

# Ilka Hoffmann: Diary of a Shadowless Man Part 1: The Lost Shadow

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Theo C. can't believe it at first: he has lost his shadow! How is he supposed to go on living now? After all, a person without a shadow will cause offence everywhere! So the offer of a company for replacement shadows comes just at the right time. But can he trust the obscure shadow dealer?

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## The Dismissal



**Saturday, July 1**

Today I received the notice of termination. At first, I thought it was an advertisement, because the new English name of the company was printed on the envelope: SOS – Safety • Order • Security. International Insurance Company. Sounds kind of silly, but if you want to operate worldwide, you probably can't avoid such name games.

Of course, the dismissal was agreed with me – but it hit me anyway. I wonder if they deliberately delivered it to me on a Saturday of all days. So the recipient is practically forced to calm down before possibly taking measures against the decision. But in fact they probably don't care.

If only I had someone to talk to about the whole thing! I need to think it all over again, but I just can't get anywhere on my own. For this, I simply lack the distance to what I have experienced. On

the other hand, I also shy away from revealing myself to others in my nakedness – at least that's how I feel about my condition.

So for now, the computer is my only counterpart – a somewhat one-sided communication, even if the mute monitor might be a pretty good father confessor.

But if I am honest, I have to admit that this form of self-reflection is not only no help to me, but rather increases my feelings of helplessness. I can hardly stand the blinking of the cursor. It reminds me of the heartbeat, at night, when you wake up from a nightmare and initially mistake your own heartbeat for the sound of approaching footsteps. I should stop doing that – it's no use after all.

### **Saturday, July 1, evening**

Now it has proven worthwhile after all that I decided to save my words this morning. At least it's a start, and now that I won't be doing any regular work, maybe typing on the computer every day can give my days some sort of rhythm. Of course, it remains questionable whether this will lead to anything – but it's worth a try.

Today I frittered away much of the day completely pointlessly. I can hardly remember what I have done. So how will I be able to reconstruct this whole story, which goes back much further into the past? Maybe I should take some notes first. Then I could also escape this annoying blinking of the cursor for a while.

## Shadowless Days



**Monday, July 3**

Went to the office to pick up my things. True, the termination agreement is dated for the end of the month – but what would have been good about taking full advantage of the deadline? This way, I made the termination at least a little bit my own business. The colleagues still look at me as if they were noticing my "nakedness" for the first time. But did I expect anything else? Probably they really perceive me as naked, and that's just something you can't get used to in our culture. After all, if someone belonging to a jungle people would go hunting in a business suit, that wouldn't be socially acceptable as well.

Since I can hardly do anything about my situation myself, it would possibly be best to openly admit to it – to walk straight through the middle of the room where the floods of light, created by all the ergonomic lighting equipment, are strongest, without caring about the looks of the others. The unusual could become a hero's attribute if I wore the taint like a badge of honour.

But I just don't have the strength to do that. I prefer to take detours and sneak as close as possible past walls and corners where



my nakedness is not immediately noticeable. After all, for me too, my condition is like an open wound. It is precisely its essential characteristic that I feel like being at the mercy of an unpredictable destiny.

Whoever wants to transform a taint into a distinction needs a certain pleasure in provocation. But if you experience the blemish yourself as a deficiency of your personality, such a reinterpretation can never succeed. Instead, the others feel confirmed in their negative attitude, which in turn has a corresponding effect on yourself – a vicious circle.

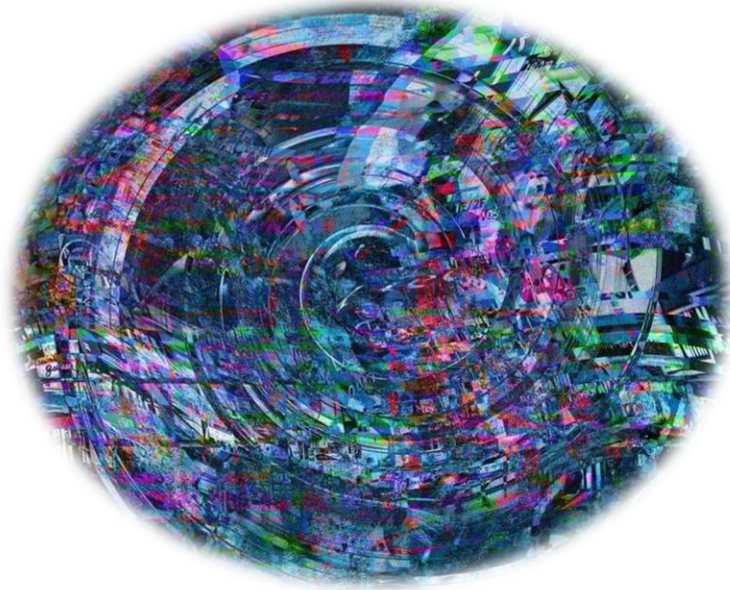
### **Monday, July 3, evening**

My first day as an unemployed person. Actually, I should go to the job center tomorrow, but I'd rather wait until the next rainy day. Of course, this is basically senseless, because the light inside the rooms will then probably be even more glaring than it is now. Nevertheless, I somehow feel safer when it's dark outside – and that's not at all unimportant when going to the authorities.

In the meantime, I have also taken a few notes. This made me realise that I know almost nothing about the night when everything started. Or rather, that everything seems like a dream to me.

The details – on which everything depends if I want to get clear about what happened to me – are like blown away. The streets, the girl, the river – everything looks like a surrealist painting, and I myself move through it like a stranger thrown into it by the obscure logic of a dream. I will probably have to schedule a few "site visits" in order to make progress with my reconstructions.

## Remembrance Work



### **Saturday, July 8**

Once you open the floodgates of memory, it is as if you are literally inundated with your own recollections. At first they seep into your mind very slowly, but then their stream suddenly swells so powerfully that you can hardly control them. So I should finally try to form them in order not to drown in them.

But what if the memories become even more unbearable as soon as they have taken shape? Does the shipwrecked sailor feel better when he recognizes that what he took for ships on the horizon are in fact wave towers? And can a substance that is immaterial in its structure be shaped at all?

At least I have not been idle during the week. Wednesday and Friday I was on the road for site inspections. I walked along the

routes I must have taken that fateful night, and I measured the time it takes to cover the entire distance. Obviously, everything had happened much faster than it seemed to me in my memory. But given the importance of the events to me, that was to be expected.

I want to use the weekend for further notes. So on Monday I might start my first workweek as a "memory restorer".

Funny that I have the feeling of weekend, although I have no working week at all now ...

By the way, I have finally made it to the job center. On Thursday afternoon – when it rained and even thundered for the first time in weeks – I jumped in at the deep end and registered as unemployed.

It seems to me that my strategy worked to some extent. The lightning, the thunder, the heavy rain – these are simply such manifold sensations that you don't pay attention to every unfamiliar visual appearance. Of course, there was the usual insecurity in the behaviour towards me, but it was all within reason.

I am digressing ... Will I ever be able to not only look at the jungle of the past, but really penetrate it?

## Story of a Shadow Loss/1



**Monday, July 10**

Instead of taking notes, I have spent the whole weekend with all sorts of trivialities – moving things from one place to another, wiping dust that I hadn't even noticed before, sorting old newspapers ...

I flee from myself. I am afraid of feeling the same disgust for myself that drives everyone else away from me. It is the fear of the shot fired at an elastic wall, from where it bounces back at yourself, right into your heart.

But I no longer have the choice. I am alone with myself and have to beware of myself. Either I trigger the shot quite consciously or it will be released without my doing and destroy me from the inside out.

So I better get started.

## 1. The Company Outing

It all began in the night from November 18 to 19 last year. As part of a company outing, we had visited the neighboring town of Hadderstetten, where – as is customary on such occasions – we stopped off at a pub in the evening to end the day in a cheerful atmosphere. The pub was chosen because one of our colleagues was related to a brother of the landlord. So we could expect to be served with a certain courtesy.

In fact, the evening proceeded to our complete satisfaction. Not only did the vaulted room itself radiate a cozy atmosphere. Additionally, our tables were arranged in such a way that we could easily overlook everything from our corner without feeling pushed to the sidelines. The food was excellent as well, not to mention the carefully selected wine list. We were even allowed to taste the wines before deciding on a particular one.

From an objective point of view, there was nothing extraordinary about the evening. It was the usual end of a company outing, with the somewhat forced cheerfulness at the beginning, which then moves with a certain inevitability towards increasingly lewd jokes and shrill laughter. Nevertheless, for me the evening was something very special. After all, it was the last time I could spend as I was used to, as part of the whole, as one element among many others in a large crowd.

I won't claim that I felt particularly comfortable in my own skin, but even this feeling I probably shared with most of the others. Basically, those with whom we celebrate on such occasions are complete strangers to us. Despite this, everyone makes an effort to give a semblance of voluntariness to the forced company community. Of course, the harmony is only superficial, the whole

thing is nothing more than a ritual – but after all, it serves to ensure peace in the workplace and thus facilitates everyday work processes immensely.

Another special thing about the evening was that I finally succeeded in talking to Lina – who was still relatively new to our company at the time. She had already been working in my team for a few weeks, but until then I had never managed to get beyond the usual friendly phrases and lunch break jokes in my conversations with her. The room, only dimly lit by candles and indirect lighting, now fostered a certain confidentiality among each other.

I had felt attracted to Lina as soon as she joined the company. Of course, her physical appearance also played a role in this – her silky black hair and her delicate, vulnerable-looking facial features. For me, however, her attraction was primarily based on her open, outgoing nature, which radiated both a love of life and a certain intellectual curiosity.

Our conversation at the company outing reinforced this impression. What particularly appealed to me was the ease with which we switched from one topic to another, and the open-mindedness with which Lina approached even the most remote questions. With all this, we had a lot to laugh. More and more, the events around us faded into the background. Separated from the others by an invisible wall, we sank into our own world.

In retrospect, it almost seems to me as if the conversation with Lina had somehow influenced the following events. But probably one thing has nothing to do with the other, and it is pure coincidence that I later got lost in the harbour district.

