past two in the morning now, and
the moon has set. The night's just
about as dark as it's going to get
out there.

Anna considers, then sighs heavily.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
Oh, Screw it.

She stands up, sleeping bag making a sharp, vinyl fabric
sound.

CLICK. CLICK. Leaves crunch loudly under her feet.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
(walking, a little out of
breath)
I'm walking towards the old mining
camp now. Haven't seen much yet --
just a few rusted old cans near the
trail. Historical Litter. If it
weren't for the antiques act I'd
pack them out and toss them at
home, but they're artifacts now. I
wonder what will happen to our
garbage, once we're history?
(MORE)

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
 Plastic doesn't break down like tin
 or iron. Will it just be left there
 forever? Our legacy? *Look upon our
 works, ye mighty, and despair?*

(CHUCKLES)

I wonder how many unread Anna
 Sheridan paperbacks they'll find in
 the rubble?

Anna's footsteps stop.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
 (glancing around,
 recounting what she
 already knows to tape)
 Here we are. Santa Lucia
 Consolidated Mine. 1869 to 1901.
 The town sprang up about half a
 mile east of here. It was pretty
 quiet -- at least for a mining town
 back then, even if it did end up
 burning to the ground. A drunken
 blacksmith, apparently. Or was it
 the barkeeper? It might make an
 interesting short story, if I ever
 want to write a western.
 (experimentally, trying to
 muster the enthusiasm for
 it)
 Yee-haw.

She pauses, as though feeling the idea out.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
 (a little disappointed)
 No. That's not me.

She keeps walking.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
 (admiring)
 There's still a lot of old mining
 equipment around. A couple of tall
 wooden frames with metal spokes
 running from top to bottom -- they
 almost look like giant guillotines
 in the dark. A few tumbledown
 huts... mostly just the
 foundations, though there are still
 a few walls left standing. A cement
 chimney -- that must be all that's
 left of the foreman's cabin. And
 one big damn wheel, half buried and
 broken off its axel.

(MORE)

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
Guess I got here at just the right
time: everything's rusted to hell
and falling apart, but nothing's
quite gone yet. They sure built
this place to last.

Anna pulls out a small device and switches it on. It begins
to beep, slowly and steadily.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
(reading the display, a
little disappointed)
No magnetic or radio distortions on
the scanner... and it's chilly, but
not any more than it was on top of
the hill. A little warmer now that
I'm under the trees, actually.
Damn. I could've sworn I felt
something strange about this place
when I hiked through this
morning... Or maybe it was a
different part of the mine. This
place is pretty spread out. Hard to
tell this late at night, anyway.

Anna switches off the scanner. The beeping stops. The forest
is dead silent. She drinks it in for a moment.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
(INHALES AND SIGHS
CONTENTEDLY)
Just me and the dark. Perfect.
(beat)
Guess I'd better get back.

She turns to go, marching a few steps -- then...

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
(confused, and a little
unnerved)
Wait. No, that's not right. How
did... How did that get behind me?

She walks towards what she sees.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
(uncertain, trying to
phrase her thoughts)
Okay, umm... Description: a wide,
semi-circular cave entrance,
opening in the side of a low hill
that *I'm sure wasn't here before.*
(MORE)

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)

It's almost perfectly round, and the cave inside is just a straight shot back into the hill from where it opens up. I can see wooden braces every couple of yards, holding the ceiling up. This is definitely the mine... though I could have sworn it was on the far side of the camp, not the way in. Did I get turned around somehow?

As if in answer, a long, low wind gusts out of the cave -- sounding almost like BREATHING.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)

(disconcerted)

I'm just going to go back the other way.

She turns around and walk a few steps, then...

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)

Oh, you've got to be kidding me. Okay: the cave is still in front of me. I turned around 180 degrees, walked off into the dark, and... It's still in front of me.

(pause as she looks behind her)

And looking back, it's not where it was five seconds ago.

Anna pulls out her scanner and switches it on. The beeping is still slow and steady.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)

Still no change. But there's definitely something going on here. I never let myself get this turned around. Especially not at night.

(beat)

So let's try walking backwards. Just keep an eye on it.

Anna begins to march slowly backwards, away from the cave entrance.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)

(trying to keep her cool
by insulting the cave)

Oh, I see you. You think I'm still scared of caves, huh? Think you can freak me out?

(MORE)

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
 I'm Anna *Goddamn* Sheridan you old
 tin-pit, and I'm not going to be...
 OOF!

Anna is cut off as she trips over something and lands flat on her back. After a moment, she stands up, brushing herself off.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
 (annoyed, deadpan)
 Ow. What the hell was... Oh, great.
 I'm in the mine now. Perfect.
 Absolutely perfect.

