

Enduring Shade

John found himself in a penetrating darkness. A darkness that had something heavy about it, that seemed to possess a coldness, an alien sort of feeling. He looked up at the sky. There was no moon, but somehow, he was able to see the things around him dimly, in spite of the darkness.

He began walking down the dirt path. He passed a formation of rocks, then a murky river.

“John, where are you going?”

“Who’s that? Who’s there?” John stopped and looked around. He didn’t see anyone, though he sensed that someone was there.

“You mean you don’t know me after all this time?”

“All what time? Who are you?”

“Stop and think for a minute. Sit here.”

John could make out a large rock next to him. He sat down.

“Think hard. What were you doing right before you got here?”

John closed his eyes and tried to remember. Memories began to trickle into his mind. “Of course, I was talking to Frederick.”

“Right.”

“Frederick and I always had the most wonderful conversations.” He paused. “Now I remember. Teaching at the university, my times with Frederick.” John looked around him. “But where am I now?”

“Think back. What were you and Frederick talking about during that last conversation?”

“We were talking about the latest terrorist attack, and about the divisiveness of religious superstition.”

“I don’t understand how these ancient fairytales still hold so much sway over so many people,” said Frederick, pulling at his short beard, “the human race has evolved so much, but on this point it’s still backwards. So many people still cling to superstition.”

“You know that I’ve always been with Marx on this point,” replied John, “religion supplies some sort of high to people who have nothing else. Look at how the poorest of the poor in the third world cling to Catholicism.”

“So true,” replied Frederick. “Think about the psychological comfort an institution like the Catholic Church gives them. It tells them that their lives have a sort of cosmic importance to a transcendental being, and that ultimately, in spite of it all, their lives have a deep meaning. It’s the ultimate Band-Aid.”

“Yes.” John’s brow furrowed. “But how to explain people in prosperous first world countries who still cling to religion? Our species has become so technologically advanced, and yet, people still cling to irrational myths.”

“That’s something I’ve thought about for years. All the war, the poverty, we just can’t seem to get civilization right.”

“It’s a puzzle,” said John, shaking his head. “So many people are progressive and forward thinking, but not enough people.”

“So true.” Frederick sighed. “Oh, by the way, you remember Maria, don’t you?”

“Maria, your ex-girlfriend?”

“Yes. I saw her the other day. I was in the dining hall catching a little bit of dinner and there she was ahead of me in line. She looked so beautiful, you know with that shiny black hair and those eyes. But when I tried to talk to her she gave me the cold shoulder and would barely speak a word to me. I don’t know what happened.”

“Maybe she’s still angry at you over the breakup.”

“But that was two years ago and we ended things amicably. She was a lovely woman, but things between us had simply run their course. You know how it is. At the time she told me she understood and was on board. But now she’s so cold to me.”

“Maybe she was still in love with you when you broke it off,” suggested John.

“I don’t think so. We started out being madly in love, but after a while, somewhere along the way, the spark between us died. Surely she felt it too.”

“Maybe not. There is such a thing as unrequited love you know.”

“But with a with a woman like her? She’s so intelligent, so level-headed.”

“Come on my friend. We both know what a fool love can make of people. Look at me with Sarah.” A flash of Sarah’s face came back to John, when he had first met her, in that dim little coffee shop just outside of campus.

“True, very true. What became of Sarah?” asked Frederick.

“I don’t know. When she left that was it.”

“Do you ever miss her?”

“Sometimes. But that relationship is one of the things that made me the person I am today. Therefore, I don’t regret it. In fact I rarely regret anything in my life.”

“That’s the last thing I remember.” John began to be able to make out the faint, shadowy outline of his companion, standing on the road in front of him.

“Do you remember where you were when you were talking to Frederick?” asked the shadow.

“No. It’s as though it all happened in some sort of fog.”

“Come, let’s keep walking.”

“Where are we going?” asked John.

“You’ll see everything in due time, there’s no need to worry,” said his companion, in a sweet and comforting voice.

They turned a bend and John saw something looming on the horizon. At first he could only make out vague, dark shapes that seemed to appear and recede. Little by little the shapes became more solid, until he was able to make out an enormous structure. A few more moments passed and he knew he was looking at a splendid castle. He had toured Europe many times but he had never seen anything like it. He could tell there were carvings of immense detail on the walls and turrets, though he couldn’t quite make out what they were.