I wonder where this need to presume special causes and motives behind everything comes from. After all, it doesn't make my fate any easier to bear.



## Story of a Shadow Loss/2



**Tuesday, July 11**

It's a strange feeling to make oneself the hero of one's own story. I almost have the impression of becoming a stranger to myself. But maybe that's the magic about writing diary: when you look at your own life from a distance, you suddenly notice things that before, entangled in your own ego, you didn't notice.

The whole thing would probably be different if I told the story orally. Then I would be able to avoid some of the twists and turns that are not very flattering for me. But in writing, the barrier of inner censorship doesn't work so well. Here I am my only counterpart, no one builds me a bridge to noncommittal platitudes, behind which all kinds of inconveniences can be so excellently concealed.

So let's get back to the company outing!



## 2. November Fog

At the end of the evening, I didn't feel the slightest desire to return to Lumenberg with my colleagues. I knew that there were trains departing from Hadderstetten to Lumenberg late in the evening. So I decided to forego the noisy journey home in the cramped bus and take a short walk through the town. The station was on the other side of the town, beyond the park, so I had to walk a few steps to get there anyway.

Of course, my behaviour was quite out of place. I explained it to my colleagues by saying that I had promised a friend to drop by his place. Fortunately, given the level of alcohol in the company, no one doubted this excursion, which was in fact hardly credible at 11 o'clock at night. When the bus left, I caught a glimpse of Lina, who was perhaps the only one who sensed why I didn't want to get on the bus. Then I set off for the station.

Despite the late hour, I wanted to walk across the dark park and then catch the train. According to my memory, it had to leave around 12. Otherwise, I could have easily taken a taxi from Hadderstetten.

For a November night, the air was exceptionally mild. After the stuffy hours in the pub, it was a pleasure to breathe it in to the full. I walked, as I suspected, straight towards the park, which I thought was at the end of the avenue leading past the pub. The stroll took more time than I had expected, but I didn't worry about that at first. After all, I didn't know my way around Hadderstetten as well as I did around Lumenberg. And couldn't it be that the avenue at night – without the busy traffic and the hustle and bustle in front of the shops – just seemed longer to me than during the day?

Only when I reached the end of the avenue did I realise that I had been walking in the wrong direction. Instead of reaching the park, I found myself on a thoroughfare, behind which the avenue led into the maze of alleys of the harbour district.

I probably should have turned back then or asked one of the few passers-by for the way to the station. I don't know why I did nothing of the sort. Perhaps a kind of defiance prevented me from admitting that I had made a mistake with quite unpleasant consequences at such a late hour. After all, the way to the station was now about twice as long as from the pub. So I would probably miss the train and have to take a taxi. In that case, however, I could just as well look for one in the harbour district.

Without a second thought, I crossed the underpass that connects the avenue and the harbour district. On the other side I just randomly headed for the first alley. In contrast to the avenue, the air here, near the river, seemed damp and heavy. After only a few meters, a dense fog enveloped me, flowing through the night as a weightless stream in the light cones of the street lamps.

Unaware of where I was, I just kept walking straight ahead. At some point I would surely come across a larger square where I could hail a taxi – or so I thought. In fact I must have got lost in the labyrinth of paths pretty soon. Faster and faster the circle of alleys spun around me, tighter and tighter the wall of fog enclosed me, and fewer and fewer passers-by came my way.

These circumstances may also explain the fateful decision I made shortly afterwards. Today, I myself don't understand why at the next crossroads, from which three alleys led off, I didn't choose the middle and largest one. After all, it would have been the most likely to lead out of the labyrinth. Unfortunately, however, I took the alley to my left, from which a reddish glow emanated.

## Story of a Shadow Loss/3



**Tuesday/Wednesday, July 11/12**

### **The Dark Mountain Village**

Midnight ... The feeling as if life is flowing back into itself. No one has a shadow anymore, everything returns home, sheltered by the soft wings of the night.

Of course, these sensations are also related to my current situation. For someone without a shadow, the night is like a cloak of invisibility under which he can hide his true nature. On the other hand, the night has already given me a feeling of security before, a feeling of inner peace and coming to myself.

There is only one single exception that comes to mind. It goes back to a remote mountain village, when I wanted to go back to my hotel from a restaurant late at night. I knew that there were no streetlights in the village. But I had not expected such impenetrable darkness. It was as if God had suddenly grown tired of his

creation and had spread a blanket over it so that he would no longer have to see it.

Since there was only one road in the village, the way to the hotel could not be missed. Nevertheless, I felt like an astronaut floating freely in space, with no idea how to find the way back to the spaceship. Rarely have I experienced such relief as I did when the lights of the hotel appeared in front of me.

Why do I think of this just now? Probably because – as strange as it sounds – I felt something similar while wandering around the waterfront of Hadderstetten at night, approaching the red light district.

### **3. In the Maze of the Red Light District**

The red light district as a refuge for a lost wanderer? Today that seems pretty ridiculous to me myself. And yet, when I try to remember the exact moment when I walked towards the reddish shimmering alley, the feeling of a sheltering warmth rises in me.

For the lightly clad ladies standing around in front of the house entrances, I was one of those who could free them from the damp-cool fog for a few minutes. Thus, they tried to attract me in a rather importunate way.

By then, at the latest, I should have realised my mistake and turned back. Instead, however, I simply quickened my pace as soon as one of the ladies approached me from the side. So I got deeper and deeper into the alley, until it finally didn't matter whether I went straight ahead or took the way back.

The voices approaching me gradually mixed in my head to a chorus that seemed to obey the same monotonous, shrill rhythm as the twitching neon signs that blinked at me from every other

house: "Hey cutie how about us SUPER LIVE SHOW why so alone cutie HERE YOU'LL GET IT do you feel the desire cutie come on STRIPTEASE so alone in twos it's warmer BEST PEEP SHOW cutie do you feel it ..."

Suddenly I had the feeling as if someone would fix me from an angle ahead with the eyes. Involuntarily I slowed down my step until I arrived at a crooked wooden house. In front of it stood a girl whose eyes were firmly focused at me.

I can't say how many times I have tried to remember her face. I just don't manage to picture her appearance more precisely. Of course, this is partly due to the fact that the house was located in a blind spot between two street lamps. Moreover, her face was only illuminated by the reddish twitch of a neon sign mounted diagonally opposite.

But above all, I get lost in her eyes whenever I think of her – in those pond-green eyes that immediately captivated me and made it impossible for me to pay attention to anything else.

"Shall we go upstairs?" she asked me, as if I were a longtime friend she had been expecting.

I nodded, stunned by her appearance. Only when we had crossed the threshold of the house and entered the dark corridor beyond did I begin to perceive my surroundings more consciously again.



## Story of a Shadow Loss/4



**Wednesday, July 12**

The girl with the green eyes ... I simply cannot make her face appear in my mind's eye. As soon as I try to envision it, her eyes widen into a green lake that pulls me into the depths. Its waves embrace me softly, it is by no means an unpleasant sinking, but it deprives me of any possibility of grasping a clear thought.

Did I only fantasise about the encounter in the end? But then why can I remember every detail of our time spent together so clearly – except for her face? Can a dream leave such a lasting impression that you take it for real?

Her evening wind voice, her cherry blossom scent, the dark whispering corridor: all this is still as present in me as if it had been yesterday.

#### 4. The Girl with the Green Eyes

I still remember how a shiver ran down my spine when a damp, somewhat musty smell engulfed us inside the house. I silently followed the slender contours of the girl that penetrated the semi-darkness in front of me. I knew for sure that I had never met her before. And yet, from the first moment, she was as familiar to me as a friend from childhood.

At the end of the corridor we reached a decrepit staircase. As we climbed the groaning steps, I noticed that there were obviously more ladies doing their jobs in the house. As small as it seemed from the outside, as spacious it appeared on the inside. The corridors leading from the stairs on the ground floor and on the two floors above were surprisingly long. The laments of love echoed out of them as if from a deep well.

The girl led me to the top floor. Once there, we went to a room at the very end of the corridor. With an unwilling squeak, the door opened.

"Would you like some wine?" the girl asked after we had entered. I nodded: "Why not?"

It took a while until my eyes got used to the darkness in the room. Vaguely, I could make out a bed standing in the corner, a wall shelf and a table. Halfway between the table and the bed I saw an old stool standing around.

To my surprise, the neon sign from across the street was not noticeable up here. Only a pale strip of light stretched across the room, which seemed to come more from the moonlight than from a street lamp. But how could the moonlight suddenly penetrate the dense fog?

Amused, the girl looked at me: "Do you need some light?"

I slowly shook my head and made an effort to go to the window to get an overview of the part of the street visible from here. But at the same moment the girl put a clay cup on the table in front of me and pulled the stool towards it. So I sat down and sipped the wine. To my disappointment, it tasted somewhat sour, as if it had been mixed with cider vinegar. Involuntarily, I shook myself as I put the cup back down.

"Are you cold?" it purred close to me.

I looked up: The girl was leaning on the edge of the table right next to me. Since there was a smile in her voice, I assumed she was joking with me about the wine. Undecided how to interpret her behaviour, I tried to read her eyes. But in the darkness her face was only indistinctly discernible.

"He doesn't talk at all ..." She leaned close to my ear: "Are we a bit nervous?"

With these words, she sank onto my lap and began to cover my face with kisses. Her mouth slowly moved up my cheek, touched my eyes and then slid down to my mouth, which she tenderly opened. At the same time, she reached for my right hand and gently guided it to her bosom, like a mother giving her child the breast to reassure it.

Her movements showed a certain routine, but did not at all seem vulgar or even businesslike. Rather, I had the impression that she was performing an ancient ritual.

As if in a trance, I began to caress her and fumble with the bodice she wore over her chest. She too now brought her hands to my shirt and began to undress me, while she continued to explore my face with her lips.

Finally, we both lay naked on her bed, our faces turned towards each other, so that I could look directly into her eyes. And as long



as we moved in the harmonious, even rhythm of love, I kept looking into these eyes, which never stopped fixing me, drawing me towards them, until I finally fell into a kind of twilight state of which I cannot remember how long it lasted.



