

Shadow Man

by stephen hastings-king

Words are not like bricks. They track across a page one after the other until they spill over into sentences and your patterns of eye movement change. Now sentences track across the page one after another. With them you build a space.

This one is an urban neighborhood. You have been here before. Your viewpoint is at a table in a coffeehouse on the edge of a sidewalk. Nearby, a glass wall is folded back like transparent theatrical sets. The table is small and round. The seats are wicker and a little small for you. You linger over a macchiato. An island of foam floats in the center of a small white cup. Around it you can see a black ring. The smell of espresso wafts upward. You shift slightly in your chair in order to organize these visual phenomena into concentric circles: white foam, black coffee, white cup, white saucer, glass table top, metal edge, the reflection on the sidewalk complicated by legs. You hesitate as you always do before adding sugar but you like sugar to cut the bitterness. You already know what the coffee will taste like.

The shadow man is nearby.

Words are not like bricks. The neighborhood flowers from within the rituals that enframe the drinking of a macchiato in a café. Now it hovers over the page.

Soon the page will disappear. This is a good place for watching people. As your sight-line travels across toward the sidewalk, you populate it with extras. The people who comprise it are variations on what you already know. You are the floating observer. You are invisible; apart, unconditioned, free. Along each of the sight-lines occupied by the various projections who pass on the sidewalk, you are an aspect of the horizon. You are context or background. In different stories that invoke the generalized experience of pedestrians walking along a similar stretch of sidewalk past a café you may be recast as an extra sitting where you are who lingers over a coffee, lowering a spoonful of sugar toward an island of white

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foam. But now, you are invisible. You are comfortable there. Maybe it is morning. Maybe it is some other time. Either way, people move through it with a sense of directedness. You find this reassuring. All is well with the world. The people who pass as you imagine them are all willing participants in their own surveillance. You imagine that each enjoys the attention. Each is bland and accommodating. Each fetches well.

At the edge of your field of vision, the shadow man inhales and dissipates.

An event is a dislocation of sequence. Gray water pervades the air: it lowers the sky; it weighs down; it pushes the above into the trees and bends their networks made from details. The shadow man lurks by the anchor at the shoreline.

An event is a dislocation of sequence. At another table sits another. She is dressed vaguely like a beatnik. You steal glances from behind the protective shield of your actions: the cup as it travels toward your mouth; the warmth of the coffee; the reassuring smells; the moment of concern about the disposition of foam on your upper lip. Perhaps the other designs theatrical sets. Perhaps in her imagination sets from different periods are archived by number. They jumble together periods of the history of this imaginary theater in particular and the history of theater in general, the periods of history in particular and the history of history in general. When she's not working, she frequents cafés. She reads newspapers that are threaded onto long wooden switches that give the feel of a library. When you lean back and close your eyes, you move her around. She accompanies you on adventures. The conversation is unforced, natural. You like the smell of her hair. You move through composite spaces. You imagine a cluster of moles on her inner thigh. You examine them as if they are an intimate message written in code what is it what is it.

The shadow man is nearby. He wears an outfit from a noir film. He never comes any closer. He is never any further away. You do not know who he is. You are not sure that he is real. You find him disturbing.

