

'Outside the Shadows'
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The desolate streets of this rundown city were plagued with destruction; the hidden alleys and deep corners that harbour the dreary spectacles of the human race's most horrid actions. This particular bend of the city held a reputation of the lowest order; murder, rape, brutality and dereliction. I wandered this kingdom because I belonged to it, attracted to the darkness and suffering as the world had deemed necessary.

As I wandered I slipped into a nearly comatose state. It was all great until the labyrinth of my thoughts was halted by footsteps far too close for comfort. A being lingered behind me, merely a figure in the darkness, a paranoid spectre invented by my own insomnia riddled mind. I'd caught glimpses in the periphery of my vision and the constant drop of its footsteps shadowed me.

I muttered that it was nothing, assured myself that I was slowly, but surely, losing the meek grip on reality I held.

Nothing at all.

But the tapping hadn't stopped, I scoped the streets, no one. Nothing. It was always no one, always nothing. Merely my own footsteps. I called to the shadows, spoke aloud and cried for a reply, I was rewarded with only the wind and its visionless presence - a presence that has existed alongside me for months, perhaps even years.

In the final months of the year I continued my voyage with my silent companion, street to alley, corner to darkness, occasionally disrupted by the few who dared venture to this little hole in the city, the crater that the moon made and promptly forgot.

As I continue my expedition I duck between two buildings and find the dent in the wall that once I entered, the door I'd come through shuts firmly behind me. This prism leads the way to a dark stairwell rising into a thin white line of light after the darkness and as I begin to ascend I imagine my life without the realisations I've come to. Pointless and uninspired.

I've come to fully appreciate that we can't completely comprehend our own flaws, our own purpose. We struggle to see retrospectively with clarity of understanding and our lives are tragedies due to a single fatal fault. What truly binds us is our immaculate misconception: we're immortal.

My thoughts were derailed by the coin on the tracks that was once again those hurried footsteps not ten paces behind me. Upon turning swiftly to catch the culprit I was met with only the streets I know so well. Empty. They were always empty, after every turn, following every shadow; empty, alone. I couldn't help but question if my isolation was preferable to being in possession of all the things I'd ever wanted- material, emotional, psychological or have nothing at all and substantially, nothing to lose.

The glorious life one could live in the absence of fears and regrets is perpetually beyond my reach. Perhaps it's only in death that we find permanent companionship, in God or religion, spirituality, or just the ground that consumes us and remains our "final" resting place.

I falter on a rickety step and slip a few inches lower, it feels as if I've been climbing these stairs for years, following its endless spiral into oblivion. My mortality is weak, one slip, one step in the wrong direction could be my demise.

Suddenly, the inevitable becomes a harsh reality. Lingered on the outskirts of my conscious mind is my potential self, all I could be, immortal. This being is alien; it consists of my traits, lacking only the aspects that make me human- mortality, fault, and compassion- life. I journey with him, he is my shadow and he looks over my shoulder with judgement at every humane-inspired act that I commit.

My words have no sound in my feeble attempt to silence the critical nature of his presence; they resonate within me as I bite my tongue to the point of pain and tighten the countless binds that encompass me and hold me here as I secure my grip on the railing that borders my ascending path.

Here, where I've witnessed acts that would serve to disfigure the minds of stronger men than I, alter the perception of the most confident figure, this boundless prison is inescapable.

It's not that I've never held company with physical beings but rather that the few people I've conversed with, while confined by these ruined streets, have each met with a destructive end. I've been privy to their triumphs and downfalls, and, of course, my own. The choices I've made and the doorways I've passed without entrance. I've reached yet another, the dank stairwell I've climbed has led to a single door marked "*Emergency Exit*". After several seconds of applied pressure the door gives and opens onto a rooftop. I've unknowingly ascended a car park and reached its highest and final level. The cool breeze of the afternoon stings the skin of my face and I'm reminded of the season whilst I am thrust into a memory of a similar time.