## Story of a Shadow Loss/5

Thursday, July 13



The night with the girl whose face blurs before my eyes like a reflection in the water, stirred by the wind's incomprehensible whispering ...

My thoughts are still completely captured by it – which is not surprising. After all, this is the night when my life thread was cut in two. There is a before and an after, both standing unconnected beside each other.

I wonder if this abrupt change is directly related to my night with

the girl. Is my memory deceiving me, as I may have been deceived about the girl that very night? Was she in fact one of those witches the fairy tales tell about? A malicious magical creature who only took on the guise of a beautiful young woman in order to cast a spell on me and thus bring me to my doom? Is it she, in the end, who made my shadow disappear?

But no: that simply does not fit in with my feelings! This is just my mind talking, this schoolmasterly censor who thinks he can interpret and explain everything. If I recall how I felt torn to the core when I had to leave the girl ... No, there was no malice in her at all. Rather, she was one of those good fairies who take you by the hand and lead you home when you get lost in a bog at night.

## 5. In the Maelstrom of the Night

From the girl's embraces I had sunk into a soft darkness, in which I remained for a few eternal moments. When I regained consciousness, the girl was sitting next to me, still naked, looking into my face. "You have to go now," she said in a quiet, but firm voice. "Why – what's wrong?" I felt like someone whom you wake up in the middle of the night to evict from his own house.

"It will be dawn soon," she whispered.

I looked at her uncomprehendingly. "So what? Who cares about it?"

Instead of answering, she bent down to me and touched my mouth delicately with her lips. Then she got up and went to a clothes chest in the corner of the room. She opened it and pulled out a kind of housecoat, which she quickly put on and tied at the front. As far as I could tell in the sparse light coming in from outside, it looked a bit old-fashioned – but it wrapped around her waist like a second skin and had a seductive neckline. Less than ever did I want to leave her now.

Unperturbed, the girl went to the table where it had all begun – a long time ago, as it seemed to me. Routinely, she started to pick up my clothes lying on the floor. Without any hurry, she heaped them onto the stool and placed it next to my bed. Then she reached for my shirt, obviously intending to put it on me.

"I'll marry you!" I cried out, like a drowning man being pulled away from the piece of wood that keeps him afloat. "You'll never have to work in this business again."

"You'll never get married," she replied gently, but at the same time so emphatically that I gave up my resistance and let her

dress me – which she did just as tenderly as before, when she had undressed me.

"How much do I owe you?" I asked, already standing in the doorway.

She mumbled something I didn't understand because I had already lost myself in her green eyes again. I read amusement in them, but also a kind of indulgent wonder that people show towards strangers who are not familiar with the customs of their host country.

The girl kissed me fleetingly goodbye. A moment later, I stood in the long dark corridor. Dazed, I groped my way to the stairs. The house was very quiet now – obviously the other ladies had sent their johns home much earlier.

Outside the house I looked up to the top floor, hoping that the girl might be standing at the window and waving at me. But the house was completely dark and there was no sign of movement behind the windows. Probably she had gone straight back to bed.

It occurred to me that she might have had other clients before me. For some reason, however, this seemed completely unthinkable to me. Maybe I just didn't want it to be true.

Since everything remained silent, I finally set off. I decided to walk towards the river and then stroll into the morning.



## Story of a Shadow Loss/6



**Friday, July 14**

### Burning Sand

The manager in the large warehouse of memories must be a convinced supporter of chaotic storage. Recent events are filed next to long past ones, dreams are found next to real experiences, sad and joyful episodes are stacked on top of each other without any discernible system.

This might explain why I suddenly remembered an incident from my early childhood: I had fallen asleep on a beach on a hot summer's day. When I woke up, my skin was burning like fire. I straightened up instantly to escape the fire, but the fire stuck to my skin, there was no way to escape.

Sparks flashed before my eyes. I was all alone with the vast, burning beach. No one was there to rescue me from the glowing

earth. No one came to defend me against the sun priest who was sacrificing me with ritual cruelty to his deity.

I had almost forgotten the traumatic experience. But that's how it is when you let the memory off the leash. Then an ordinary walk can suddenly turn into a second, imaginary walk on the moody shores of memory.

## 6. The Sunstroke

In retrospect, I have to admit to myself that it was not a good idea to go down to the river. I had indeed been prepared to be on the way for longer than if I had simply taken the same route back. But in the dense fog, I almost felt like I was treading water.

My footsteps sounded like those of a stranger, and even my gasping breath seemed to come more from some exotic bird than from myself. A few times I thought I heard a church clock chiming somewhere in the distance, but each time I started counting the strokes too late. Now it was avenging itself that I still hadn't picked up my wristwatch from the watchmaker.

After a while – it's one of those periods of time that I can't determine exactly in retrospect – it gradually got brighter. However, the sunlight seeped through the fog so slowly that at first I wasn't sure whether I was only imagining the twilight.

Before the fog completely lifted, I came across a wide flight of steps that – as I knew from previous walks in Hadderstetten – led up to the town center. Apparently I had half-circled the town by the river.

I climbed the stairs, then turned into a side street that ended in a pedestrian zone. There the small ball of sunlight vaguely appeared behind the clouds of mist. I still remember the uneasiness

that seized me at this sight. At first I blamed it on exhaustion from lack of sleep and on the uncomfortable night hike, although I secretly felt it was too intense for that. Maybe, I thought, I was just hungry. So I decided to stop at the next café and have a good breakfast.

But when the first ray of sunlight hit me shortly afterwards, I felt such a strong shortness of breath that I had to hold on to a nearby tree to avoid falling over. The light not only hurt my eyes – which would have been normal after walking through the dark night. Rather, I had the feeling that it was firing at me as if through a burning glass, and piercing my body.

Reflexively, I squinted my eyes tight. Then, with my back pressed against the tree, I felt my way to the other side of the trunk, where the light could no longer hit me head-on. Even there, however, it took a while before I could breathe more freely again. Indecisively, I blinked my eyes. An incomprehensible fear kept me from opening them fully.



## Story of a Shadow Loss/7

Saturday, July 15

### Shadow Plays

There are days when I sit for hours at the window and immerse myself completely in the sea of passers-by surging back and forth. It does me good to feel like one of them, part of an amorphous mass, driven and adrift at the same time, always in motion and yet sheltered in the stillness of the ever-repeated patterns of movement.

When I wake up from these daydreams, I feel like flotsam and jetsam spat out by the sea. Then I look enviously at all the others who are still firmly rooted in their shadows – at all the people resting in themselves and moving freely because their dark reflection gives them the certainty of being themselves.

Only very rarely do I perceive the dark flickering shadows differently. A few days ago, for example, on an evening when the slanting sunlight drew the contours of the shadows more clearly than usual on the asphalt: At that moment, it suddenly felt to me as if the roles were reversed between the shadow casters and their servants. It looked as if the servants did not follow their masters but pursued them relentlessly, controlling their every move.





But that was only a fleeting feeling, which now seems to me like someone else's sensation – all the more so if I think back to that morning when the wound of losing the shadow burned inside me for the first time.

## 7. Circulatory Problems

The first sunrays that hit me as a shadowless person ... I can still feel them like glowing lances on my skin. It took some time until I had halfway recovered from the shock.

When I opened my eyes carefully, I noticed that I was standing in the middle of the large square into which the pedestrian zone of Hadderstetten opens. My back was pressed against the blood beech in the middle of the square, under whose leafless skeleton I must have looked pretty lost. Some passers-by glanced curiously at me, others even stopped and looked at me with a mixture of fright and pity.

I realised that I had to move on if I wanted to avoid embarrassing questions. Nevertheless, I did not immediately succeed in freeing myself from my torpor. It was as if my limbs had taken on a life of their own, independent of my head, and had decided to grow together with the tree trunk.

So I remained in my strange position for several endless minutes – or was it only seconds? Finally, an elderly woman approached me. "Are you unwell?" she asked sympathetically.

"It's ... it's all right," I stammered. A ridiculous fear that she might touch me came over me. I felt as if I consisted of nothing but a translucent shell that would shatter into pieces at the slightest touch.

The panic that suddenly rose in me finally gave me the strength to detach myself from the tree and move away from the bystanders. Like pinpricks, their gazes hit me in the back. Their head shaking affected me like the lurching of a ship in a stormy sea. They probably thought I was drunk.

At the next street corner I found an entrance to a house with the door ajar. Without thinking, I entered and sat down on the bottom step of the stairs. At first I thought there were workmen in the house. Only after a while did I realise that the pounding noise was coming from the rush of blood in my head.

For a while I must have sat there motionless, completely focused on not losing consciousness. Circulatory problems, I said to me, surely these are just circulatory problems! A hearty breakfast with a strong coffee would make me feel better again. Pull yourself together, I admonished myself, don't be silly!

Gradually the hammering subsided and my breathing calmed down. I strained to remember the street layout in the centre of Hadderstetten exactly so as not to spend too much time looking for a café.

"Are you looking for something?" Fortunately, I had already stood up when the voice of someone living in the house hit me from behind. Another jerky stand-up and I probably would have blacked out for good.

"No-no, just the wrong address," I muttered and stepped out.

I remembered that there was a small café nearby. That meant I didn't have to walk across the sunlit square again for my breakfast.

I was indeed lucky with the café. Not only did I find it without any major problems – it was even open at this early hour. I sank into

one of the plush chairs in the far corner and ordered the "Big Breakfast".

Probably I hardly noticed how the breakfast was served to me. In any case, the first thing I remember after ordering is the curious, concerned look of the waitress, which made me turn to the rolls, scrambled eggs, jam pots, sausage and cheese platters lined up in front of me. The eggs were already completely cold, the coffee was only lukewarm.



## Memory Gaps



**Sunday, July 16**

Do things actually become clearer to me by writing them down? Rather, I have the impression that the opposite is the case. Most obvious to me are the gaps in my memory, through which the events stand next to each other even more disconnected than I had originally assumed.

