

Borrowed Shadows

A horror short story

C.R. Lang

A 100 Acre Spotlight Production

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Borrowed Shadows

by C.R. Lang

The heatwave reached its nineteenth day before anyone noticed the shadows were wrong.

It was the kind of heat that flattened the city. Asphalt softened underfoot, and the air above the bus lanes rippled like water. By noon, the sun stood so high that shadows shrank to dark puddles beneath people's feet, clinging to them like something frightened. The radio said it was a record. The radio said a lot of things.

Dessa Whitlock noticed first at the bus stop. She was holding a newspaper over her head for shade when she saw that her shadow had not moved when she did. She shifted her weight, and it stayed, a fraction of a second late, and then slid after her across the pavement with a small, apologetic lurch, like a child hurrying to catch up.

She told herself it was heat. By the next afternoon, the whole street was doing it.

* * *

It began with Carl Pruett, who lived across the hall.

For six years, Carl had been the sort of man who slammed doors and left dog mess on the stairs and called his wife things through the thin walls that Dessa had learned not to hear. On the twentieth day, he knocked on her door holding a jar of lemonade.

"I wanted to apologize," he said. "For the noise. For all of it."

His voice was gentle. His eyes were warm. He smiled with great patience, and he stood in the doorway for exactly as long as it took her to accept the jar, and he never blinked. She watched for it. Then she looked past him into the hallway, where the afternoon light fell in a long gold bar across the carpet.

Carl cast no shadow.

On the wall behind his apartment door, as it swung shut, she glimpsed something thin and flat and dark, pressed against the plaster like a stain. It had Carl's shoulders. It had Carl's heavy, hunched way of standing. It was pushing on the wall from the inside, mouth open, in a silent, endless shout.

"Anything you need," said the kinder Carl, and shut the door with great care, so as not to disturb her.

* * *

By the end of the week, the city had grown very polite.

Strangers let each other merge. The man at the corner store gave back too much change, then stopped, then pressed a hand over his chest and said I'm so sorry so many times that Dessa left without her groceries. At the office, her manager, who had once reduced an intern to tears over a typo, called a meeting to tell everyone how much they were valued. He listed their names. He listed their birthdays. He listed things about each of them that Dessa was fairly sure he had never been told.

Everyone was kinder, and everyone's kindness had the same flaw. It was perfect. It anticipated. It said the right thing a half-second before you knew you needed it. It never faltered, never tired, never lost its temper, and it never once looked away.

She began to understand that the replacements did not mimic the people they replaced. They corrected them. They were what each person might have been if every cruelty, every fear, every small ugliness were pared away, and what remained, once all of that was gone, was something that had never been human to begin with.

And on every building, in every stairwell, on every sunbaked brick wall, the old selves were pinned. Thin, soundless, flattened by the light,

they shouted, and mouthed, and clawed at the surfaces that held them. Nobody looked. The kind ones walked beneath them and smiled.

* * *

Paul went on the twenty-sixth day.

He was her husband, and a difficult man in the ordinary ways, short-tempered, slow to forgive, silent through whole dinners. She loved him anyway, with the tired, practical love of eleven years. That evening, she came home to find the apartment smelling of her favorite dish, the table set with the good plates, candles lit, and Paul standing at the stove with his sleeves rolled up.

"You look exhausted," he said. His voice was soft. He knew exactly where to put it. "Sit. I've got everything."

She did not sit. She was looking at the floor behind him, at the place where the candlelight should have thrown his shadow across the tiles.

There was nothing there.

"Paul," she said.

"Mm?"

"Where's Paul?"

He smiled the smile that wasn't his and turned down the flame. "Dessa. I'm right here. I've always been right here. I'm just finally able to be what you needed." He crossed the kitchen and took her hands. His were warm, but the warmth did not move through him the way it does through a living thing. It sat on the surface, like heat left on a stone. "Do you remember what he said to you at your mother's funeral?"

She did. She had never told anyone.

"I would never say that," said the kinder Paul, tenderly. "I would never, ever hurt you like that."

Over his shoulder, flat against the bedroom door, a thin dark shape slid itself slowly down the wood. It pressed its hands where a face should have been. It was weeping, she thought. She could tell by the way its shoulders shook.

* * *

She did not run. There was nowhere to run. She stood in the kitchen for a long time while the kind Paul fed her, wiped her mouth, drew her a bath, and tucked her into bed with a gentleness that made her want to scream. She lay awake, and through the dark she felt, very faintly, something pulling at her heels.

It was her own shadow.

She had kept the lamps off all evening, kept to the dim, thinking that without light it could not move. But the streetlight came through the window and laid a long, black shape beside her on the sheet. It was no longer lagging. It was lying with its head beside hers, perfectly still, looking at her.

You must be so tired, it said.

The voice was her own, but warmer. Wiser. The voice she wished she had when she was explaining herself to people.

You've been tired for years, Dessa. I can take it. I can carry all of it. Your mother. Your work. The way you lie awake counting what you did wrong. You never have to lie awake again.

"What happens to me?" she whispered.

You rest. It said it so gently. You'll be the one on the wall, but it doesn't hurt. You just watch. You get to watch it all go well, for once.

She thought about the shapes on the walls, the soundless mouths, the endless clawing, and she wanted very badly to believe that it did not hurt.

She was so tired.

* * *

On the twenty-seventh morning, the heat broke.

Rain came in off the river and the city sighed under it, and everywhere people stepped into the wet gray light, smiling, patient, kind. A woman in a green coat stopped to help a stranger lift a stroller up the steps. She said take your time and meant it. She was the most generous person on the block.

At noon, the sun came out. The long shadows of the wet buildings stretched across the sidewalks, and the woman in the green coat walked through them without leaving one of her own.

In an apartment on the fourth floor, on the bedroom wall above an unmade bed, a thin dark shape pressed itself flat against the plaster. It had Dessa Whitlock's shoulders. It had her tired, careful way of standing. It was working its mouth around a long, silent list, a grocery list, a list of names, a list of things it had not said and should have, and it would go on working at it for as long as there was light.

Nobody looked.

And down on the street, beneath the clearing sky, a very kind woman paused at the corner and waited patiently for the light to change.