

Shadow games

Chilies and soya sauce, noodles, sweet corn and frijoles wafted through the rafters. Parents had found a crumbled wooden slatted house in the suburbs. A blend of spicy richness stifled the air. Sometimes I just longed to run out the door, down the street and find a haven in McDonalds.

I sank into the folds of the bed, deep, loving, warm and smelling of old socks. My mother held me close, deodorant and maybe whiskey puffing my brows. We lay awake, awaiting, unable to sleep. The door shuddered. Bed creaked as she rolled over and held me closer. The light in the hall tripped on. My father's shadow loomed beneath the door frame. Mother sighed. Resigned. But she got up. Cold air hit me as she slept from beneath the blankets. She tucked me back in. Father was shouting about food. He'd be angry by this time, tequila calling. But mother would make sure I wouldn't be out there all alone. She could be punch bag tonight. I felt guilty but relieved. It was so much easier when she took it for me. I filled my head with the pillow and muffled out the thuds.

That hierarchy of death. Who goes first. Who counts most. How many hollow men does it take to fill a whole, how many shadows to fake a soul.

Javier had been a savior. God he was handsome. And rich as well. A Roman face, long nose, slight hair down the nape of his spine, could have been from any place in Europe if it hadn't been for his name. But tribes do mix; do blend as they bleed. Or maybe they don't. Continents formed over time. Maybe they will just keep breaking up. I was no geologist.

Being a spy was actually quite easy. All you had to do was keep out of the shadows, make sure your own was never seen, that you were only half the person you pretended to be. I'd learned early. Seen everything from behind closed doors, disregarded messages on the mobile, undeleted links on internet explorers. I knew what father was up to, but couldn't quite manage to tell mother. I knew about her drinking, but let father beat it out of her. The nights

were long, dark even in summer when the light curtains let the flimsy air in to wake me before dawn had completely established its presence. Owls hooted, then faded. I knew where they hid. Tracked everybody's secrets. Or thought so. That's what you had to do, growing up in a house where nobody seemed to speak the language of the land.

The room spun with the bang. I felt the door collapse and the heavy boots trample it into dust. There was no time to wake up or stand decently. They dragged me from the bed, balls shriveling in icy fear. Flung me to the floor, granite splinters choking my face. There was no breath left to scream.

I think I groaned. They smacked me one on the head so I stopped.

I don't know how so many of them managed to fit into the tiny bedroom. The mattress collapsed under their force. The torches hurt, searing searchlights too focused to allow even a shadow.

Hands grasped me. Up against the wall this time, pistol digging into the base of my neck.

"Fucking bastard."

The voice rasped with a hot coldness.

"Types like you get us all into trouble."

I searched for the courage to scream.

Shit hit the pants.

Desperation stank. Perspiration sank cotton into a leaden weight, enough to sink your feet as if embedded in plaster.

My nose was slammed to the wall in response. I felt it crack. Or maybe that was the brick. Flattened against the brittle paintwork my lips spliced into a grim smile as they were embedded into the concrete.

"Light" I pleaded. "Light". I just needed a shadow, a feeling of being alive. I had that hollow sickness in my stomach.

They jammed a heavy black sack over my head in response. They tugged it down to my knees. Wrapped in a motionless darkness they pushed me down the stairs to the street. Blind, stuffed into a cloth sausage, unable to do more than stutter, they led me away like a fresh corpse still bleeding through the nose, twitching after being cut in half.

All that remained were the shadows, between reality and motion, a self concept and a physical response, the government and a serf, both deluded, colluded. The shadow was the problem. If it could be avoided, stripped away, buried on a treasure island where no one would ever dare defile it, that would be peace, a world where life was black and white and not the shades that interweaved between. It was all so prickly. That is the problem when pairs don't work. My parents showed me the path. Javier led me down it.

Javier had turned up out of the blue, a 404 really. It was a lonely bar where stragglers strayed in search of solitude. Making conversation was an exception. The barman rarely nodded. The beer stank, dripped dry. An occasional whiskey sparked a nerve.