Perhaps it would be most truthful if I didn't even try to put the events in an orderly sequence. In doing so, I am only deceiving myself into believing that there are causal connections – which in fact do not exist!

On the other hand, what would be the point of writing down the single incidents in the same chaotic order in which they flash through my mind? Or is there a logic in that too, which has only remained hidden to me so far?

Ultimately, however, the effort to chronologically sequence the various events is at least more honest. After all, this is the only

way for me to find out what I remember and where my memory stops. It is precisely these gaps in my memory that could be of particular importance for a deeper understanding of my problems.

So basically, this is only the preliminary work from which the later, well-founded analysis must start. Moreover, in reconstructing the events, I should perhaps focus less on what I was thinking at the time. It might be more important to find out why I didn't think of certain other things.

Let's take, for example, the morning when I fled to a café, driven by an inner turmoil that was incomprehensible to me at the time. It is interesting to note that in this situation I had completely suppressed the fact that this was a normal working day. Actually, I should have been in the office for over an hour. Was my nocturnal excursion possibly nothing more than an unconscious escape from the stresses of everyday life?

However, if all my actions at that time were based on some kind of avoidance behaviour, then this behaviour was at least incomplete. One thing is certain: I should never have gone to the office that day. The shock that ran through my limbs when my gaze fell on the date display of the digital clock as I left the café was quite out of proportion. After all, no one is dismissed because of a single sick note!

Of course, calling in sick the morning after the company outing would have raised doubts. But all the inconveniences resulting from this would have been insignificant compared to the catastrophe caused by my hasty departure to the office. If my conscious mind wasn't working properly, at least my subconscious mind should have done a good job!

## Story of a Shadow Loss/8



**Sunday/Monday, July 16/17**

### **Flickering Eyes**

These terrible nightmares ... I thought I had left them behind. But I will probably never get rid of them completely.

Shortly after the loss of my shadow, they had haunted me almost every night. I was always surrounded by pairs of eyes in them – pairs of eyes forming a circle around me that grew ever tighter, until they merged into a single oversized eye that threatened to devour me.

Every time I woke up from the nightmares with my heart racing, I still had the impression that flickering eyes were lying in wait for me all around the room. I felt as if they were burning their way through the walls from the outside to pierce me with their flaming gazes. For the rest of the night, I mostly sat in the kitchen and stared dully at the streetlights, in whose glare the eyes of fire vanished into thin air.

So this is what it feels like when madness creeps up on you, I thought then, as I ventured back into the bedroom in the early morning, at the first signs of dawn.

## 8. A New Day

I must have looked rushed when I entered the office the morning after my night in Hadderstetten. It had taken me an enormous effort to hurry across town to the station and get on the next train to Lumenberg.

Although rush hour was already over, it was still very crowded, which increased my discomfort considerably. I constantly had the feeling that I was doing something wrong. Several times I made sure that I had bought the right ticket, that I could show it quickly in case of an inspection and that I was in the right class.

But it was impossible to rule out all eventualities. The most unpleasant thing was the thought that someone might engage me in conversation. Language suddenly seemed to me like a jumble of islands on an immeasurable sea. Each word was a fragment lying disconnected next to all the other word splinters. It was inconceivable to me that I could put the pieces of the puzzle together correctly.

So I was both relieved and worried when I finally reached our office building: relieved because I could now move into familiar surroundings, and worried because I wasn't sure whether the old feeling of familiarity would return. Unfortunately, I soon found out that the latter was the case.

Already in front of the time clock, which impassively documented my – despite flexitime – excessive lateness, I felt exposed. In the lift, in the hall, in the corridor – everywhere I had the feeling of being watched.

It became even worse when I entered our open-plan office. To get to my workplace, I had to cross it completely. Although I tried to move as inconspicuously as possible, I felt like a homeless per-

son who shuffles across a hall lit by chandeliers to unfold his sleeping bag in the middle of the room. In reality, probably no one paid attention to me. After all, someone is always walking past you in an open-plan office.

Once behind my partition wall, I habitually booted up the computer. In the mailbox I found a message from Ms. Zimmerman, our product manager. She invited me to a team meeting at 10.30 am. I glanced at the digital clock at the bottom of the screen: it was already 10.26!

Only now did I notice that no one from my team was at their place. Obviously, all my colleagues were already on their way to the meeting. I hurried off immediately. It was only two floors to the team rooms. If necessary, it could be done in four minutes. On no account did I want to burst into the meeting after it had begun!

Was it really the case that all four lifts approached my floor that day with an almost insidious slowness? Or did it just seem so to me? Today, of course, I wonder why I didn't take the stairs, by which I probably would have reached the team rooms more quickly. Perhaps I simply didn't do it because it was unusual and would have exposed me to increased attention – and I had the feeling of standing out too much anyway.

When I finally got out of the lift, the digital clock above the floor display already showed 10.33 am. Since Ms. Zimmerman had taken over the manager's post, the meetings always started on time. So I had lost the race against time after all!

Now my only hope was that the product manager might have been delayed by a phone call. In that case, however, the door would still have been open. Tensely, I looked at the room at the



end of the corridor where the meeting was supposed to take place: The door was closed!

My hand trembled as I placed it on the door handle – something that, despite the embarrassment of the situation, I considered an overreaction. But that was precisely what worried me.



## Story of a Shadow Loss/9



### **Monday, July 17**

I am ashamed of myself for not having continued writing tonight. Nevertheless, I shy away from judging this as pure cowardice. Not only was I suddenly dead tired after the effect of my nightmare had subsided. Furthermore, the moment when my changed appearance became evident not only to myself, but also to everyone else, was a traumatic break in my life. Facing up to this is no small matter.

But today there is no way to avoid it. So I board my time machine again and travel back to the team room, where the product manager had just opened the meeting.

## 9. The Exposure

Although I had tried to open the door as carefully as possible, Ms. Zimmerman immediately turned at me when I entered the room: "Ah, Mr. C.! Well, speak of the devil ... Just now I asked if anyone had heard from you."

Her quite complaisant smile could not prevent my face from flushing with shame. Of course, the layout of the room almost provoked embarrassment in a latecomer. The tables were arranged in a circle and the whiteboard, on which the presenter could sketch calculations or business strategies if necessary, was at the front, not far from the door.

The head of the meeting therefore always sat with his back to the door. On entering the room, I thus had the feeling of stepping onto a stage, especially as the ceiling floodlight mounted above the whiteboard was directed at me like a spotlight.

For a while I remained in the half-open door like an actor who has forgotten his lines. All eyes were fixed on me. The looks showed the same mixture of astonishment and disgust that I was to encounter more often from then on.

At that time, however, I didn't understand what was going on. Sure, I certainly didn't look very good after a half-awake night. But did people therefore have to stare at me as if I were a zombie covered with blood?

My first thought was to leave the room backwards and just go home. But instead, in order to do anything at all, I closed the door behind me and took two steps forward. Why I then paused instead of simply walking towards the only vacant seat, I can't say myself. Probably I was unsettled by the inquiring looks that now no longer pierced my face but fixed with incredulous dismay a

spot diagonally behind me where the cone of light from the ceiling lamp should have drawn my shadow on the whiteboard.

At some point, I must have followed the others' line of vision and turned around to find out the reason for their concern. So I might have noticed that there, where – according to the laws of physics – my shadow should have been, the varnish of the whiteboard was just as immaculate as in the other places. The light simply disregarded me, it fell right through me, as if I wasn't there.

Was that perhaps the truth? Was I really not there? Was I only dreaming all this, or was I myself part of the dream of my colleagues, who were staring at me like a group of sleepwalkers dreaming of their awakening? But since when did sleepwalkers go on their nocturnal rambles in groups?

When my legs became unsteady and I started to sway, Carsten and Alex – who were sitting closest to me – came to my rescue and supported me under my arms. Otherwise I would probably have fallen directly onto the little table in front of the whiteboard, where a laptop and a projector were ready for Ms. Zimmerman's presentation.

"For God's sake, Theo, are you not well?" asked Alex worriedly. Someone said I'd better be laid down, but by then the two of them had already put me on Carsten's chair and were standing behind me – now paralysed in their turn – like two lapdogs unsettled by some strange disguise of their master.

"Should we get a doctor?" I heard someone ask. "Or maybe a glass of water?"

Of course, these words are only reconstructions, based more on the law of probability than on actual memories. Moreover, I am sure that more sentences were uttered than I remember in retrospect, and I may have said something in response. However, I can

only think of completely nonsensical statements such as: "Excuse me, I forgot my shadow at home, it won't happen again".

Therefore, I better refrain from describing the incident any further. If I stick closely to what I remember, I could in fact only reproduce the feeling of a drowning man who sees the faces of other people through the waves crashing over him – whereby it remains unclear whether their lips are actually moving or whether this impression is only due to the movement of the water.

Someone must have brought me home in the end. When I regained consciousness, it was already completely dark.

At first I wasn't sure whether I was just dreaming my awakening or was actually already awake. After some time, however, I realised that I was in my bedroom, lying on the bed still covered by the bedspread. I was dressed, except for my shoes and my jacket, which had been shoved under my head as a pillow substitute.



## A Promotional Letter from *Pleasant Work*



**Wednesday, July 19**

I hardly get any mail any more. Well of course – who should write to me? If I am honest, I'm still waiting for a sign from Lina. Since she's silent in the digital world, I sometimes hope she'll send me a funny little card, the old-fashioned way, to break the ice.

Sure, she has every reason to be angry with me. My behaviour towards her was really stupid. But that was several months ago. And hasn't my dismissal created a completely new situation? Is she really that resentful? Or has she simply cut me out of her life?

Out of sheer boredom, I have already started reading the junk mail. Today I got a particularly nice one:

Dear Mr. C.!

