

Tonkawa Christmas / Lingam & Guy

TONKAWA CHRISTMAS

Tuc & Potak's
Winter Solstice)

By
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&
GERALD L. GUY

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Creative Commons No: 2111249896793
ISBN: 9798772831366

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Western Fiction Adventure

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PREFACE

Here's a news flash. When authors are not spending long hours creating plots and interesting characters, they are reading the works of other novelists.

Authors are no different than anyone else. We become rabid fans of our favorite authors and the characters they create.

That's how "Tonkawa Solstice" came about.

I became a Texas Ranger fan when I picked up my first Ash Lingam novel. I fell in love with Capt. Rowdy Bates, "One-Eyed" Jack Black and likeable Bill Vents.

I contacted Lingam when his Tonkawa series began because its originality was captivating, and I wanted him to know I was a fan. To my surprise, Lingam had read my McIntyre Adventure Series. A friendship developed and, before long, we began discussing a joint project. If you are reading this, you are aware of the results. The joint effort fell together in a matter of weeks.

To make it work, I developed the characters of Tommy Turnbolt and Delbert Elliot, two young misfits from a traveling freak show who are rescued by Lingam's "odd couple," Potak and Tuc.

Could there be an odder foursome?

Tommy and Del are white teenagers, one tall and one small. The Tonkawa cousins are seasoned veterans of the Indian Wars. Potak is a medicine man and Tuc is a fierce warrior.

The orphaned teens are naïve newcomers to the wild country of the American southwest. Their journey begins when a fortune teller informs them they can find their long-lost parents in Texas. Potak and Tuc are guided by visions Potak conjures up at will as the two, crusty old-timers search for their own destinies. Magic happens when their paths cross on a frigid Texas night.

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Ash and I hope you enjoy this latest edition of the Tonkawa saga as much as we enjoyed creating it. And Merry Christmas!

*“It is not in the stars to hold our
destiny but in ourselves.”*

William Shakespeare, Playwright

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CHAPTER ONE

Winter's Arrival

(Seminole Canyon, in West Texas in the panhandle)

In one afternoon, the temperatures dropped over thirty degrees. Surprisingly enough, sometimes it got extremely cold in West Texas. It wasn't every year, but upon occasion, the temperatures plunged to unbearable depths. The panhandle region, farthest from the Gulf of Mexico, experiences colder winters than the other regions of the state. Occasional wintertime Arctic blasts can cause thermometers to plunge well below freezing and bring snowy conditions. Something that Tuc welcomed in exchange for the normal Texan heat, but a climatic change Potak deplored. The warrior had his bearskin tied to his waist and only wore his buckskin shirt and leggings. He relished in the bitter cold.

Potak had donned every piece of clothing he owned. He had his bearskin wrapped around his shoulders and high over his neck up to his ears. This was the time of year and place where they would see important visions and perhaps show them the path they would follow in the Spring when a new year would come.

“By now, it must be around the time the Rangers called Christmas,” Potak said with a red nose. “In the Indian Nations, we observe the Winter Solstice, which is a reverent period since ancient times. For indigenous peoples all over the west, it is a time to offer gratitude, honor family and ancestors, and follow a ritual of observance of beliefs.”

Potak yawned as he had heard his cousin repeat the same thing year after year as though he might forget such an important event. He grumbled but held his tongue and forged onward as he enjoyed the bitter cold air against his face. A warrior could endure all types of weather. He never let such things affect his awareness and skills. He prided himself in being at his best in every situation, from snow

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blizzards to sweltering droughts and even sandstorms. He could navigate his way in each and was still just as deadly. His skills never faltered regardless of the climatic situation. He had even done battle in the middle of a hailstorm.

But Potak had been affected more and more by the winter weather with each passing year. He suffered from what white men called arthritis and stiff joints. The Indians called this ailment age. As they made their way down the Seminole Canyon, the old medicine man munched on herbs he had grown, which reduced the pain. He could only hope it would not snow before they got to shelter. Then, the cold in his feet would become unbearable.