Then the channel changed, baseball faded into hockey and we were chatting, smuggled cigarettes outside, trying out a risky kiss. We seemed to have more in common than solitude. We wanted to share it.

Hands exchanged fondles as keyboards exchanged thefts. In fact, it became difficult to separate one from the other, or who was passing secrets to whom. Javier was a journalist and knew a bit about tapping phones and other devices. Finding out your favorite actor had secretly married a dog was frightening. But it made sex hot. And one secret fed the next. As we grew into a relationship Javier told me all the gossip about our friends and others.

Javier had an apartment with views of the park people committed suicide to pay for. His family ran a bank or something similar. His clothes whiffed of wealth, his smile of perfectly arranged teeth: nothing out of place except a desperate need for affection or simply knowing everything about everybody who might deny it. A long way from an immigrant's fumbling accommodation.

Javier could easily have kept me. That was what I thought, but Javier wanted me to keep myself. You didn't need anything more than an internet connection Javier pointed out, naked, rung dry, ever so pretty, stretched out on a bed that had never lacked fine linen. Bodies exhausted, minds overflowed.

"Get out there, make money, keep yourself."

Plans split emotions like quarks hitting plutonium.

It was remarkably easy to find work posting fake posts, false reviews, abridging comments, wikipееing people out of wiki. For all its appearances of openness the net is little more than a web of deceit and everyone is the centre of a spider feeding out deceptions, weaving a chainmail that is built not to protect but to allow arrow shafts through to the heart. A provocative review here, a discouraging comment on a set forum, destroy a devastating thread with a couple of closely connected words which lead the conversation down safer paths, more easily accepted ideas: falsify a product, sell another. That was life in the cloud, hustlers in the poorest area of any city that had learned how to survive. Pimps glowing in the sidelines.

I'd learned the online low-life routine and knew it was as greasy, as profitable, as dangerous as any knife wielding gangster's hovel. The same principal. No matter how you played it there were few winners. But everybody fought on. All those parking lots, those shabby one bed roomed apartments were owed by a few selected mongrels, and they all had shares in Google. Pimps in the night, they came and gathered their returns, then hid them on off shore accounts in

islands normal people never really knew existed. Peter Pan was alive and well. I'd grown up with him.

The Chinese grew to adore me. I was soon a secret favorite when it came to disrupting online challenges in forums and social networks. I had that knack of diverting, of sending the subject astray without anyone noticing. Modern camouflage. Money swarmed in. Javier loved me.

I was special. My parents had made me that way. How they'd met was anybody's guess. We didn't talk about things like that. Our family history was taboo. My father had slipped over the border and made himself legal. My mother had nearly been interned during the war. Too young to really remember Hawaii but too livid to stay within her own homespun community. Her offspring were a complete mess. A mish mash of identities, hanging out to dry on lines that kept moving with the wind. I hadn't seen my brother and sister for years. Wouldn't recognize their images shuffling in the breeze. A Spanish speaking native speaking Chinese was something of value, a life's experience of knuckling down and learning the rules. I was making it pay off.

Apart from the sex the great thrill lay in the knowledge that nobody else knew. Nobody had a clue what I was up to.

It took time for me to realize everybody always knows. Your shadow trails behind if it hasn't already gone ahead. The sun never lies and you cannot live forever beneath the moon. I think I taught that to Javier. Sometimes I think he understood.

Subterfuge of course becomes a habit. And not just online. When Javier found out about John, I thought it might be like a joke but then he hit me. And that was when I started taking it seriously.

My mother would have agreed. She knew what it was like to have a black eye on Christmas day and Chinese New Year, and the shame of having no one to share it with. Some secrets should never be shared. Javier had wanted me at

home, cheap, online, earning, but it was equally easy to find some leisure time and seep out the door and find a trust in the dark. John. But there were so many Johns. Javier only needed one to black and blue me into a new hue. And then he couldn't stop. Which made sense because neither could I. There was always another excuse.

It was bigger than a car as I had to step up into it. It howled with diesel, the purr of a well honed trunk. Their boots kept me on the floor. I could sense check points. Nobody shouted Charlie. Everything was under control. Except it wasn't. They'd come for me and I don't quite understand why.