*Surely you too have often suffered from the blinking of your cursor indicating where you will place your next input.*

*As recent studies have shown, this is not just a nervous feeling of certain individuals, but a widespread problem. Our research team has also found evidence that blinking can cause serious damage to the retina.*

*At **Pleasant Work**, we have therefore developed a system that allows a completely new way of dealing with the flashing of the cursor. A special scent cocktail, for which no side effects have been detected so far, enables the brain to convert the cursor impulse into a motivating signal, which was felt by test subjects similar to a cheering call during sports. This gives your computer work a completely new quality!*

*In order to give as many people as possible the satisfaction that **Pleasant Work's** cocktail of fragrances provides when working with computers, we have developed a new generation of computers that are equipped with a special fragrance emitter. This not only compensates for the unpleasant effects of computer work. You are also directly connected to the scent emitter via the keyboard, so that your computer can respond to your moods like a sensitive friend!*

*Join us! Let us make you an offer that is individually tailored to your needs. **Pleasant-Work computer systems** are available in different versions. Find out more at [www.pleasantwork.com](http://www.pleasantwork.com) – or simply call us on 017071-224488! We are at your disposal at any time!*

It's funny what companies come up with to pull money out of people's pockets! Despite everything, I have clicked on the company's website. I was simply interested in the advertising concept. After all, a fragrance cannot be represented visually!

I must admit that the Pleasant Workers are quite creative. The whole website is interactive: You can talk directly to employees and even log into a special scent channel that gives you an idea of the new computer work concept.

However, the whole thing did not have a great effect on me. The scent was very artificial and reminded me more of the citrus smell in department stores' toilets. I could not at all detect a connection between the fragrances and my perception of the cursor.

However, I could have guessed that right away! So why do I get involved in a dialogue with people who make such bogus promises? Maybe because I want to get some practical help – something tangible, something immediately effective. With my memory work, I am somehow going round in circles. Apart from this, it is simply no pleasure to keep recalling unpleasant situations over and over again.

On the other hand, I don't want to run away from myself once more either. If only I knew whether it is courage or routine, honesty or just the need to distract myself from my own emptiness that keeps me writing!

But today I'm too tired to devote myself to my reconstruction work. Maybe I'll just go for a walk again – something that I haven't done for a long time. With the thick cloud cover hanging over the city today, my little flaw probably won't be noticed that much.



## Story of a Shadow Loss/10



**Thursday, July 20**

I wonder what my first thought was when I woke up that evening after my dizzy spell. But what does that mean – "my first thought"? Does it imply only what I consciously thought? Or does it also include the pre-conscious, semi-conscious and unconscious thoughts that were running through my head?

Perhaps it is wrong to ask about the first thought anyway. Shouldn't I rather ask about the first feeling? The first thought is already a form of censorship, the way in which the consciousness reacts to the feeling: rejecting, accepting, shaping, interpreting ... Thus I can possibly only remember the past correctly when I grasp the preliminary stage of my self-interpretation at that time. For this, however, I must first thoroughly reconstruct the past events.

## 10. Painful Awakening

When I close my eyes, I see myself getting out of bed that fateful evening and stepping in front of the large mirror in the hallway. Obviously this was an attempt to check the realness of the memories that were now seeping into my mind.

In any case, I hadn't switched on the light yet. So I could only dimly recognise my likeness in the mirror. I remember that I was extremely relieved to catch sight of it. Probably I assumed that since my reflection was still there, my shadow could not have disappeared either – so that the eerie images that rose up in me were perhaps only fragments of a nightmare.

Halfway reassured, I switched on the light and looked at my reflection again. At that moment – which I recall very clearly – I was struck by a tremendous horror.

Of course, I must have looked overtired, with rings under my eyes, a stubbly beard, tangled hair and crumpled clothes. That will not have failed to have an effect on me either. After all, who looks at himself intensely after having drunk the whole night away and having just woken up with a terrible hangover?

What really worried me, however, was something else. I had the feeling that I didn't know the one who was staring at me in such horror. It seemed like I was seeing him for the first time.

A senseless feeling of shame came over me. Involuntarily, I removed my gaze from the other person's eyes, the way you look to the side in embarrassment when you catch people picking their noses.

Only now did I realise that I was standing right under the ceiling spotlight that I had recently placed above the mirror. My heart began to beat faster, it twitched, it trembled, like the drum roll

before the tightrope walker's salto mortale, unsecured by any net.

Slowly I turned around, now already without any illusions about what I would perceive at my back. And indeed: No shadow of me was to be found.

Of course, with the indirect light, only a hint of shadow would have been visible, a shadowy bridge into the darkness of the room. But there was nothing to see at all. It was as if I didn't exist.

The light took note of the shoe cupboard, the pair of rubber boots in front of it, even of my old trench coat, which had been hanging untouched next the door since last winter. Only I was left out, as if my appearance was an embarrassing oversight that had to be concealed from the world.

What I did then was admittedly quite nonsensical, even if the situation might make it understandable. I went along all the light switches in my apartment, just in the way they came to my mind. I hurried through the kitchen, the living room and the bedroom, switching on the lights everywhere.

Probably, I told myself, it was all a result of the many indirect light sources in my flat. After all, shadow outlines can often only be perceived indistinctly, especially in diffuse light or when mixed with other shadow shapes.

But wherever I stood and however intensively I exposed myself to the light – my shadow had disappeared once and for all. I had to resign myself to it, whether I wanted to or not: I no longer had a shadow!

Now I suddenly found the light flooding in from everywhere unbearable. Staggering, I rushed from one light switch to the next

to restore the previous darkness. Then I let myself fall onto my television armchair.

In front of the television, I brooded dully until a reflection of light on the black screen startled me. I stood up and looked out the window. Was I mistaken or was someone watching me from across the street? Worried, I closed the curtains. For a moment I felt as if I were buried alive.



## Story of a Shadow Loss/11



### Friday, July 21

Strange ... The telephone conversation I had with Carsten back then, after I had become fully aware of my shadowlessness, had completely slipped my mind. Only now, in the course of my systematic reconstruction work, has it come back to my memory. I must have somehow repressed it.

Of course, today, more than half a year after the phone call, I only remember fragments of the conversation. Nevertheless, I will try to form a whole out of the scraps of words whirling around in my head – even if I am aware that in doing so, I am only lining the cave of forgetfulness with a new tapestry of fictions.

## 11. Phone Call with a Colleague

I can still see myself reaching for the mobile phone and dialling Carsten's number. A short toot, then I heard his voice: "Hello?"

"Hi, this is Theo." I tried to appear relaxed, but realised that I was doing a poor job of it. In the darkness, my voice sounded like shattering glass, and I myself was the intruder who had triggered the noise with a careless movement.

For an endless moment there was silence on the line. Then Carsten asked: "Hey, old chap, back from the dead again?"

"Yes, indeed," I murmured, "I feel better again." The commonplace phrase he had used provoked a strange uneasiness in me.

Carsten continued to talk to me in the non-committal collegial manner: "I guess you were pretty drunk last night, huh?"

Last night? Had the company outing really only been 24 hours ago? "I don't know," I replied evasively, "I can't remember exactly."

Carsten laughed. "There you go! My dear, you must have had a pretty good buzz. But the rest of us weren't quite sober any more either – otherwise we would certainly have stopped you from drinking any more."

"How ... how did I actually get home?" I asked cautiously. "I mean, at our team meeting, when I ..."

"When you fell off your feet?" interrupted Carsten, striving for a joking undertone. "Well, you ran away all of a sudden – have you really forgotten about that? But Sabrina and Nobby followed you. So they possibly drove you home."

"You know, Carsten ..." I hesitated. After all, I had assumed that Carsten himself had brought me home – a thought that now seemed completely absurd to me.

"Well?" Was I mistaken, or did his voice really sound slightly annoyed?

"Oh, nothing," I returned, discouraged. "I just thought ... When I stood in front of you all at the whiteboard .... when you looked at me there ..."

Carsten suddenly became more serious, almost fatherly: "Don't worry about it, dude. Everything will be fine. We all have our little quirks, and it..."

"No," I insisted, "I mean, when I was standing in front of the whiteboard, in the beam of light, you .... you must have ..."

Carsten tried to avoid the subject. It was clear that he was uncomfortable with it: "Hey! I'm telling you, it wasn't the end of the world! You just need a good rest and then everything will go back to normal. Of course, Ms. Zimmerman will expect an explanation from you."

I felt my mouth go dry. "Yes, of course ... Did she say anything about my ... my performance?"

"Nothing special, I think. We were all just ... well, let's say: worried when you came staggering in like that. But as I said, this can happen to anyone." He suddenly sounded strangely distant – as if he had set the speakerphone function to free his hands for something else.

I made another attempt: "Did I really just seem hungover when I ... I mean ...?"

"Wait a minute," he cut me off again, "my doorbell just rang."

I hadn't heard anything. But there are indeed very quiet doorbells that you don't necessarily notice through the phone. In any case, the short pause in the conversation was very helpful for me. I now realised that there was no point in continuing to talk to Carsten about the incident.

"So, here I am again," I heard him say after a while. It seemed to me that he was exhaling the air intermittently, like someone who had just lit a cigarette.

"If someone's coming to see you, we'd better break up," I offered. "I can call back later."

I heard Carsten take a drag on his cigarette. As he exhaled the smoke, he said: "Well, it you don't mind ..."

"Not at all," I affirmed, "no problem!"

Carsten sounded noticeably relieved. "Well then, cheer up!" he comforted me as we said goodbye. "I'm sure we'll work it out!"

For a moment I just stood there motionless, with the mobile phone in my hand, lost in thought. Why had I called Carsten in the first place? What had I expected from it? Finally, following a spontaneous impulse, I grabbed my trench coat and left the flat.





## Story of a Shadow Loss/12



**Saturday, July 22**

Where are you, my green-eyed girl? What have you done to me?  
Where do you live? Do you even exist at all?

These must have been the questions that went through my mind back then, the day after my encounter with the mysterious girl. However, when I think back to how I set out to find her the day after, I have the impression that it was done rather unconsciously. Like something that is so self-evident that it doesn't even need a conscious decision – but at the same time so outlandish that you can only do it in a kind of trance.

## 12. In Search of the Girl with the Green Eyes

It must have been around seven in the evening. I walked among all the people carrying shopping bags, not quite knowing where to go.

