

Shadow

{air'-i-buhs - Deep blackness, shadow. }

Erebus appears again with Aither, but now the characters are much different. This is an expansion of the treatment into a short story, with many changes.

The forest woke and lay sullen, lethargic under a cover of leaves and moss and rotting wood. Watchful and quiet in the dim. For a while nothing stirred. Then a shadow began to move, out from the darkness and wet leaves and gloom, toward the light that bordered the woods. A tinkling sound like breaking glass followed the movement, a constant single rush of noise without interruption. It stopped, pausing near the edge of the forest. It waited at the verge between the dark and the light, looking out at the old farmhouse on the other side of the hayfield.

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I brought my wife and two children to this worn out old farm many years ago, My soul drove us here. Wounded and scared, fleeing from the city, danger and death. On a Sunday afternoon drive out from Manhattan, we happened to meander down the narrow road and saw the house sitting up on a small rise of ground, surrounded by fields. A For Sale sign leaning against a tree in the front yard appeared as old and weather beaten as the house.

I simply fell in love with the place. Across the road from the large house loomed dark mountains that changed from a calming green at high noon to dark blues in the afternoon as the shadows deepened. Behind the house were fields of tall grass and clover. Beyond them lay the dark dense forest. I remember feeling at peace as I stood in the side yard, between the house and the barn. I sat down in the grass and looked up at the wide sky, beautiful and open from the mountain top to the opposite horizon.

No object would fall out of it without warning. I knew nothing was aimed at me, of course, but the memory of seeing a 767 tear into a skyscraper on a bright and beautiful morning in September had forever dispelled my notions of safety. I needed to be out in the open and away from the claustrophobic canyons of the city.

My wife, Ruth, had reservations about living so far from what we call civilization, but I knew she would love having a garden down in back of the house, and walking through the fields that smelled sweetly in the spring and were golden colored in autumn. She had been an avid hiker before the children were born and loved the outdoors.

“You’ll just love wandering in the woods out back,” I told her. “We can run around bare-ass naked out there while the kids stay in their rooms doing homework.”

“Uh huh,” she said.

The loose green shutters on the house and the decrepit, leaning red barn filled my heart with a pastoral joy that couldn’t be found in the city. Crowded, hot sidewalks and blaring noise would soon drift away into nothing but a sad memory. I told the kids they would never miss Best Buy or Target. As for me, in my line of work, it didn’t matter where I lived. Copy editors do it through the mail. I convinced myself the four of us would be a closer family here on the farm, happy and fulfilled, spending our days in idyllic surroundings that fostered peace and contentment. Yeah, I know. But I did believe it for a while.

We’d been here only a day when my daughter’s two month old kitten disappeared. Here one minute, gone the next. Eleven year old Hannah called and called for Munchie all day. The poor kid had left her friends and school in the city and now her little pet was missing. Together with her older brother, Marcus, we walked across the fields and into the strangely dark woods, yelling out for the cat over and over.

Though I’d had seen my share of the outdoors, hiking and skiing in the Rockies out west, I can tell you I did not like it back beyond the field in the woods. Under the pines and among the musty, close-grown hemlocks, it felt like a

primeval forest. Dark it was, and as quiet as a mortuary. In the dimness, we came to a small creek, its flow weakened now in summer, the edges green with a sickly looking film of slime. The silence, I realized, wasn't like the normal furtive whisperings of a vernal wooded glen, alive with small critters and the occasional zephyr in the tree tops. Instead there was simply an absence ... nothing, not a sound. No birds or skittering squirrels. No breeze or movement. It was dead.

"I don't want to go any farther," said Hannah. Her brother chided her, "Don't you want to find Munchie?"

"We're going back," I said. I guess I needed Hannah's fear to excuse my own. I had begun to feel rattled by the ominous shadows. "We'll search for Munchie again ... later," I said. Flustered by our walk in the woods, unwelcome memories came back to me. I wondered if I would always feel afraid of my own shadow.



We crossed the hay field, high-stepping through the tall grass. Marcus stopped and pointed toward the barn.