Theological historians also place significance in the same time period during which the white men have Christmas and a vital component of holiday celebrations across America and even beyond. A few days before the Solstice, many American Indian tribes made prayer sticks in honor of an ancestor or native deity. They plant these sticks during the ceremony on the Solstice. Usually, these American Indian festivities occurred in the white man's calendar on December 21st or 22nd, depending on the astrological configuration and the year. Many tribes host dances, bonfires at sunset, and festivals, along with family programs.

Tuc and Potak were on yet another spiritual conquest as they climbed higher up the valley of Seminole Canyon. Potak had had a vision like many, and although Tuc argued as he always did, in the end, the medicine man got his way, and here they were seeking out the Tonkawa spirits. His vision said they should feel the cold. The medicine man knew immediately where to go. When they got to the sacred place, the vision promised the shaman he would have yet another that would clarify his presence.

Both men now bore bear skins to protect them from the cold as the temperatures continued to drop even lower. They had experienced such weather through the sixty years they have roamed the earth. Potak claimed this extreme cold happened every seven years. This was due to the fact seven is an auspicious number for the Tonkawa tribe. This was also so for other tribes across the west.

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These drops in degrees often coincided with the day the white men celebrate the coming of their God, the one they call Christ. They were in Seminole, Texas, just over 250 miles northeast of El Paso. This vast stretch of the state registered the lowest temperatures reaching as low as minus 22 degrees yearly, but temperatures as low as minus 30 degrees were not unheard of on occasion— like in which they found themselves now.

Neither Tuc nor Potak had a thermometer and had little notion of the scale of white man's temperatures. But even a fool could tell when the water froze, and it became dangerous for most living things. When the chill reached Potak's old bones, he sensed colder days were to come, and he knew well that the West Texas cold could be life-threatening if they were not prepared when it arrived in full force.

"I believe we better find a cave to hide in so we can build a fire out of the wind and warm our bones," Potak said as he looked at the gray sky and pulled his bearskin tighter. "We can use the old shaft we sheltered in the last time we climbed these canyon walls. I believe a blizzard is imminent."

"Then we'll have to go farther down the Canyon," Tuc replied as he tried to peer into the distance, although it was impossible to see very far in the haze caused by the extreme weather. "I remember the place you mean. It is a short time from here."

"We will have to move quickly," Potak said as he picked up more firewood and slipped it into Tuc's backpack. Tuc, in turn, put two more pieces in Potak's. They were both nearly full.

Tuc moved quickly through the afternoon. Potak swore under his breath every time he stubbed his toe on an ice-cold rock. In such temperatures, his bones ached and creaked with each step. Generally, in the heat of the Plains, he didn't notice his age so much. His joints didn't groan with each step, and he didn't feel his weight against his hips, knees, and ankles. Now he longed for his beloved warm weather. In such cold temperatures, his arthritis flared, and he became chilled to the bone.

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As they made their way toward their refuge and possible escape from the snowstorm, which would arrive shortly, they collected more firewood until their loads were just bearable. They remembered they had left ample kindling and wood the last time they visited, so it would be there were it needed on their next visit. This was over five years ago. So, few people lived or traveled in this area, and the cave they headed for was so challenging to find it was all but impossible to locate unless someone accidentally stumbled onto its location, or it were shown to them.

Finally, they arrived just below the rock face where their refuge would be found. They clawed their way upward as the broken path from five years ago had deteriorated but was still passable if one was careful. Once they arrived halfway up the face of the canyon, the opening became visible. There was a flat landing in front of the cave with signs of an ancient campfire from long ago and warmer times. As soon as they entered the dark, dank-smelling cave, Potak lit the torch he had prepared for this occasion. Then he went about busily making an enormous fire to warm his joints. He was chilled to the bone, and his teeth chattered. The fire sat between them and the cave's entrance. As he fumbled with his fire-starting kit, Tuc pushed him aside with a kind smile and nimbly sparked the ball of kindling to life and placed it under the teepee of wood. He blew on the glowing embers until they grew and burst into flame. In minutes the fire lashed out at the cold surrounding it. What was a dark, scary cave moments before became a brightly lit shelter.