The weather had changed while I had been lying unconscious on the bed. A fine but dense rain dust glistened in the cones of light from the street lamps. Since I had forgotten to take an umbrella with me, the rain seeped incessantly through my hair and gathered as a thin trickle on my scalp.

After a while, I arrived at the large square that separates the center from the rest of the town. I crossed the main street, went to the stop in the middle of the pedestrian island and bought a ticket for the local area. Now I knew where I wanted to go. Shortly after, the tram came and took me to the station.

Fortunately, I didn't have to wait too long for the train. Some minutes past eight I arrived at Hadderstetten. Most of the stores had already closed, so the usual late-evening sepulchral silence spread through the pedestrian zone. Of course, the harbour district, where I wanted to turn my steps, would only now come to life – the mostly male visitors just appreciate the protection of darkness.

I walked through the deserted streets of Hadderstetten towards the park I had missed the previous evening. It was raining incessantly, so that my hair was soon completely soaked. It wasn't long before I found myself back at the broad street and the underpass through which I had entered the harbour district the day before.

It took me a while to find the alley that had led me into the red light district the previous night. In the thick fog, everything had

looked very different. The contours of things had blurred together and thus somehow seemed softer, like behind frosted glass.

Now I could no longer comprehend this sensation. Had I really found the red glow of the entertainment district to be welcoming – as a saving light that shows the lost wanderer the way home? This time it reminded me more of the ominous flickering of demon eyes. It was reflected thousandfold by the wet cobblestones and the numerous small puddles that had emerged between the irregularly placed stones. Intrusively, the neon signs burned into my eyes.

Due to the rain, the love-selling ladies pressed themselves tightly against the walls of the houses. Some even ducked under small umbrellas, while others hid in the doorways, from which they murmured to me as disembodied voices when I passed them. I tried to look like an uninvolved passer-by who had entered the district accidentally, so as to walk along the rows of houses as unmolested as possible.

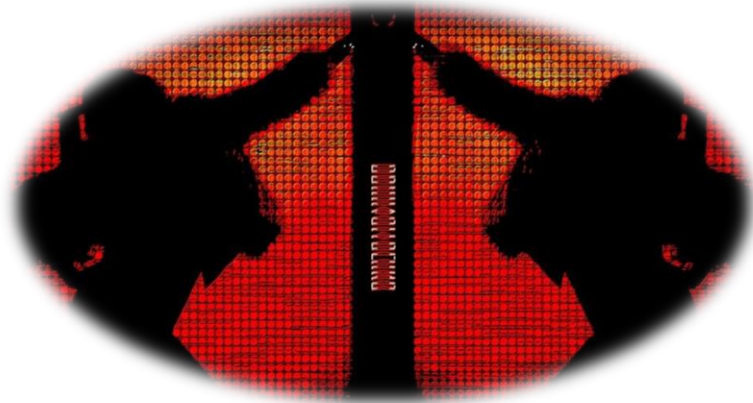
However, I was not very successful in this. The problem was that I couldn't take my eyes off the houses – especially not from the left row of houses, where I suspected the wooden house and the girl with the pond-green eyes. Moreover, I had to look into all the entrances. After all, it was quite possible that my lost love had also sought shelter there.

Finally, I reached the place where I expected the wooden house to be. Unfortunately, however, I only found a gap between two other houses there. Judging by the acrid smell that came up my nose, the place served as a public toilet. Just as I got there, a man who was still fiddling with his fly approached me from the dark.

Had I possibly been mistaken about the alley? Was I looking in the wrong place? Or was the house simply on the other side of the alley?



## Story of a Shadow Loss/13



**Sunday, July 23**

When I think that the starting point of all my problems is an encounter with a girl who possibly doesn't exist, I feel like going crazy right there and then – and maybe I already am.

Of course, everyone knows that the human mind is not at all inclined to depict the world in a realistic way. So I could get philosophical now and ask what reality is in the first place and how the realities of different people or even the realities of people and animals, which are equipped with completely different sensory organs, differ from each other. But that is not what I am concerned with.

What worries me is something that goes beyond this: the ability of our brain to make us perceive things as real experiences that are actually based on pure imagination – while at the same time we can remember what we have really experienced as a mere dream.

These are mental paths on which it is better not to venture too far. They lead into a fog-enshrouded bog where the gullets of despair are wide open.

### 13. Dream and Reality

After failing to find the wooden house where my green-eyed girl had welcomed me the night before, I took a deep breath and made a second attempt. I simply returned to the beginning of the alley and looked at the other row of houses. Unfortunately, this also proved unsuccessful.

Indecisively, I stopped and looked alternately to the left and to the right, searching for a clue that I might have missed so far. To the shivering ladies who were looking for a customer that would save them from waiting in the cold rain, I must have looked like a client failing due to his own inhibitions.

In any case, two ladies approached me and asked me almost motherly if they should not be of service to me. They had pressed themselves tightly together under a much too small umbrella. Behind their naked arms, covered with goose bumps, their pushed-up breasts piled up into a remarkable mountain of flesh. Disoriented as I was, I started a conversation with the ladies. "Maybe you can help me," I began, as if I were talking to two traffic wardens. "I'm looking for a girl I met yesterday in this alley. She has green eyes and lives in a wooden house that must be around here."

The shivering ladies gazed at me from their purple and black eyes, which appeared even darker under the umbrella. Obviously they didn't quite know how to react to my question. Finally the one on the left tried the usual teasing: "You're crazy about green eyes? That's something you can have with us, too! Our fingers turn everything green again."

She let her colourfully painted fingers flutter before my eyes. "Do you want to try how green it feels? Come on, Evelyn, we'll give him a free sample!"

From two sides, skilfull fingers stroked my cheeks. "Well, doesn't that feel green?" flattered Evelyn.

They looked at me expectantly. Apparently I was the first fish they had lured near their fishing line that evening.

"Very pleasant indeed," I praised them – after all, I didn't want to offend them. "But I'm really looking for the girl with the green eyes. I have very specific reasons for that."

Do you think we can't do the job? What did she do to you that was so special?" the left one asked, still half in a joking tone.

Now I began to feel a little queasy. "It's not what you think," I tried to talk my way out of it. "I just need to talk to the girl again, you know?"

"Sweetheart, if you want to chat, go to the Salvation Army. That's not our business," Evelyn barked at me.

So you don't know whom I mean?" It was nonsensical to persist with the question, but after all, this was my last chance.

"You know what, you scarecrow – get lost or we'll kick your ass!" Evelyn's colleague had raised her voice threateningly. At the same time, a man who had evidently been observing our conversation from a nearby doorway appeared in the semi-darkness behind her.

I mumbled an apology and quickly turned to leave. Only when I could no longer hear the cursing they were shouting after me did I slow down. Disillusioned, I went to the station and took the train home.

## A Visit from the Shadow Dealer/1



**Tuesday, July 25**

### 1. The Replacement Shadow

This morning – I was still having breakfast – I had a very strange visitor: When I opened the door, a ridiculous figure of a salesman stood in front of me.

Immediately he engaged me in a conversation: "Good morning, I am from Shadow Colours, and I would like to introduce you to our product range."

At first I just looked at him in consternation. Perhaps his appearance was deliberately chosen to attract all the attention and thus prevent potential customers from interrupting him. In any case, he did not let himself be distracted by my silence, but went on unperturbed with his torrent of words: "Dear Mr. C." – I involuntarily winced when he mentioned my name – "I don't



know if you have ever felt the need to be invisible to everyone in broad daylight ..."

He looked me straight in the eye, knowing about the effect of his words. "Perhaps," he added, lowering his voice in a complicit manner, "you sometimes also feel the desire to be someone completely different – a person with a different skin colour, a different sex, a different past, a different profession, a different personality? Don't think that's impossible!" he appealed to me. "Nothing is impossible if you believe in your possibilities. Or do you always want to run after reality? Always be second?"

He took a step back and eyed me sympathetically. "To be honest, Mr C., you don't look like that kind of person to me. You're more of a doer type – someone who prefers to shape reality himself instead of being enslaved by it. Wouldn't you agree?"

While he reeled off his speech – which he had obviously already held several times in front of stunned customers – I had the opportunity to take a closer look at him. He was wearing a light-grey salesman's suit, whose deliberately discreet design contrasted strikingly with the colourful lettering of various product names, which – almost like on a racing driver – were attached to numerous places on his jacket. For those who didn't pay closer attention, they appeared at first to be mere ornaments, which gave the whole figure a clownish look.

"I could also offer you," he continued, "some demonstration material that will show you our product range a little more vividly. Would you mind if I came in? Of course only for a short moment, I don't want to take up too much of your time! Time is money, who knows that better than me ..."

Without waiting for an answer, he stepped past me into the corridor. There he paused – expecting (or rather challenging) my approval of his proposal – and looked at me encouragingly.

Sighing, I resigned myself to my fate: "Well then, come in. It's just that the flat is rather untidy – I hope that doesn't bother you."

"Not at all, quite the opposite!" he affirmed. "After all, a conversation in an informal atmosphere is much more pleasant." The whole man was one big advertising smile. Everything about him expressed infinite goodwill.

I made a gesture with my hand to let the guest walk in front of me – as has been my habit since losing my shadow. On my way to the living room, I noticed that there was something diffuse about his shadow. It seemed as if it was constantly changing shape.

After we had sat down in my TV corner, he lifted his silvery shining salesman's case to his knees and fished out the announced illustrative material. "There we go ..."

Silently he waited until I turned my gaze on him. Then he fixed me again with his eyes: "I think we can talk openly?"

I nodded. It was one of those questions that didn't allow for a negative answer.

"You see, Mr. C.," he continued, leafing through his material, "problems like yours are quite solvable nowadays ..."

Before I could reply, he added with a knowing smile: "I do understand you, of course – for someone who is personally affected by something like this, it is a stroke of fate in any case. I always say it's a bit like death: a general fact, but in the concrete individual case nevertheless a tragedy. However, you can be sure that ..."

Since we had sat down, his tone had become much more confidential. In view of the open allusion to my problems, this made me feel highly uncomfortable, almost creepy: how did this guy

actually know about my problems? Or was he just pretending to know about them? Weren't his statements deliberately general, like newspaper horoscopes, which in their non-committal nature also somehow apply to everyone?