"That's the biggest, blackest dog I've ever seen," he said. I

followed his stare to a large dark beast, feral and sinister, lying on the side lawn, halfway between the barn and the house. We moved closer and I kept the kids behind me as we approached the massive creature. The dog was rippled with muscle under a sleek coat of short black hair. Built like a steamer trunk with 4 legs, it had an immense head and mouth with large teeth. This animal could dispense with me in a heart beat and I would be no protection for my children as I lay on the ground with my throat ripped out. I edged closer to the dog. I could see a substantial amount of intelligence in his eyes as they darted attentively from me to the children to the line of woods behind us, across the field. Kneeling down as in submission, to not show any aggression, I put my open hand toward him. His tail wasn't wagging and his jaws were closed. I didn't like the power I saw or imagined in his stance and I began to feel

frightened. He looked past me and then rose up a couple of inches to a half crouch, fully alert. I put my palm up, like a dog trainer does, to signal him back down.

Without taking my eyes from the dog, I addressed Marcus and Hannah softly as they stood behind me, "Kids, walk slowly into the house. Don't run."

"But why, Dad, we want to see -- "

The dog exploded, coming off the ground straight up, fully five feet in the air, it seemed. With a deafening roar, he shot by me before I could turn and scream to the children to run. No need. The beast was past them and heading across the field toward the forest before I got a sound out.

Something moved out where the field met the woods, just inside the line of trees. Damn! It looked like a woman! Well, someone wearing a dress, anyway. Then she was gone and the monster dog stopped his headlong pursuit before he could enter the woods.

Quickly we ran inside the house, through the kitchen door, slamming it closed. I wondered if the dog belonged to a neighbor. I hoped it was passing through on its way to the Arctic, or somewhere far away. Strangely, the kids were unperturbed.

From time to time through the evening, I looked out the window into the side yard, but the dog was not there. Later, getting ready for bed, I turned the television off and went to lock the side door. Looking out, I could see the huge animal sitting majestically near the barn, his eyes gleaming in the outdoor floodlight.

The next morning, Ruth asked, "Does Erebus live in the barn?" Asking her to repeat herself, I discovered she was sure either the kids or I had mentioned the dog's name. We couldn't spell it, but sounded it out (air a bus) until our trip to the library the next day, Saturday. I was sobered by the quick lesson in mythology that morning. Son of Chaos, the shadow of darkness, Erebus. As we drove home, I thought of Jung's definition of the Shadow. The part of myself I

resist owning. The side of me pushed into darkness. The beast I didn't want to meet.

"Dad, do you think we'll ever find Munchie?" my daughter asked from the back seat. I was quiet.

After a moment, Marcus said, "I don't think so. When Erebus came in the kitchen last night and sat in the corner, he let out a huge burp." Hannah wailed.

"The dog came in the house?" I asked. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"I don't know. It's was just our dog coming in." "What do you mean, 'our dog.' Why did you let it in?"

"I didn't," he said, "Erebus was just there, sitting in the back corner of the kitchen."

Not believing him, I said, "Don't let him in again."

Hannah pined away for Munchie. She worried about the cat and would not be easily dissuaded from finding her pet. Unknown to me, my daughter was beginning to look everywhere, while I pushed it all from my mind in denial of what I knew would eventually happen. Her search would widen around the property over the next few days and eventually there would be nowhere else to look but in the dark forest.

For the time being, Hannah searched in the barn. Munchie could have been anywhere in the old structure ... up on a beam, under a floor board, behind bales of hay. Hannah enlisted the aid of her brother from time to time, but he was more interested in playing with Erebus, who everyone in the family found to be a wonderful dog and pet! Not me! I continued to resist their efforts to have the beast come and live in the house. Marcus pointed out the very few times Erebus had been inside, he took his place in the kitchen by the back window, as though he was very used to the spot. I was not moved by settlers' rights, especially when the settler weighed more than me.

Saturday afternoon found me up in the attic, stumbling around in the half dark, guided by the light of only a small window. The old man from whom we bought the farm, found dead of natural causes out back before our arrival, had

left some stored items in the attic. "Please get rid of the stuff," my wife said as I headed toward the attic. "Take it to the dump." But I couldn't just throw someone's memories on the garbage heap. I thought I might find a few useful items and lighten the trip to the dump. I began the clean-up by first lugging small occasional furniture and luggage down to the truck. Then men's suits from the 1940's got hurled down the attic stairs. Over near the chimney, a photo album caught my interest. As I opened the cover, dust blew up into the column of sunbeams streaming in through the dirty window.