“That is certainly impressive,” said John.

“Oh yes, you will find many such things here.”

“Well then it must be a good place.”

They arrived at the entrance. In the darkness John saw something stir, almost as though a shadow were circulating. It undulated and became larger until it morphed into the figure of a woman—tall with golden hair falling in long waves, and large, shining eyes. She smiled; it struck John in the recesses of his brain and being in a way he couldn't deny.

“Who is that?” John asked his companion.

“What? Don't you know her? Take a closer look.”

John took a few steps towards her. Recognition came crashing. “Sarah? Is that you? What are you doing here?”

She looked at him and said nothing.

“Sarah? Why don't you answer? It's me, John.” He turned to his companion. “What's going on?”

“Take a look at her. Wouldn’t you love to get to know her? To feel her close to you? To enter into union with her? Who cares about the future. You deserve this. You have a right to the pleasure you will get from her. Just look at her. Why else would she exist but for pleasure? Why would she be so constructed were it not for that? Go to her.”

“Sarah,” said John, “why did you leave me? I was in love with you. Why did you go?”

“Don’t you remember why?” she asked, her voice low and mellow.

His companion said, “Go to her John. Any red-blooded man would desire her as you do. You adore her, don’t you? So there’s no harm done to her. Go.”

In spite of himself John began walking towards her. When he got close to her she disappeared. “Am I dreaming? Where did she go?”

“You were always so predictable. That’s how I knew I would get you in the end. All you needed was just a hint and you always chose what I wanted you to. Don’t you remember why Sarah left? Think about it. Deep down you know why.”

The memory came flooding back and a great pain entered him. “She didn’t believe I loved her because I wouldn’t marry her.”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“Why? The real question is, why would I need to subject my sovereign love to manmade structures and dictates?”

“Ahh, of course, your theory of love.”

“Yes. My love is a unique and sovereign force that issues from the uniqueness of my sovereign heart. It’s not contingent on any external structure, whether church or state. I gave my heart to Sarah. Why wasn’t that enough for her? Why did she need me to wreck the force and spontaneity of my feelings with some sort of meaningless promise that I would love her forever?”

“But then why did she leave?”

“I suppose she was more conventional than I. She needed that societal approval for our union.”

“Are you sure about that? Don’t you remember the conversation you had that night before she left?”

“We were in the kitchen. We had just finished eating a tense dinner. She began to clean up and I remember how cold she was. She’d been ignoring me for days and I didn’t really know why.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, come to think of it, her friend had just gotten married. It was a sudden proposal. They had only been together for a few months. By that time Sarah and I had been together for five years.”

“Right. And she had been wondering for a long time why you hadn’t proposed.”

“And of course I couldn’t figure out why. I had explained how I felt about things when we first met. I didn’t understand why she expected a proposal.”

“And then things came to a head that evening in the kitchen, right?”

“Now I remember. She was mad about a tiny little flirtation I had with a co-worker. Actually, I can barely even call it a flirtation. We had gone to the Christmas party and drank a little too much, and then I think we just slept together that once as a

mistake but that was it. I mean, I'd been with Sarah for five years. One mistake and she was ready to put my head into the noose of matrimony and destroy our love."

"What happened that evening?"

"She was washing the dishes and she wouldn't talk to me. I went up to her and put my arms around her but she pushed me away."

"Please John," said Sarah, "I'm really not in the mood right now. You can be so insensitive." She pulled out of his embrace and continued to scrub a pan.

"I was just trying to kiss you."

"Like you were kissing her the other night?"

“Do we have to go over that again? I made a mistake. You know you’re the one I love.”

John tried to embrace her again, but she turned off the faucet, wiped her hands and walked to the other side of the island. “Oh really. And how do you show that? You cheat on me, you never show any sort of commitment to me. And you think I deserve that?”

“I do have a commitment to you. I love you. We live together. I made one mistake but besides that I’ve had nothing to do with any other woman but you since we’ve been together.”

“You call that a commitment? You know I want children.”

“And you should have them. Let’s have a child together baby.”

“But no marriage.”

“Here we go again. Why are you so conventional? Isn’t my love enough for you?”