By the time he was done, the entrance to the old cave shone out like a beacon in the night. The Tonkawa weren't worried an enemy would show up in such an out-of-the-way place and on such a dreadful day. Any intelligent Indian would be in this teepee with his woman keeping each other warm.

"You would have to pick the worst day of the year to decide to come here," Tuc grumbled. "You know how you suffer the cold. We should have made our sacred journey into Mexico, where the mountains are warmer."

“I don’t choose the time or place of visions,” Potak retorted. “The Indian spirits choose these times, and for them, it is the same if it is hot or cold. The Tonkawa spirits don’t feel the weather like mere humans. They often pick these times to play with us and see if we will commit a folly. Or possibly ignore their message. But it is not wise to let visions go untended. What if it is a warning of imminent danger in our future?”

As the fire began to roar, images moved in the deep crevasse in the cave's ceiling, and the bats started to stir and flap their wings in protest to the intrusion. They were reluctant to move from the safe place where they hid. But now, their dark lair had been violated with light. A few startled and flew for the exit but returned shortly to the shelter of the cave. Blasts of Arctic wind blew past the entrance. The Indians and the bats waited out the storm tensely. Both species were at the mercy of Mother Nature, and both welcomed the warmth provided by the enormous fire. Potak put some more wood on the pile as gusts of freezing wind blew past the cave entrance. With each passing hour, the velocity of the wind increased. Before nightfall, they saw the first snowflakes. They were like millions of small feathers floating down from the heavens to accumulate on the ground. In an hour, the landing at the front of the cave was covered in an inch of snow.

“If you make that fire any bigger, you’re gonna burn us out,” Tuc grumbled.

He had now removed his buckskin shirt due to the heat the blaze produced. Sweat shone on his aged skin. Hard muscle rippled below the surface. Potak sat so near to the fire he felt the heat roll over his face and body. He welcomed the fiery feeling. His joints began to loosen, and his teeth stopped chattering.

The medicine man pulled his perpetual coffee kettle from his backpack and filled it with water and placed it on a rock right next to the coals. In minutes the aroma mixed with that of burning wood in the enclosure. Soon each Indian had a hot tin cup of boiling coffee in their hands. The heat transmitted to the shaman’s old fingers and gave him even more relief from his arthritis.

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“I don’t like the cold anymore,” Potak said. “It appears that we are aging differently, cousin.”

“Use your ally, smoke, to take you to a warmer place,” Tuc suggested. He knew the power of the herbal mix his cousin carried in this tobacco tin. “Maybe it will reveal the rest of your vision. We have done as the spirits requested.”

CHAPTER TWO

Misfits and Marvels

(Somewhere in Western Texas.)

Tommy Turnbolt and Delbert Elliott were the original odd couple. One large and one small, they were two of the many misfits and oddballs who accompanied two dozen wagons across the Santa Fe Trail in the summer of 1878. The trek strained every resource available to the Marvelous Marvels Touring Company of Hannibal, Missouri.

Owner Ichabod Justice was in the process of relocating his touring company to California, the land of opportunity. He had grown weary of traipsing north and south annually to find suitable weather. The northern states were too cold in the winter and the southern states too hot in the summer. In California, the weather reportedly was fabulous all year long. Ichabod decided it would be the perfect place to set up business with his troupe of misfits, outrageous performers and oddities.

The entrepreneur had stopped his caravan for repairs at a junction along the Arkansas River, a spot where most wagon trains either turned west to go to California or south to New Mexico. Tommy and Delbert, orphans and misfits who were as different as day and night, did everything they could to ensure every wagon made the grueling trip across the untamed Kansas Territory. There were two dozen wagons in the Justice caravan when they left Independence, Missouri. They lost only two along the rutted path that led west. The trek strained and tested the stamina of the performers and their livestock.