The pictures were obviously taken over many decades, beginning sometime before the 1930's. Families were caught by the camera in poses with friends and relatives on the grass, near the old well pump, in the barn's doorway, and on the front porch. As time went by, men and women and children could be seen standing near autos in the widened dirt circle that became the driveway. The house and barn remained pretty much the same, except for the addition of a side porch, possibly in the 1940's, judging from clothing styles and the automobiles. As my eyes moved over the photos, my breath caught and I felt as though a vise grabbed my chest. In many of the photos from over the past 80 years, Erebus stood, large and threatening. He looked no different than when I had seen him an hour before.

As menacing as Erebus appeared in all the snapshots, none of the people were concerned. In fact, it wasn't clear they even noticed him standing over to the side near a tree in one photo or to the rear of a group in the next picture. It was like looking at a photo of a family with a live alligator crawling up behind them. I wanted to shout at the photos, "Get away from him. Can't you see he's dangerous?" But the dead people in the images didn't sense what I could feel. Except for one.



Across the front porch in a photo was a group of men and women. Erebus sat at one end, exchanging a stare with a young woman at the other end of the porch. She gazed at him with intensity and ardent dislike. Maybe she alone recognized the animal's malevolence. Something was familiar about her, but I couldn't quite bring it to mind.

After a few minutes, I tore my eyes from the picture and turned the page in the album. Across a sepia toned photograph, scrawled in a child-like hand, was the inscription, "This is Erebus' house." I slammed the album closed. I wanted to deny it, but I was coming to believe that Erebus had always lived here. He may have forever inhabited this moldering farm house. For all I knew, the dog stood guard on this piece of ground long before the sawyers wrested the lumber from the nearby forest.

As we got ready for bed later, I began to tell my wife about the photos of Erebus. "Stop it," Ruth said, "you sound like a crazy man. The dog is fine. He's gentle and he'll be a great pet. "He's evil!" I shouted. "You're crazy! Why are you so afraid of that dog?" I could think of nothing to say other than, "I am NOT afraid of that god damned dog!" I said it so forcefully, I almost convinced myself.

On Sunday, while Ruth and the kids were in town shopping, I noticed Erebus had left his position out near the barn. He had lain in that spot most of the weekend, rising occasionally to run down through the field and stand looking at the line of woods, as if on guard. I wondered where he had gone, and hoped he wasn't inside the house.

Looking out the kitchen window, I saw a woman walk out of the woods and cross the field to the house. Her long ochre dress dragged in the high grass, and she held the hem up now and then, revealing her bare feet. She came around the corner of the house and stood at the open side door. The bright sun illuminated the door screen like a large theatrical scrim and silhouetted the woman's features, framing her in the doorway.

The sunlight showed through her thin dress, revealing her legs. A phrase from my high school days came to mind about legs that "went all the way up." I stood for a moment, gazing at this female apparition.

At the sound of her knock, I came abruptly out of my reverie and went to the door to welcome her into the kitchen.

"I am Aither," she said.

I offered her a seat and we spoke for a few minutes like new neighbors do. But as I now think back on it, I did all the talking. She offered nothing about herself and gave me only a slight smile. She didn't glance around the kitchen with interest as a woman might when entering a strange home. Rather, she looked impatient and expectant.

Aither had a lustrous ivory complexion. She was a natural beauty with deep, blue eyes. A fine figure showed through her dress, which did nothing to rein in the movements of her body beneath the thin cotton. She was one of the most stunning women I had ever seen. Her presence was very intense, even from across the table. I found myself uncomfortable and I sat



back, as one might move away from a hot stove. I couldn't keep my eyes from roaming over her features. I felt embarrassed and hoped I wasn't leering at her. Soon my nervous monologue stumbled to a stop. I looked down at my hands and then back up at her face. Her expression of polite interest hadn't changed.

I was about to ask where she lived, when she broke the short silence.

"I've come for Erebus," she said.

"Oh, you're the dog's owner," I said.

A quizzical look passed briefly across her face. It softened to a smile as she looked over my

shoulder. When I turned to follow her gaze, Erebus stood in the doorway from the living room. I stopped breathing.

The huge dog bolted through the kitchen to Aither, brushing by the old pie safe and almost toppling it over. He might have jumped on her lap, had she not thrown her arms around his neck, as if hanging on for dear life. I sat frozen through the melee. It took a few moments for me to realize this was a joyous reunion of friends. Aither's face lit up with pure happiness and she hugged and petted and cooed the dog. After a few minutes, Erebus began to calm down, breathing heavily, tongue hanging out and tail wagging back and forth as it banged against a table leg, moving it a fraction of an inch each time.