All of this made me feel quite uneasy. "Listen," I therefore interrupted the man. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"My dear Mr. C.!" He looked me in the face and then turned with almost provocative emphasis towards the side where my shadow should have been. "You don't have to pretend anything to me! We know our clients and we know what they have to go through. Believe me, I have come to help you. We want to be on friendly terms with you!"

I felt increasingly uncomfortable in my skin. "Perhaps you should finally show me what you have brought," I urged him curtly. "After all, I have some other things to do."

"That's exactly what I was about to suggest." Not at all impressed by my irritation, he reached for one of the brochures, opened it and placed it in front of me. I glanced at a page with a golden background, against which several shadow outlines stood out. On the side I saw explanations in small print. They were numbered, like in a mail-order catalogue, and referred to a price list at the bottom of the page.

The salesman first let the pictures unfold their effect on me before he continued to ensnare me. "All the products you see on this page," he explained, "have been tested for years. We only provide our customers with models that have been tested in a series of standardised everyday situations. So you can be one hundred percent sure that the products meet the requirements to be placed on them."

I was confused. "Excuse me, I don't quite understand what ..."

He made a placating gesture with his hand. "Don't worry: we don't want you to make a rash decision. After all, it is in our own interest that the customers feel at ease and that we don't have to make any subsequent changes. After all, such problems are inconvenient for everyone involved."

He turned back to the brochure and pointed to the silhouette at the top left of the page: "You see, this is our Classic design, for example – the standard version, so to say. But here too, of course, you have the guarantee that we will individually customise the shadow for you and adapt it to your personal needs."

I looked at him incredulously: "You want to sell me an artificial shadow?"



## A Visit from the Shadow Dealer/2



**Wednesday, July 26**

The encounter with the shadow dealer was so unpleasant for me that I did not even manage to write further about it yesterday. Even just thinking back on the conversation, I feel as if someone is sedating me with a sweet poison that is imperceptibly paralysing my limbs.

What I also find disconcerting is that I can hardly remember the man's face – even though I sat opposite him for at least half an hour. Of course, it was a common face, a typical salesman's face that deliberately hides behind a mask of benevolence to make it easier to lure the victim.

Probably the man was nothing but a trickster. Did all his obscure advertising words have the sole purpose of scouting out my flat and stealing from me behind my back? But nothing is missing from the flat ...

And what if he just wanted to spy on me in preparation for a break-in? Perhaps I was a bit too naïve after all. It makes me shudder just to think of that man's pried piper smile! That almost priestly glow in his eyes with which he initiated me into the world of artificial shadows ...

## 2. Shadow Models

Actually, I should not speak of "artificial shadows" here. After all, the shadow dealer himself explicitly rejected this term.

"Most of our customers," he explained to me, "are surprised by the technical possibilities we have in this field today. But I would not use the word 'artificial' in this context. 'Artificial' sounds a bit like 'fake', and by no stretch of the imagination can you say that about our models. They are more like a second skin. The process of shadow adaptation works similarly to organ transplantation – the body has to accept the foreign organ as its own, otherwise the whole project fails."

Now he had made me curious after all. "And ... what would the *Classic* model offer me in concrete terms?" I wanted to know.

The shadow dealer twitched his eyes barely noticeably – like a lion watching a victim stumble.

He moved a little closer and explained in a jovial manner: "The *Classic* model offers its owner everything that his innate shadow also offered him. This shadow is the perfect double of its master. It reacts to all his movements, lets him sink into the sea of other shadows when necessary, relates him to them where necessary, sometimes even rushes ahead, but never removes itself from its master in an undue way. There are many clients for whom this is

fully sufficient – even though it must be said that we have much more advanced options for umbratic interaction today."

He pointed to the silhouette in the middle of the page, around which the other models were grouped: "Take, for example – as an admittedly extreme standard of comparison – the *De Luxe* model. This model includes all the services that are also provided by the classic version. But on top of that, it offers you the possibility of the so-called prokinetic vibration, which makes you appear to others as a mirror image of their own ideal. The model is therefore just as helpful in the search for a partner as it is in career advancement."

I must confess that my initial resistance now gave way more and more to a lively interest. If – which was of course still possible – the man was not a charlatan, he offered me the opportunity not only to overcome my shadowlessness, but almost to use it productively.

Therefore, I now began to ask about the details: "Tell me, please, this model *De Luxe* ... it probably isn't quite cheap?"

He sensed that his victim had almost swallowed the bait. So his tone became a little more jaunty, while at the same time his voice retained its solemn, subdued tone. An outsider would probably have taken him for a good acquaintance of mine now.

"Cheap! Expensive!" He drew out the words as if they were something offensive. "Aren't these very relative terms? Of course, our products are a bit more expensive than, say, an ordinary mid-range car – but they also offer you something very special in return!"

He pointed to the silhouette on the right under the *De Luxe* model: "Remember that I asked you if you had ever wanted to be invisible in broad daylight? Well, our model *Private* offers you

exactly this possibility: no one will take any further notice of you if you opt for this shadow version. In contrast, those who choose the *Entertainer* model will achieve exactly the opposite: they will always be in the focus of attention. As you can see, each model is precisely tailored to the particular needs of the customer."

He turned away from the brochure and looked me in the eye again: "Of course, mixed versions are also conceivable. We produce them as special designs if required. But above all, we have the possibility today to fit several shadows to one client – the right model for every occasion. Considering all this, you will realise that we are not simply talking about an ordinary act of purchase here. Rather, it is an investment in your future – and for that, no price should be too high!"

The salesman's eagerness had made me a little more suspicious again: "Are you seriously suggesting that a person can have several shadows at the same time?"

He smiled at me in a superior way. "Technically, this is indeed no longer a problem nowadays. I would even say that it is almost standard today. Most of our clients have a spare shadow, many even order a third shadow, just in case."

If anything, my scepticism seemed to spur him on even more. He probably understood it as a sign of a deeper interest that only needed to be converted into hard cash. As if on a sudden inspiration, he added: "You know what, I'll make you a proposal: this DVD here contains an offer for a shadow adaptation that is individually tailored to your needs."

I glanced at the DVD case he held out to me – indeed, my name was engraved on it. Underneath, shimmering like a hologram, the word "Shadow Adaptation" glowed at me.



"Normally," the shadow dealer explained, "we ask our customers to pay a certain share of the costs for something like this. After all, it means a considerable effort for us to adjust our models – even if only temporarily – to the personalities and lifestyles of our clients. The whole thing also contains a strong prognostic component, which is often underestimated by our customers. That's why we usually can't give such things away completely free of charge."

He let his gaze rest approvingly on me. "In your case, I think we can make an exception – since you are so vividly interested in our product range ..."

I looked at him expectantly: "That is?"

An appraising look met my eyes. "That means that I could let you keep this DVD here ... well, let's say: for a fortnight. The brochures remain with you in any case, of course. So you can think everything over again at your leisure. Two weeks from now I will get back to you to discuss the next steps. As I said, this is a bit against our terms and conditions – but it will remain between us, won't it?"

He winked at me with a conspiratorial face, so that I felt like after a successful, albeit not entirely legal business deal. I had the impression that I could only win here. So I agreed to his proposal without hesitation. After all, I was not committing myself to anything. If the offer – viewed with a little more distance – should seem too dubious to me, I could still refuse it.



## Story of a Shadow Loss/14

Thursday, July 27

### Everyday Worries

Today a bank employee called me up. He said that a large amount of money had been deposited in my account: Would I be interested in an investment meeting?

That's how I got to know that the severance pay had been transferred to me. Obviously, someone wanted this done quickly – probably for fear that I might change my mind in the end!

And with this enormous fortune I was supposed to start a career as a stock market speculator? I would have laughed out loud if I hadn't known all too well that from next month on – unless the famous fairy godmother with the magic wand comes to my rescue – my cash flow might dry up altogether. In this case, I will probably get a completely different call from the bank.

So reality knocks on my door everywhere: Money worries will drive me to the job center, going to the job center means going outside, going outside means becoming a zoo animal, an object for the shuddering curiosity of passers-by. Not to mention the assessment machinery and the highly embarrassing interrogations I will be subjected to at the job center!

So I'd rather crawl back into my reconstruction work. After all, I still have enough money in my account! And who knows, maybe I will feel purified and strengthened after the journey into the past, like the heroes of mythology who return from their expedition to the underworld as if born anew.



## 14. Phone Call with Lina

When I woke up the morning after my odyssey through the harbour district, I felt exhausted like after a long, arduous journey. Through the open curtains, rain-grey light fell on my bed, where I lay mindlessly, my eyes turned to the ceiling. I remember trying to move as little as possible, as if I were afraid of waking up someone.

But that someone was none other than my own self, experiencing a fierce, strenuously suppressed disgust with myself. Even the air I sucked in and exhaled in an uncontrollable automatism caused me a painful awareness of my lungs. Like bellows, they bumped against my ribcage.

What was left for me to do now? Basically, I couldn't go on living like that. A shadowless person would be considered a public nuisance everywhere. At best I would be tolerated in some asylum. But what kind of life would that be?

So should I draw a line under it all? Wasn't a free death preferable to an unfree life?

But this thought, too, was repugnant to me. After all, even a suicide would have entailed, at least for a short time, an increased sensation of my own body. Perhaps, I thought, I should become a commuter between the poles and always stay where eternal night prevails. But electric light was everywhere nowadays, and even in moonlight the body could cast a shadow.

I got up, undressed and threw my clothes into the washing machine in disgust. I would rather have burned them, as if that could erase the last 36 hours from my life. Then I went to the bathroom to take a shower. Following an intense washing compulsion, I let the water trickle over my body for half an eternity. Afterwards, I

put on new clothes and made some coffee. I was pouring myself the second cup when my mobile phone rang. It was Lina.

"Hello Theo, it's me, Lina. I just wanted to ask if you're feeling better," I heard her say.

Her voice sounded strangely distorted. Involuntarily I had to think of a yellowed photo showing people from a time long gone.