If not for the efforts of the two versatile teenagers, several wagons would not have made it past the halfway point, especially the wagon of loveable Miss Hutchins. She had been a surrogate

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mother to the two boys who were born into the Marvelous Marvels family years earlier. Both their mothers had been performers.

Delbert was just a baby when he was abandoned and his care transferred to Miss Hutchins. Tommy came along a half dozen or so years later when he was nine years old.

Delbert, like his mother, was extremely short. He was ten years old before he was able to grab a piece of toast from a tabletop. Tommy was the opposite. He was an inch short of six feet and a month short of his tenth birthday when his mother disappeared. Delbert begged Miss Hutchins to take custody of the gangly youngster and his best friend. She did with the approval of Justice, who became a father figure to both boys.

Hutchins, like almost everyone in the Justice caravan, was an odd but loving woman. To say she was “obese” was an understatement. Ichabod promoted her as the “World’s Largest Woman: One Thousand Pounds of Feminine Fancy.” It was an exaggeration, as was most of the proclamations Justice made about his cast of Marvels, but she weighed every bit of six hundred pounds by the time the caravan began its trek west.

When the boys were just twelve years old, it was their job to transport her to the stage whenever the caravan pulled into a town for a performance. Miss Hutchins could no longer get along on her own because her legs could not support her massive weight. So, their roles changed. Tommy and Delbert became the caregivers, gladly reciprocating for the kindness Miss Hutchins who had shown them so much love when they were younger.

They were the perfect pair for the job, because Tommy was big and strong; Delbert was intelligent and good with his hands. It was he who devised the winch system that respectfully lifted Miss Hutchins to the stage whenever she had to perform. Tommy provided the muscle.

Now sixteen years old and skilled at a variety of tasks, Justice depended on the teens and a pair of aging roustabouts to keep the train moving westward on the rugged Santa Fe Trail. They used

their ingenuity and brute strength to solve most problems that popped up.

That's how things were among the carnival family. They cared for each other. Most of the actors were strange characters or odd looking. That's what attracted the masses to Ichabod's shows. They had been shunned or mistreated by the general public before they joined the cast of Marvelous Marvels. Among people of their own kind, they found love and acceptance. They no longer were odd because everybody in the troupe was odd. They were loved and appreciated for their uniqueness.

* * *

BY THE TIME Tommy and Delbert were teenagers, they fit in perfectly with the troupe. Of course, it was the only life they knew. They recognized they made an odd pair, one less than four feet tall and the other pushing seven feet. The boys had grown up together — in fact, they were inseparable — and never gave much thought to their difference in height because all of the Marvelous Marvels were different in one way or another.

Ichabod used his collection of marvels to attract customers to his shows that traveled from town to town and provided a peek at the stranger side of Mother Nature. When Tommy and Del finished setting up the carnival tents and stages, it was their job to drum up business for opening night. Tommy would carry Delbert on his shoulder and walk through the streets of the towns they visited. The diminutive Delbert would become a “barker.”

“Come one! Come all!” he called out in a high-pitched voice for all to hear. “Ichabod Justice invites you to be entertained by the Marvelous Marvels Touring Company this weekend.”

People pointed and whispered to each other at the sight of the unlikely pair, but the promotion worked. When the carnival opened for business, there always were long lines of curious onlookers, willing to pay a few pennies, a nickel or a dime to see something they could see nowhere else.

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Along with the world's largest woman, Justice's Marvels included a strong man, a fortune teller, a Persian queen, dinosaur bones, an albino Indian chief, a two-headed goat and countless other oddities and performers.

Tommy and Del became integral pieces of the crew that set up and tore down whenever Justice stopped to put on a performance. They also took admission, cared for livestock and helped wherever needed.

They were not performers, even though it was obvious they were misfits, one too tall and the other too short.