Aither could see I was in a state of shock when she looked up at me. She continued to calm the dog, laughed and said, "My better half."

Then she stood to go.

"You have one." she told me.

"Yes, I do. Her name is Ruth and she's with the kids in town."

"No, I meant ... an Erebus."

"We had a kitten...." I trailed off.

"Yes," she said.

"... should I get a dog?" I asked, lamely.

"What you're looking for is in the forest," she said.

"No," I said, "what I'm looking for are some answers. Who are you and who is this dog? There are pictures of him in the attic going back some eighty years!"

Her smile faltered, but not completely.

"You need to understand yourself first," she said.

She walked over to the kitchen door and then turned to look at me. At that moment I recognized her.

"You're in the photos, too," I said, "the only one looking at Erebus."

"Angry," I added.

"No," she said, "frightened."

"Of what?" I asked.

"My shadow."

Aither walked out the kitchen door with Erebus and together they headed to the forest. I watched them cross the field. When they arrived

at the tree line, Aither went on alone and Erebus turned back to come and stand by the kitchen door. Hesitating, I let him in and he went to the far corner of the kitchen and found a place under the back window that overlooks the field and the forest. That evening I put an old blanket on the floor for him. He has seldom strayed from there. I never mentioned the visit to Ruth. I didn't know how.

Hannah morosely nibbled a piece of toast the next morning while she sat at the heavy old kitchen table, on which I was sure a million meals had been served and probably almost a hundred babies were born in the last century. "Dad, can't we go back out in the woods and look for Munchie?" she asked.

"Hannah, let's wait and see if the cat comes back by herself. Cats have been known to do that. Besides, she could have gone anywhere. I don't think Munchie is in the woods."

"Why not?" asked Ruth.

"Because, a kitten wouldn't go in the woods." She looked at me dubiously.

"The woods aren't that deep," said Ruth. "There might be houses right behind them where Munchie could have gone."

I squared my shoulders and put on my best head-of-the-family pose. "According to the county map, there are more than five miles of forest," I said, "before you come to the state route,."

"Well," said Ruth, "it doesn't seem that far when we drive here from town. Maybe you're reading the map wrong."

"I'm a guy," I said. "I never read a map wrong."



On the day that Marcus and I were in town signing up for his swimming lessons, Hannah went into the woods by herself to look for Munchie. When Ruth came upstairs from the laundry in the cellar and couldn't find the girl, she became concerned. She called frantically

around the house and the yard. Ruth was just coming out of the barn when my son and I arrived home.

“She has to be around here somewhere,” I said, trying to calm my wife. But I knew ... we all knew ... where Hannah had gone.

I insisted on going alone, and I crossed the field and stepped into the forest. It was dead quiet, but then a sound I sometimes heard at night through our open bedroom window rose like a slight breeze. A long unending note of tinkling glass, as if pieces were drifting down like rain. An awful stench of rot permeated what little air hung below the wet branches of the closely knit trees. I walked until I reached the green, slimy creek, where we had stopped a few days before. The rush of the tinkling noise grew louder and in it I heard ... or thought I heard ... sirens and people screaming, thudding sounds and hoarse cries. My head hurt tremendously and I felt extremely faint as nausea enveloped me. I reached out to lean against a tree and instead touched the head of Erebus. I stepped back quickly. Aither stood just a few feet beyond the dog. I followed her gaze to see Hannah sitting on a fallen tree trunk, about 50 feet away, across the creek, holding her kitten. My young daughter looked me straight in the eyes, her face a picture of misery. A column of what looked like swirling leaves swarmed around her, a miniature cyclone.

“Come here, honey.”

“I can’t, Daddy. They won’t let me.”

“*Who* won’t let you?”

“They won’t let me!”

I turned to Aither.

“Who the f**k *are* you?,” I shouted.

“You have to get Hannah,” she said. “Walk over and take her hand and lead her back here. They won’t hurt you.”

“I’m not going *anywhere!*” I shouted even louder. “Not until you tell me what the f**k is going on.”

I was stalling while my daughter waited in agony for me. Aither’s eyes drilled into mine.

“You must bring her here. We can’t.”

“This is crazy,” I sputtered, whining now and feeling tears of frustration and shame well up in me.

The whirlwind noise now increased its pitch, like a siren. The tinkling glass sound increased until it became an awful rumble.

“No,” I said, “You’ve done this! Who are you?! Why are you torturing us? Stop this! Stop it! Stop it!”

