

By Oliver Errington

The shadow man follows me.

Tall and burly, he is forced to shop at the wrong end of town buying long, dark coats, heavy jeans, and tall, black work boots. He is hunched over, concealed in darkness, merely a silhouette. His longing face is shrouded, not by a hood, but as if his features could not reflect light. I rarely see his eyes, or his lips, or his nose, and it's almost as if his face isn't even a face at all, but rather a silky sheet of skin, bereft of facial features that somehow still manages to see, feel, whisper and breathe.

Sometimes, when I wake up, he's waiting for me behind the frosted mullioned window that stands, hunched, at the foot of my bed. Other times, he'll let me walk ahead – always within reach, but not interfering. Just following. And in these moments, for an instant, I get a rush of euphoria. I feel as if I'm normal again. Alas, he catches up again, his presence tainting everything I do and say, the anticipation of his touch stripping me of fortitude.

My favourite moments with him are the ones where we're both too tired to move. When we just lie in bed, motionless, gazing at one another. After a few minutes, his bloodshot eyes start to twitch a little bit under his unbrushed hair. I try to pull off a little smile at him, but he shoots back a corruptive and perpetual grin. Maybe that's his way of being nice. I'd rather not take my chances.

He speaks with a brazen, yet intimidating and belittling voice; the kind that leaves your ears ringing for a few seconds. When he shouts, he cackles. A baleful cackle that transpires from behind gritted teeth, the tops of which are like sandpaper from the hours of grinding. His scream is a war cry. A war cry that comes not from his mouth but from his whole body: eyes wide with horror, mouth rigid and open, chalky face gaunt and immobile, fists clenched with blanched knuckles.

Occasionally, he will envelop me. Surrounding me with a dead cloak of black that masks the bright blue skies, the yellow sun and the greenest trees, he begins to draw my life in blunt

charcoal. No longer are coloured pencils needed because the blanket thickens with every breath until I can no longer move. Until I can no longer fight to escape, to see the world once again. Instead, I have learnt to just lie there, lie there listening to his hissing whispers.

I choke on his every breath as he exhales a thick smog. I kick and scratch, flailing blindly, trying to crawl out of his abyss. Eventually, I tire not only from exhaustion but from his familiarity. I collapse into his arms. He locks me in. To the untrained eye, you might think we were doing some sort of awkward hug, actually, it was more like being trapped in a room with walls, slowly closing in, second by second, breath by breath.

He's as ethereal as a shadow, but his blows are worse than any man's. He punches with sorrow, slaps with guilt and kicks with loneliness. I drown in his monotonous taunting, more real, more terrifying, more omniscient than the iciest of waters – because at least I know how to swim. So, I plan to just stay here in the cold, comfortably numb.

Yet, I manage to pull out of the darkness. I scream at him and scramble to the surface of the water. I notice the bright sky and the warm sun, the colourful flowers, my mother's blue eyes and my friends' laughter. I startle him with love, and he disappears for a few days.

But he returns to pace behind me.

Because you cannot escape the shadow man.