They were born down around Missouri way, in a dirty little hole called Hannibal. Delbert's mama died giving birth, as occurred all too often in the nineteenth century. Birthing children was not easy. Doctors were few and prenatal care was not what it is today. Twenty-five percent of the women who gave birth to children in the 1800s didn't survive the delivery. Estar Elliott, rest her soul, was one of them.

Delbert's mother, was only three-foot-six inches tall and was recognized as the "World's Shortest Woman." His father, Jack Elliott, was taller than six foot and one of the show's laborers. He raised the tents, cared for the animals, fixed anything that needed repair and took admission at many of Ichabod's shows.

Miss Hutchins said Estar was the kindest woman she ever met. Estar and Delbert's father instantly fell in love. Their height and weight differential never seemed to matter to the loving couple. They lived a normal live, despite being the only married couple in Ichabod's touring company. Miss Hutchins said seeing them together spread joy and hope through the rest of the entourage.

"I always thought if Estar and Jack could fall in love, I too might find a partner one day," Miss Hutchins explained. She didn't, of course, but she did get to care for a child when Ichabod placed Estar's child in her arms. She considered it a blessing and became the only mother the toddler ever knew.

When Jack Elliott lost his wife to childbirth he was more than heartbroken; he was distraught. It was shortly after that he ran afoul of the law and was incarcerated, a secret Miss Hutchins kept from the child. She told Delbert his father ran off because his son was such a tiny baby. He presumed the child would be a dwarf like his mother and the sight of him reminded him too much of his beloved wife. He deserted Delbert and the others without saying a word.

Tommy's upbringing was quite different than Delbert's. He had no idea who his father was, but his mother was one of Ichabod's top attractions, breathtakingly beautiful and Justice's one and only "Bearded Lady."

Most women consider childbirth a blessing. Not Tommy's mother. The vain and curvaceous Emily Turnbolt made Tommy call her "M" because she didn't want to be addressed by anything that indicated she was a mother.

"I never saw a mother who wasn't overweight and sagging in all the wrong places," M used to say. "I'm not, and I refuse to be lumped in a class of lesser women."

Tommy's mother thought she was better than everyone, because she made lots of money for old Ichabod Justice. She was an inch short of six feet tall, had sandy hair, blue eyes and the most shapely figure of anyone on the carnival circuit. She kept her beard neatly trimmed and, during her shows, let one lucky visitor give it a pull to prove it was real. When she bent to offer up her whiskers, she flashed cleavage that made most men drool.

Her beauty is what coerced so many men to spend a dime for a peek at her behind the Marvels curtain as often as five times a day. It never failed, when the carnival rolled into a new town that was short on available young women, strangers fell instantly in love with M, beard and all.

Tommy became an orphan at nine years old. Two drunken cowboys snuck into their tent late one night outside of Kansas City and kidnapped M. Tommy was there when it happened. He was tied and gagged so he couldn't make a ruckus and forced to watch as

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they manhandled his mother. He said the first thing they did was strip her naked and shave off her golden beard. She fought like an alley cat, Tommy said, because that beard was what put food on their table.

Years later, Tommy remarked about how beautiful his mother was without the beard. Of course, he thought she was gorgeous with a beard, too. She was statuesque, but not tall like Tommy. He figured he inherited his size from the father he never knew.

Delbert was shocked when he walked into the Turnbolt tent and found his friend tied and gagged, and his mother missing. Tommy never knew what happened to her. Was she taken far away or killed? Miss Hutchins said she suspected M was sold into bondage in a foreign land. She said something called “the sex trade” was big in the West.

Ichabod was heartbroken when M was stolen. He reported her disappearance to the local authorities, who sent out search parties but she was never recovered. Some of the performers suspected it was Ichabod who impregnated M, but he never showed any special attention to Tommy, before or after his mother’s disappearance.

Delbert was glad Ichabod did not leave Tommy behind when the caravan left Kansas City because the two boys had become best friends, even though they were as different as night and day.

BUY WINTER SOLSTICE