"You compromised our troops."

"All I did was tell them what was going on."

"Exactly."

"That's what we mean."

The beating continued, but it always had. My father had done it. Javier had done it. For no reason. Or maybe I'd deserved it all along. I could have told Javier the truth. Or maybe not. My father wouldn't have listened. It would have led to the same result. They'd wander home at nights and with the lights off he would suddenly let it all flow and as curtains sailed and shadows whispered it was like dad flaying from his grave, my mother missing, no longer up to providing a protective wall. None of them knew what was really going on.

I sweated in the bag, swooned, stifled. The car retched. Smell of gas. I tingled in the fear they would burn me alive.

But I was still worth something. Could tell them what I'd stolen. What had become public domain or what still could. Beneath all the blows they knew they couldn't wipe me out, that my hard disks would never be completely clean. I

was the only one who knew the whole truth. That was my ultimate secret. The shadow that protected me from oblivion.

My nose was bleeding, my shoulder broken. It was all too real to be true. Good spies don't die, they fade away, unknown, neglected, unclaimed. I just wished I had it clearer who I was spying for. The money didn't seem to matter anymore.

Dead bodies filled my mind. Javier knocked me out. My father surfaced through the blur.

Mother would have understood. She'd been through the mill, a mine of useless information. Submerged.

"Who the fuck are you seeing now?"

My father's fist in her eye.

"No one I promise."

"You fucking promise."

A punch.

"You're a lying bitch."

My father's fist puncturing an eyetooth.

"You bitch."

Secrets secrets secrets lies lies lies. Everyone prickly, hollow underneath a mound of fear, swallowed up by the sensation of being out of place.

Father fumed, smoke bursting nostrils, a dragon on fire, butts sizzling unsquashed into the floor.

Spies are slippery, living without shadows while endlessly creating illusions to replace them. It was all very cloudy. Like computing, always up in the air. I'd spied on my parents as they did things I had never learned to understand.

Javier thought he knew all the tricks. You don't always know who you are hiding from. Javier had never known about John. But I couldn't help teasing him. That was why he had broken my nose.

Always somebody beating the shit out of me.

I'd never done anything. That was my secret. Only Javier knew. That was all he needed to know.

My parents had moved in, moved over and finally moved on. That was an immigrants life, a hierarchy of death. You could see it every day in the news: some people's lives are valued more than others. That's why I liked to spy, stir the shit, switch on the fan and watch it hit. Something might stick.

They refused to turn the light off. It swung overhead. Then they poked it in my face. They'd stopped the hitting. My shoulder had grown back. As the light came closer my heart rose. I sensed the dark stain beneath the shiny table surface and bravely stared defiantly into the light. They'd been proven wrong.

I watched the confusion fill their faces and then panic as they swiveled the spotlight from all angles, trying desperately to prove themselves right. I sat firmly. My shadow was going nowhere. It had emerged safely. Just beneath my feet. Almost where it should be. Truth. But they hadn't noticed.

So they released me. Not a word of apology or forgiveness. But I was used to that. They'd let me free because they had forgotten the obvious, that they were right. It had been my shadow all along.

"We're just doing our job."

"Come on man, give us a break. How much longer do we have to last?"

And they didn't have the broken bones. Curious how tasks fanned out. That was the problem. They were bored with their lot. Punch drunk. They'd been told to get rid of me. Easy sometimes, a bullet in the head behind an olive tree, ask Lorca, or the mud of a football stadium turned red under pressure of a Pinochet.

Let go Scott free. They couldn't be bothered any more. I was wasting their time. They had another case. I had nothing left to sell once I sold Javier down the line.

Let them bust him. Bruise him up. I didn't feel guilty. I'd fooled him from the start so let him take the final rap. There would be other Johns and other Javiers too. This was the black and white world where everything ended up grey. They really needed to take better care of the shadows they cast. They can't all be hidden under the carpet. You have to watch out for who is cleaning the floor. I could invent another Javier any day. Not that difficult.

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