“How do I know that you love me? How do you ever prove it?”

“I’m here with you.”

“That’s all you’ll give me?”

“Is there really anything else?”

John turned to his shadowy companion. “The next morning I woke up and she was gone. I haven’t seen her from that day to this. Man she is as beautiful as ever.”

“Yes she is rather beautiful, isn’t she?”

“Where did she go? It was so good to see her again.”

“Come, let’s go inside.”

John's companion opened the enormous golden door, upon which was carved scenes of people doing something, John wasn't able to make out exactly what. They entered a hallway—shiny black marble floors, an immense side table made of dark rosewood, with intricate, detailed carvings on the legs, colorful tapestries on the walls. John moved closer to one of the tapestries; he saw scenes of people standing in a red, amorphous substance. They made their way down the hall, passed underneath an enormous crystal chandelier, and stopped in front of a closed door.

At this point John was able to see more details of his companion's appearance. He was thin and rather small; John could see two bright eyes and a slight smile playing over thin lips. "What's in there?"

"Come, let's enter."

John's companion opened the door and they entered a large room with a vaulted cathedral ceiling. Against the far wall was a grey desk, covered with papers. Behind the desk was a stained-glass window, depicting a man dressed in some sort of tunic, leaning against a tree and smiling.

"Please, sit down," said John's companion, somehow producing two chairs, which he placed in front of the desk. As they sat down the door opened and a man dressed in a drab, ill-fitting grey suit rushed into the room. He carried a pile of papers under his arm. He set them on the desk and sat down. "OK, so who do we have here?"

"It's John Kent sir. He arrived just this morning."

"Ah, OK, I think I have his file here somewhere." He shuffled through the papers. "OK, here it is, right, John Kent. Do you have his life review Wendell?"

“Um, no sir. I was told that you would have it.”

“Oh, OK, that’s right, let me just see here for a minute.”

John and his companion waited as the man shuffled through all the papers again. “Right, here it is. So, welcome Mister Kent. We’re very happy to have you here with us.”

“Thank you. But where is it exactly that I am?”

The man in the suit turned to John’s companion. “He doesn’t know yet?”

“I thought he would figure it out by now but he’s still fuzzy.”

“Yes, of course, that can happen every now and again. As I said Mister Kent, welcome. We’re always thrilled when someone new gets sent to us. Now then, let’s address where you

need to be placed. Wendell, you know John better than any of us. What's your recommendation?"

Wendell looked John over and thought. "Well, let's see. I got him in many areas, I just need to figure out where he erred the most."

"Yes with subjects like John that's always the difficulty."

"OK," said Wendell finally, "I will charge him with two things. Pride and lust. Those are the things I tempted him with the most, and where he fell again and again with the most consistency. Especially lust. All I needed to do was plant even the slightest suggestion in his mind that he could have a woman and he was off to the races."

"OK, very good," said the man behind the desk. "Pride and lust. Now, let me just mark those on this form and we'll send it

down to Jameson's office, and then this business should be finished."

John stared at the man in the grey suit. "Pride and lust? What is this all about?" He closed his eyes as it came back to him in a sudden flash. He had been in a hospital bed while he was talking to Frederick. He had been going in for an appendectomy. "Wait a minute, the surgeon told me it was a routine operation. What happened?"

"You had a severe allergic reaction to the anesthesia and they couldn't wake you up. You died hours after you were put out," replied the man behind the desk.

"But I was only forty-seven. I had so much more life left to live."

"Well, apparently you didn't Mister Kent."

“That’s it? I’m dead?” He shook his head. “But that’s impossible. There’s no life after death.”

The man behind the desk began to laugh, and his face, which before had looked plain and non-descript, changed: there seemed to be a glow behind his features, and his eyes, which before had disappeared into his face unnoticed, became piercing, as though they had some sort of blazing energy behind them. He finished laughing and sat back in his chair. “I never get tired of that one. So humorous.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, I’m sorry Mister Kent, but it gets me every time. A materialist finds themselves here and says: that’s impossible there’s no life after death.” He sighed and wiped his eyes, then folded his hands. “Alright then, on to business. Let’s get this

form to Jameson. You wait here Mister Kent. It won't be long,
the paperwork never takes long."