It was an autumn, several years prior to this, when I came across a boy no older than seventeen, far from naïve. Identified by scholars as a child prodigy, a genius, he studied at university while his peers enjoyed their youth. After being, as many said, "Blessed" by his intelligence this young man couldn't bare his life of exceptionality. Two weeks after our meeting, in a feeble attempt to find some relief from his "blessed" life, plunged from the heights of the city, the bridge.

A monument that in its entirety is a connection from one solid plateau to another served as the platform chosen by a prodigal child as his means of escape. "*Happiness in intelligent people is the rarest thing I know*".*

I pitied and envied him. Pitied his dark perception of life, his gift cursed him. I envied his escape, not the means, the end.

My first steps onto the rooftop revealed what should be complete and utter isolation, for me however; things are rarely as they should be. Each step of my own is echoed in my shadows and when stationary they continue, they do not stop, they surround me like sharks circling prey. I am not afraid. I've experienced his torture so often it's almost cathartic, nearly tedious.

The position we hold in life is often frivolous and tenuous; simultaneously alone and haunted - an opinion shared with a woman whose melancholy perception of the world rivalled my own. She had lived. Not happily, not with content, but she had lived; travelled the world, saw the great sights, and was unimpressed. A wall flower, if ever there was one, who, from within the safety of her own mind, questioned all she had seen; the amazing successes, even greater tragedies, atrocious human tendencies and astounding compassion shown by a select few. Once a religious woman, now a

cynical recluse - not once had she found another individual willing to comprehend the thoughts churned out by her troubled mind. She was by no means overly-complex, she didn't speak in riddles and wasn't of an outlandish nature. She preferred solitude, went out of her way to achieve it. The last I saw her, she was euphoric, the state she so desired was only inches from her grasp. Its proximity brought more happiness to her well-worn features than I'd ever been fortunate enough to witness before. She found the isolation she sought and in it she found joy.

My shadow and I are alone once again, he is still beyond my vision but I catch his significant movements in the corner of my eye and move at a snail's pace to finally view this being that has allowed me no peace. As I finish my floating turn his figure evaporated in the wind that swept by capturing his essence and gushing through me. In this moment I swear we were one being. The monster had control and the fight in me waned as he moved with my body completely in his grasp, closer to the precipice.

We live as we dream – alone. The physical companions we collect are temporary and seldom sincere, they fail to surpass expectations. My dreams are filled with the solitude that I have sought in life and that has escaped me. I do not live one day without the ever present existence of my shadow, his constant foot fall and the fleeting glimpses he allows me. For once they have faulted, it is only my own footsteps, heavier than before and nearing the drop.

His existence is constant and yet provides me with no comfort. He lives as I allow him to, a manifestation of the monster I have the potential to become. I am both perpetually assisted and completely lacking any kind of relief. I am physically alone and never without beings that I can neither see nor control. Their existence is owed to my damaged psyche and each of them are released by each fall of my feet, I'm inches from the ledge.

My lack of company is tangible, but psychologically I'm never alone, it's not that I find comfort in something, someone - it's, quite simply, that I'm haunted, that my past never allows me a moment of rest that I do not deserve. I do not give nor offer selflessly as perhaps I should.

I take my final step and find myself at the highest point I've ever dared scale, my toes curl over the edge and I'm looming over the empty city that has been my home, only serious with the seriously deranged. To jump would be the ultimate test of my mortality. Looking down into the urban crevasse *I jolt forward.*

Catching myself as the elastic band that is my control snaps firmly back in place. I hear the footsteps I am so accustomed to trailing behind me almost twenty metres and stop. He is daring me to jump. On weak knees I ever so slowly lower myself onto the concrete, perched on the precipice.

It is the solution but for me it is too simple and somehow I am bound to this world as my shadow is bound to me. Peter Pan would chase his mischievous shadow to the ends of Neverland but mine is planted firmly beside me atop a deserted car park silently chuckling because as much as he is my torturer I'm masochistic enough to sustain his torment, even fuel it. Testing my immortality will have to wait; even here in this desolate place I am both alone and haunted, incapable of escaping my own psyche or finding refuge in my fleeting solitude. **Quoted from Ernest Hemingway*