She takes a few echoing steps towards the entrance.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
 Looking back the way I came and...
 yeah. No sign of the cave entrance
 I was *just looking at*. But I'm sure
 if I walked that way long enough,
 I'd find it again.

She pauses for a moment, then turns on her heels.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
 (a little shaky)
 Well, I guess the only way out is
 through. One more cave, Sheridan.
 It won't kill you. Probably.

Anna starts off down the passage, boots crunching on the stone.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
 (steadily counting off the
 seconds)
 One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six.
 Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven.
 Twelve. Thirteen... God, is this
 thing ever going to turn? Fourteen.
 Fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen.
 Eighteen. Nine...

Anna stops.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
 What the hell -- HELLO!

Despite the depth of the cave, the word doesn't echo back to her... not right away. There's nearly a five second delay before a faint echo of her words is heard, almost too quiet to register on the tape and sounding somehow *wrong*.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
(deeply unnerved)
I... think I'm going to turn around
now.

She turns and starts marching back up the cave. Then she stops.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
(confused)
Hold on. Where are the walls? Did
the cave widen out somewhere?

She turns around a few times, then stops.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
Calm down, Sheridan. Think. You're
just going to confuse yourself. The
map said the main tunnel ran
straight west into the mountain.
You have a compass, so just... go
straight east.

Anna pulls her compass out of a pouch on her belt, flipping it open.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
(relieved)
Okay. Now we're in business.

She starts walking.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)
(starting confident, then
growing nervous)
One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six.
Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven.
Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen.
Fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen.
Eighteen? Nineteen? Twenty? No, no,
stop. That's not possible. Is the
compass broken, or did I turn into
a side passage...

The wind rises again, like the breath of an enormous animal. A distorted static joins it, overpowering her voice. Then... CLICK. The recording cuts off.

A moment's silence. Then... CLICK. The silence of a mountaintop night.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)

(a little shaken)

Whoever -- whatever -- was in that cave, it definitely has a twisted sense of humor. Don't get me wrong, I like a good practical joke as much as the next person, but if it was just trying to mess with my head, I don't see why it...

(long pause as she
collects her thoughts)

I listened back to the recording from the cave. For some reason it cuts out just before -- well, just before things got *really* weird.

(beat)

I kept walking in the direction the compass said was east. I remembered the main shaft of the mine ran straight west. I must have read it on a plaque at the visitor's center. But thinking back to the map they had there, I'm sure the tunnel didn't go nearly that far into the hill. A few yards, maybe, and then it turned off... But not as far as I went. And definitely not as far as I walked when I turned around and tried going back. No matter how far I walked, I couldn't find the way I came in. I turned left, trying to find the wall of the tunnel. I thought that I could just keep my hand on it and follow it out. I walked for nearly a full five minutes before I gave up on that idea.

(beat)

I know that I saw the way out of the mine when I first came in. There wasn't much difference between the darkness outside the cave and the darkness inside, but there was a difference. When you spend this much time working at night, you learn to recognize those differences. But now, everything around me was the absolute, lightless black I've only ever seen at the bottom of other caves on the few occasions I've felt brave enough to turn out my light.

(beat)

No. That's not entirely true.

(MORE)

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)

I have seen it once before. In my mind. When I imagined what the night sky would look like without stars.

(beat)

My flashlight was still working. I could see the smooth, level stone of the cave floor under my boots. I ran the beam along the ground in all directions, slowly scanning further and further away from myself in every direction. It didn't make any difference which way I looked. It was kind of a cheap flashlight, to be honest: the beam widened and dimmed quickly as it moved away, then disappeared into the dark about thirty feet from where I stood. There was a small rock at my feet, so I picked it up and chucked it as hard as I could down the tunnel. It bounced and clattered against the stone for a long, long time -- then I felt something hit the back of my leg. I nearly jumped out of my skin, spinning around to see a small stone bounce one more time on the cave floor, then come to a stop. No mistaking: it was the rock I'd just thrown.

(beat)

I didn't scream then. I was scared, sure. Terrified, actually. Darkness and complete disorientation does a number on the human brain. I would know. But this time, it was a slower, quiet dread -- the kind that fills your chest inch by inch until you feel like you can barely breathe through it. I was trapped under the earth in some kind of infinite, repeating loop with no point of reference to ground myself. My flashlight was still on, but sooner or later it would burn out and leave me stranded in that tunnel, in the dark, forever. Or at least however long it took me to die of thirst once I'd finished what little water I had.

(beat)

For a minute, I wondered if that would really be so bad.

(MORE)

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)

It was a fitting way to go, given my... Well, everything. Personal and career choices, I guess you'd call them. At least it would be quiet. I didn't mind that I'd be alone -- I always expected that to be how I went. So eventually I just -- kind of accepted it. I switched off my flashlight, just to see what it would be like. A preview of my last moments, in a way. Knowing doesn't make these things any easier, but it does make them a little less frightening.

