

The Shadow People

by Stephan Clark

The Lexus clipped the boy at the knees. His body snapped back toward the windshield and flipped over the roof and spun up toward the sun. He landed on his neck, with his limbs falling out around him like sticks dropped from a great height. But his skateboard still moved — it slid across the street, popped over the curb and launched onto the grass that ran down toward the reedy shore of Crystal Lake.

The driver of the car behind the Lexus didn't have time to stop. She drove over the boy's body, a part of the machine now, her head going up and down with the suspension as if to register each touch of rubber to flesh. Then she was throwing her foot on the break and pulling over to push open her door and vomit. By this point, the mother had started to run. She'd come out of her house up the road still holding a red and white dish-rag. She'd heard the squeal of tires, and now here she was, out of breath and standing over her child. He wore a red Che Guevara t-shirt. But Carol couldn't look at it. She glanced around for a seat. That's what she would recall so vividly later: seeing pavement and blood and thinking she needed a chair, a sofa, an ottoman, a seat.

She looked toward the lake and saw the skateboard on the grass. She'd bought it for his birthday, a fact she'd remember when she'd get her credit card bill the following month.

Her son didn't move. A halo of blood circled his head. Carol looked up from it and back to the lake that had brought them here from The City, away from the influences they didn't like. A water-skier sped across the horizon, the boat now turning toward the dormant volcano that rose in the distance.

Carol fell, her body imploding in a way, dropping like a massive concrete stadium demolished by hundreds of well-placed explosives. And so for a moment, before the others rushed in and the sheriff's deputy arrived, she looked no different than her son, a lifeless body splayed out on the pavement in the sun.

Available online at *«<http://fictionaut.com/stories/stephan-clark/the-shadow-people>»*

Copyright © 2008 Stephan Clark. All rights reserved.

~

Two summers later the ritual began. Carol left her house at midnight, having served her husband and daughter a heavy dinner that left them caged in their sleep. She was like a thief working in reverse: she rose from bed with her husband's first snore, dressed in the dark, then snuck to the car parked out front. With the release of her e-brake she was off, coasting down the hill in neutral and sparking the ignition only as she made the turn onto Lakeshore Drive -- a woman all alone and wearing three shades of black.

She brought two things with her: a can of spray paint and a manila envelope. The first year, there were five people to remember, enough to keep her busy for a few hours, but still not so many that she couldn't get back in time for breakfast. At this hour, the roads were empty, sometimes for minutes at a time. Only Highway 20 gave her trouble. Here, she had to park on the shoulder, waiting for a brief flurry of cars to pass as they shuttled back and forth between the 101 and the central valley. Then it was quiet again and she reached into the envelope for the last of the clippings.

Most years they were children thrown from their bicycles or pulled from their sneakers by the grille of a car. They came giggling out of driveways and across two-lane highways, headed for the corner store or a poorly chosen bus-stop. Some were taken two at a time, while skipping or holding hands. The drunks were usually hit when they strayed into traffic, too intoxicated to follow a straight line. "There was nothing the driver could do," the reporter would be sure to write, usually on the urging of the sheriff. Then there were the disabled. They came buzzing down the side of the highway, their hands pushed into the joysticks of their motorized carts. Orange pennants rose high behind their seats on an antennae, but still they weren't seen. Two years in a row a big-rig had met one of these carts in the cross-walk in front of the Foster's Freeze. The newspaper spoke of these deaths by describing the speed at impact and how far the bodies were thrown.

Carol only visited these accident sites this one night each year. She'd read the reporter's description (sometimes it gave a street

address or a block and a cross street, other times only a nearby landmark) and then she'd find herself there and paint the outline of a body, white on black, the inside always empty. There never were any faces.

The first year these shadow people remained for a few weeks and became the talk of the county. When a handful of copy-cats even made their numbers expand, the paper did a short little write-up. But the next year, the shadow people disappeared within just a few short days, as if the various bureaucracies responsible for the upkeep of the county's roads had been trained and now knew how to respond. Carol didn't mind. This was for her, and for them, and for him, and simply doing it was enough.

That first night out, she returned home to fix a breakfast of pancakes and eggs. The coffee gurgled, its scent drifting through the halls until her husband emerged from their room, scratching himself as he went for his mug. He asked how she slept, and because she didn't like to lie, Carol only told him that she hadn't slept at all.

