

A SHORT STORY

By M Hanlon

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In the darkness if you hold your hand up to your face the only sense you get is the warmth pressing in upon you, and you can feel the physics of warm and cold, the physics of being there and absence.

In the yard there were things blowing across the lawn in a lazy sort of way, under the streetlamps, shadows being cast in drunken directions, a bit frivolous, for that time of night and almost certainly out of sync with their tangible counterparts. Earlier in the day a boy had sat on the steps of the house, sitting on them in that carefree way you get when you don't know a thing about possessions, it's all possessed by no one and everyone. Which sounds a bit trite. Communist, you might say, had you grown up in the shadow of that. The shadow opposed to the shadow of Capitalism, I suppose. Which I didn't grow up under. Or at least didn't grow up under anything telling me explicitly about shadows of Capitalism or shadows of much, that I can recall, except vague impressions that Communism was supposed to be a shadow, at some point or another. I may have inferred any shadow references I may have mentioned. I may still.

In the day there was a boy, throwing rocks I have on the side of the stairs, which may have seemed like a good idea at some point, maybe a sort of rock garden-like thing. Which I hadn't mentioned before, either the boy's employment or my rocks by the stairs in what I might have hoped to someday call a rock garden. Not that we'd had a whole lot of time to get started. What with the darkness, the lateness of the hour, in quite a few senses, my rather crap storytelling style that drives the kids crazy, or did, because now I think they just have the sense to avoid me when I get in one of these storytelling-like moods, and you can always tell, the way I start putting my hands in front of my face, and I start looking out at the lawn, very quiet, the lawn and myself, and those are the sort of thoughts that cross my mind, and they truly do cross, not stopping any longer than it takes me to register them, to some degree, before they're gone, like the shadows, though the shadows will always be there.

They're a bit like the river. The river of Democritus, the one in which you can't step twice. For those of you landlocked and without water just lying around on the ground, moving in little grooves in the earth, a comparable analogy is that you can't catch the same shadow twice;¹ it'll always be different, never the same shadow.

Which is possibly a case in which your parents, if they're the good sort who only want the best for you, will tell you that if you see a shadow you'd like to catch, go for it. Don't let it pass you by without at least going for it, child, dream. Always at least *try* and catch it.

That's assuming your parents might call you dream. Which would be very poetic of your parents, even if they never actually come out and say that, because dreams are like shadows, maybe, in that you should grab them, not letting them pass you by, and they've gone and *had* one. As a child! Not much more tangible than that! In some ways. In some ways not so, especially if you were a squirmy sort of child, one that wiggled and was difficult to hold on to. But that's digressing.

At the same time, elsewhere in the world, there was a small plant, growing in a forest, a very large forest. And the rains fell, and the dirt underneath slowly grew moist, wet, perfect for running your fingers through if you didn't mind getting muddy, or had already

¹ I know that Kurt Vonnegut has no use, really, for semicolons, he's said as much, somewhere. However, I've always held a rather odd relationship with my punctuation (having, it might be said, and is, here it goes, today my punctuation scoffed at, yes, scoffed at. In this manner: "Punctuation!" I wasn't quite sure how to take it, either.). So I continue my maverick, it might be said (though I don't know if this has been said, not that *I've* heard, not today or any day that I can think of in recent memory, at any rate), relationship with punctuation. So I'm sorry, Mr. Vonnegut (as I can't bring myself to call you Kurt, not in a short story, at any rate, maybe if we meet for coffee, but not in a story). For semicolons, at the least. I can't say I'm terribly sorry about other punctuation choices I make, mostly consciously, I just figured I knew your stance on semicolons, and wanted to apologise, keep things in good faith, I suppose.

gotten a little dirty, and didn't mind a little more, in fact were revelling in it at this point, the earthiness of it all.

An old man made his home by the plant, the place where the plant was in the forest, which generally was not used as a directional guide to his house, as if people gave directions by plants we'd have a lot of very lost people, even if you were using redwood trees as your plant of directional choice, as redwoods generally aren't too helpful a guide if there's a forest full of them for miles all round.

"Jesus, it all goes by!" he would say, sometimes, looking out of his doorway into the rain and the green of the trees and plants outside his door.

He wasn't a particularly religious man, besides tending a small garden outside his house, on the north side of his house. He didn't call himself a Christian, nor would anyone else, were they commenting on his religious orientation, he simply invoked the name of one particular centre of a religion on occasion. He largely did it without thought to what that meant to some people, or what he meant to himself, really, besides as another word, in front of "it all goes by!" that seemed to fit in nicely, as a strong beginning. When he was younger, and conscious of using this particular man's name he even made a conscious effort to use different names, to 'mix it up,' as it were. However, of all the names he tried, and some weren't names, to be honest, not person's names, at any rate, or some were just variations on a name. Over the years he settled on the name he felt most comfortable with, the way his lips formed it, the one that felt right, and different ones felt, if the rain were falling, or if the air was dry and crackling, or if the bugs were particularly feisty that evening or day.

He occasionally wondered whether or not he would capitalise the name, and of the names, if they didn't make such strong beginnings. He wasn't much for proper names, personally. He saw the reasoning behind them, but still didn't think it was a particular convention he'd like to follow. The only one he truly liked was Sun, perhaps because it made him smile to think of saying it with a capital 'S', which didn't make a whole lot of

sense, or have a whole lot of physiological grounding, the way one's lips moved when saying 'Sun' not being particularly proven to leave your mouth in a smiling state at the tail end of the Sssss, but that was usually the point at which he stopped the exercise, which usually, though not always, coincided with him looking at the Sun through the leaves above.

There was no direct correlation between the Sun shining and him musing over proper names, though he could imagine someone superstitiously thinking of proper names whenever they'd like to have a picnic or some other outing or event that was better with the Sun shining. 'Case-sensitive,' he liked to think of it, in his more frivolous moods.

The forest was a reasonably vast forest, though he, the old man, who was older than some kinds of dirt though usually young dirt, the old man, even when he was a young man, younger than most dirt, he thought of it as a small forest. And when he thought that he thought of it as a small forest he often thought back to a saying he'd heard some time ago, and had always stuck in his head: "Wherever you go, there you are."

Because he knew the forest was vast, though he always *thought* of it as a small forest, not much bigger than he could imagine providing for his needs and providing for his eyes. And he also knew that when he thought of the saying he couldn't help but think it was a little ridiculous, though he couldn't quite put his finger on why. But there he was. This kept him enormously happy, the way saying "Jesus, it all goes by!" kept him happy.

The boy threw rocks from the rock pile beside the stairs, on which he sat without much worry about being out of place, or the steps not being those of his parents, or his parent, or however he may find himself, whether today or some day down the road, as he steps into the river again, sits on the steps again and throws stones at shadows. And I watched the stones chase the shadows around my yard, until the shadows angle off in between the grass, behind the tree trunk, lying flat, tired, against the lawn, and the boy gets up from the steps and airplanes his way across and around and around my yard until he falls

down, too, flat on the grass, lying first flat on his face, then remaining turning, until he is lying there, looking at the sky, possibly where the shadows would look, had they eyes, inferring the sky.

There is nothing I can do, there isn't a whole lot any of us can do. I just sort of sit here, in the dark, or what will become dark in a little bit, when I neglect to turn on the light, either because I don't want the light on or because I'm too lazy to get up to turn on the light or because I can't or because I like the dark, when it all comes down to it.

In the end, you are not reading this.

Go on, then.