Anna takes a DEEP BREATH.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)

It honestly wasn't so bad. I blinked a couple of times, and once my vision cleared... I don't know why, but I almost felt like crying. It was the purest darkness I'd ever seen. I knew I was still trapped underground -- of course I did. The air was thin and had a dusty, chalky taste. Even so I felt -- free. Almost like I was floating, even though I could still feel the solid rock beneath my feet. Then I started walking. Obviously I didn't know what direction I was going -- I couldn't see my compass in the dark. But it just felt... Right. Honestly, it felt like I was going on instinct. It was about the only thing I could register at that point.

(beat)

I don't know how long I was walking: I couldn't see my watch, and honestly, I didn't want to. At first I didn't want to disturb that total darkness, but then I began to feel like if I checked it, or stopped, or gave in to panic, I would never make it out of that endless, looping tunnel alive. In the back of my mind, I heard something. No... It was more like I felt it, like the shape of the words was being pressed into my skin. *Not by sight. Not by sight.*

(pause)

(MORE)

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)

However long it actually took, it felt like I was hiking for hours. But as I walked, putting one foot in front of the other and just trying to stay on this one, thin path to freedom, I started to notice the lights. I never saw them appear -- I'd just look up every once in a while, and there would be another tiny point of light shining from where the cave ceiling should have been. They were all pale and cold, though a few of them had a faint color to them: blue or red, or even orange. Most of them were white, though, and seemed to be a long way away.

(beat)

It took me longer than it should have to realize they were stars -- probably because there were so few of them at first. But by the time I realized what they were, they filled the entire sweep of my vision, and when the milky way faded into view above me -- I almost cried again.

(beat)

Then I stepped in something soft warm that crunched a little under my boot. I jumped back and switched on my flashlight, horrified that I'd just stepped through some half-rotted *thing* -- it wouldn't be the first time. I breathed a sigh of relief as I realized it was just the remnants of my campfire, still smoldering. My tent was a few feet away, right where I left it. And that's where I'm recording this now.

Anna shifts in her sleeping bag, making the loud vinyl noise again.

ANNA SHERIDAN (CONT'D)

(tired, but content)

I doubt I'll sleep much tonight. That's okay. I just feel like looking at the stars for a while.

A CLICK, then a louder CLACK as the tape deck spits out the cassette.

SAM BAILEY

Hmm. Not what I was expecting. Honestly, I didn't know what to expect. I knew Sheridan was a bit more... Imaginative than most, but still, I hope the rest of these tapes aren't just her philosophizing while stoned.

(beat)

I've been to Santa Lucia a few times. It's a pretty big park for this part of the state. Lots of tall tales. And more than a few ghost stories about the mines. One of the rangers told me that the air currents in the tunnels generate a lot of infrasound, which probably accounts for most of them. And given Sheridan was almost certainly high when she recorded this... Yeah, I wouldn't put too much faith in her story.

(beat)

Not that it matters anyway. Not to this case. I just wish she'd mentioned the date: I have no idea if she recorded this right before she disappeared, or years ago. It is interesting to see how interested she was in space, though. I thought she only began dealing with the ISPHA people earlier this year. I think it was doctor Ren -- yeah, doctor Ren Park. As far as I can tell, he was one the last people to see her alive, but there wasn't enough of a connection to establish any kind of motive. Maybe I should take a second look.

(beat)

This tape shows what I already knew, though: Sheridan lived a... Somewhat nomadic lifestyle. Moved around a lot. Lived out of her van most of her life, for some reason. I don't know how much of it is in these tapes, and I don't know how much I'll be able to actually get out of them. But ours is not to question why, ours is but to digitize and stay the hell out of trouble.

(beat)

(MORE)

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)
I think that's why they really put
on this case -- just something to
keep me busy until...

The door to the office swings open.

BILL TYLER
(muffled, across the room)
Sam?

SAM BAILEY
(SIGHS HEAVILY)
Yeah?

BILL TYLER
They're ready for you.

SAM BAILEY
(bitter)
Great. Thanks Bill.

BILL TYLER
Hey, no problem! What's it all
about, anyway?

SAM BAILEY
(reluctant, but knowing he
can't hide the truth)
Commission Board. Some... Questions
about my last post.

BILL TYLER
(curious)
Oh? Where was that?

SAM BAILEY
(quietly)
Agate Shore.

BILL TYLER
(suddenly nervous)
Oh. Right.

SAM BAILEY
(grim)
Yeah.

Sam pushes his chair back and stands up, walking towards the
door.

BILL TYLER
(hesitant)
Hey Sam? I think you're still
recording.

SAM BAILEY

Oh. Right.

(to himself)

Let's get this over with...

BEEP. The recording cuts off.

END THEME AND
CREDITS