“Only *you* can stop it!” said Aither. “It’s your nightmare!”

“Daddy ... *please help me!*”

With every ounce of strength I had, I pushed my leaden legs toward Hannah, first stepping in the creek, now burning an iridescent green. Every demon I had ever imagined, ever heard, ever seen, leapt up in my mind’s eye in the moments it took for me to reach my daughter and take her hand. I don’t know how long I stood there in the whirlwind, a vortex of leaves and sheets of paper, insurance forms, photographs, drivers’ licenses, dinner menus, parking tickets, newspapers, death certificates, crayon drawings and valentine cards, the debris of tragedy. But also, I felt caressed by something, a power I could only sense, but not understand. It had a buoyancy, like the feeling of a life preserver pushing me up to the surface. The whirlwind didn’t stop, but it let us go. Holding Hannah’s hand tightly, I pulled her back across the creek to where Erebus and Aither stood waiting. The whirlwind dissipated and the forest became quiet. The stench was gone. Hannah ran off to the field and home, her kitten in her arms.



“There was someone in the whirlwind, Aither,” I said.

“Perhaps the beast you didn’t want to meet.”

“Who *are* you, Aither?” I asked.

She sighed and turned to look out at the field.

“I don’t know. I’ve been here a very, very long time.”

She raised her hands and indicated everything around her.

“This is my ... station. I am to wait here. For what, I’ve never known.”

“Who is Erebus?” I asked.

She smiled. "Ah! He is my salvation, my soul's lover, my best self. He is my shadow, the beast that *I* never wanted to meet."

Erebus stood quietly looking at his mistress, with love in his eyes.

"We weren't always friends," said Aither.

We talked for possibly twenty minutes. It was the only conversation we ever had. Then I left her in the forest and walked through the high grass, around the corner of the house and into the kitchen. Ruthie was busy getting supper. Hannah sat at the table, holding Munchie, and Marcus hunched backward on a chair, reading. Erebus sat in the back corner. I hadn't remembered him leaving us in the forest.

Ruthie looked at me and smiled,

"You found Munchie!"

"Yes, we certainly did."

"So where have you been?" she asked.

"Oh... back in the trees, thinking."

"Well," she said, "you look more relaxed than I've seen you since we came here."

"I met someone back in the woods," I said.

"Who?" she asked, her attention back on the stove.

I laughed, "My guardian angel."

*

It's been many years since that day with Aither. But I think of her fondly, remembering our talk so long ago. For an angel ... I can think of no other way to describe her ... she remains the most stunning woman I ever met, a fact I managed to keep to myself all these years. But I did not love her in that way, not like Ruth.

My poor Ruthie. Gone now from old age. And Hannah, our daughter.... well, she is only letters in the mail arriving from time to time. She moved away to the plains out west with a man who stole her heart and gave her babies. She has never mentioned our nightmare. I'm of the opinion she is unaware of it. Maybe, somehow, it was truly only mine.

After high school, Marcus found a job in town. And then in the next town and then in the next. He calls each Christmas, but I think he's forgotten my birthday. So have I.

I've sold the house to a handsome young couple who want to fill up the house by having lots of children ... probably by running around bare-ass naked in the woods, they might be thinking. They are coming to take over the house in a few days.

Sitting on the front porch, I rock back and forth in my chair and think of all these things as evening comes on, Erebus at my feet. It is odd and rather annoying for me to be aging while the damned dog never changes a bit, not even a graying whisker. I am so sorry I must leave him. He has been a close friend through all the times of my life, good and bad, but I know he cannot come with me. On winter nights when the wind moans through the rattling shutters I never fixed, I often sit in the kitchen by the stove while the cold and snow sweep down in the moon light through the notch between the dark mountains. Erebus never joins me in the circle of warmth by the stove, preferring to sit and watch out the other window in the cold back corner of the kitchen. He waits for Aither, as she waits for God knows what.

My shadow still waits for me. I never had much to do with it after the day we found Munchie. I'm no hero. I find that I have lived a happy life with only a little bit of bravery required now and then. I've had no need to tilt at windmills or whirlwinds. But lately, on nights when my bedroom window is open, I've again heard the whirlwind out in the woods, tinkling glass dragging through the forest. It's a terrible sound, but it is only the fear within me.

In a little while, Erebus will walk with me to the edge of the forest, as I enter it for the last time. Then, he will return to the house to wait for the new owners.

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