"Lina! This is really ... really a surprise," I stammered.

"Alex told me about your dizzy spell," Lina explained sympathetically. "So I thought I'd better give you a call."

"Alex? So you yourself weren't there when I ..." I tried feverishly to remember the scene in the team room. But no matter how hard I tried, I only saw a sea of eyes in front of me that I couldn't assign to any particular face.

Lina's voice trembled barely noticeably. "I wasn't in the office yesterday. The high was probably too strong ..." Was she trying to hint at something – possibly to our little flirtation at the company outing?

"Probably the alcohol," I replied. "I think we all overdid it a bit with the wine tasting."

Secretly, I hoped she would correct me. But Lina deflected: "Yes, that's right ... But what I really wanted to ask you: What was actually going on in the team room? I just couldn't make sense of what Alex told me."

Of course I would have loved to know what exactly Alex had told her about the incident. But asking was not an option – it would have sounded too suspicious. So I said briefly: "It's not easy to explain that on the phone. But maybe ... I mean ... if you feel like it, we could meet tonight – then I'll explain everything to you."

To my surprise, Lina readily agreed to my proposal: "Good idea. Shall we meet at the station? Or how about the new pizza place on the market square?"

Now I was getting cold feet after all. Why the hell did I have to babble so carelessly! In any case, the thought of sitting down in a crowded restaurant was quite unbearable to me. What if people noticed my flaw there and Lina turned away from me as a result? This thought made me realise that I hoped she wouldn't do that. Thereupon my confusion finally got stuck as a thick ball between the root of my tongue and the back of my throat.

"Theo? Are you still there?" Lina's voice reached my ear as if from far away.

Suddenly I felt like a cornered animal. With a dry mouth, I mumbled something about "boiling milk" and "turning off the stove" and that I would call her back in a few minutes. I don't know why I came up with this excuse of all things. After all, I hardly ever drink warm milk. But of course Lina couldn't know that. And at that moment I was just glad that I could end the embarrassing conversation and turn off the mobile phone.



## Story of a Shadow Loss/15



**Friday, July 28**

Was the phone call with Lina really as embarrassing as it appeared to me yesterday? Or does it only seem that way because I can't separate my current feelings for Lina from what happened afterwards?

In fact, when I think back to her today, her picture seems overlaid with a deluge of nightmarish memories. The first telephone conversation with her thus appears like a small mosaic piece in a large wall relief, almost meaningless, but inseparable from the overall impression created by the painting.

At least Lina obviously didn't resent the sudden termination of the phone call. Otherwise she would hardly have called again shortly afterwards. And not only that: she even spontaneously invited me to her place! All this must have been like a liberation for me back then, a sudden breath of air in the tomb where I was buried alive! So why is that not the crucial impression that has stuck in my memory? Was the unpleasantness at that moment really so dominant? Or is it only the subsequent events that cast the conversation with her in such a gloomy light?

## 15. An (Un)Erotic Adventure

I wonder what I felt when I set off to visit Lina that day. What were my expectations of the visit? Was I simply hoping for a deepening of the conversation we had started on the phone – the vibrating of two strings that are getting closer and closer in their rhythm? Or was I secretly looking for an amorous adventure? But does one thing exclude the other? Isn't an erotic encounter the most intense form of confiding in each other?

At any rate, the atmosphere in which Lina and I talked that evening was erotically charged. Maybe that wasn't the case right at the beginning. But at the latest when we moved from the table to her couch corner, there was a certain crackling in the air. Our eyes were moist and our voices sounded softer, perhaps a little hoarser than usual.

I still remember the electrifying feeling that ran through my veins when our hands gently began to play with each other. Almost physically, I can sense their shy approach, their cautious exploration of the foreign being, before they finally indulged completely in their desire for expedition.

I like these first moments of a blossoming love, this strange oscillation between unconsciousness and highest consciousness. This spiritual intoxication in which the ego is completely with itself and yet completely concentrated on an event at the outermost periphery of its own being. That moment outside of time when, standing on a cliff, we touch with our fingertips the fingertips of a person standing on the opposite cliff, who stretches out his arms to us over the crashing surf. That sweet taste on the lips, their soft yielding when they approach each other.

Of course, we soon began the kind of conversation in which the double meaning of the word "tongue" unfolds its full meaning. Our hands were now completely off the leash, circling freely around us, up and down our bodies. Each inebriated by the other's breath, we gradually lost all sense of time and space.

Lina was wearing a low-cut blouse that day. It was easy to fumble the three or four buttons that held it together out of the button-holes. Deftly she shook off the silky garment. Now all that remained was to unfasten the buckle of the brassiere at her back. While I was fiddling with it, Lina's fingers glided under my shirt and skilfully pulled it over my head. Then she slipped off the straps of her brassiere and let herself sink back into the sofa.

A few days earlier, everything would have taken the usual course now. After all, thinking was switched off, instincts had taken over.

But something was bothering me. There was an eerie tremor in the air. I suddenly had the feeling that Lina was no longer who I thought she was. Behind her half-closed eyelids, a pond-green abyss seemed to shimmer, threatening to pull me into the depths. Her whole appearance blurred before my eyes, as if she were nothing but a ghost that had temporarily materialised.





## Story of a Shadow Loss/16



**Friday, July 28, evening**

### Flying Foxes

A few years ago I once observed flying foxes in a zoo. They had a nice, spacious enclosure where they kept fluttering back and forth with a quiet, barely audible beat of their wings, snacking now and then on the bowl of fruit that was waiting for them on the floor.

What fascinated me so much about these animals was that they were strange and familiar to me at the same time. With their dark shining wings, whose span exceeds that of bats by far, they seemed to me like creatures from an ancient past. When they came close to the wire mesh that surrounded their cage, it was almost as if I could feel the breath of another time, infinitely long ago, in the beat of their wings.

And yet, as strange as they were to me, I felt close to these creatures in a peculiar way. Whenever one of the tiny dragons had

satisfied its desire to fly and its appetite, it would snuggle back into the ball of its fellow dragons, which hung from the ceiling as a living cocoon in a corner of the cage. It was as if the animals consoled themselves in this way about their captivity.

Of course, in their case it was a very tangible captivity, a separation from the freedom of their natural environment. But weren't they also fleeing in their shared nest from a different, fundamental captivity that affects all living beings equally – from the captivity in an existence that radically separates us from others? From a confinement within ourselves, from which only in very few moments a bridge leads to another existence?

Somehow I have the feeling that everything would have developed differently if I hadn't been so stupid with Lina back then. But what does that mean: stupid? It wasn't a conscious decision to suddenly withdraw from her. Rather, I followed an inner compulsion that is incomprehensible even to me today.

## 16. Alienation

If I think back to the moment when my tête-à-tête with Lina came to such an abrupt end, all I see before me is a great darkness. The only thing I can remember clearly is this unexplainable slump in my desire, this sudden indifference that finally gave way to a kind of disgust. It was as if someone had injected me with a drug that reversed the effect of the hormones released.

This is how Adam must have felt after he had tasted from the tree of knowledge! All of a sudden, things lost their self-evidence. The fleshy appendix that grew strangely out of the middle of my body suddenly seemed like a rapidly growing ulcer. And the

blood-red lobe in my mouth, whose silent speaking I had experienced as so pleasurable a moment before, now felt like a dead fish that prevented me from breathing.

However, the feeling of disgust was directed only at myself, not at Lina, who had sunk back into the pillows. For her, I rather felt something like pity in this situation.

"What's the matter?" she asked, disconcerted. "Is something wrong?"

"I can't do this," I muttered.

She half sat up. "What does that mean – you can't do this?" It sounded astonished, but also a little amused.

"Nothing more than that I can't do it," I replied, gruff with disappointment at myself. "I don't have a shadow," I added quietly, as if explaining my behaviour to myself.

To my surprise, she was not at all taken aback by my outing: "That doesn't matter at all. Thousands of people walk through the world without a shadow."

I looked at her steadfastly. Only now did I realise that we had been talking about nothing but general topics the whole time. The incidents in the team room hadn't even been mentioned – and yet that was the very reason I had come to see Lina!

She leaned forward and touched my chest tenderly with her lips. "Because of something like that," she whispered, "you don't have to deny yourself all joy in life." Absent-mindedly, she stroked my chest hair with her fingers.

I felt misunderstood. For a while I kept silent and let Lina, who continued to play with my chest hair, have her way. Finally, I grabbed her by the shoulders and looked her in the eye. "Lina," I said firmly, "I don't know if you've understood me correctly: I really don't have a shadow. I mean that quite literally."

Only now did a slight astonishment mingle in her gaze – though not in the way I had suspected. "But I don't doubt that at all!" she affirmed. "Do you think I haven't noticed that?" Teasingly, she added: "I just don't see what that has to do with your ... your skill in a particular field."

She wanted to free herself from my grip and resume her previous caresses. But I had definitely lost all desire. It seemed to me that Lina did not take my problems seriously. So I released myself from her and went to stand by the window.

Lina's flat was in a dimly lit side street, which was now gradually sinking into a gloomy November twilight. We must have talked for quite a long time. But no matter how hard I tried to remember the topics we had broached, I could not recall anything in particular.

Although I felt Lina's disappointed look at my back, I finally announced coldly that I had to go now. It hurt myself to leave her just at this moment, when the world outside was melting into a shapeless mist. But it was unthinkable to resume the warm-hearted, harmless tone of conversation from before. That was probably why I sounded so dismissive and left Lina as if in a quarrel.

I slipped on my shirt, jacket and shoes, then rushed out without a word. As soon as I stepped out of the house, I myself no longer understood why I was behaving like this. But now, of course, there was no turning back.

## Hidden Camera



**Saturday, July 29**

My God, how naive I was! Instead of sitting down at the computer, I might as well have stood in the marketplace and stripped naked in front of everyone! There really are some voyeurs sitting there like spiders in the world-wide web, biting as soon as they sense even the slightest wriggle in the web. One false move and they'll wrap you up!

O.K., you net peepers, here's some bait for you:

**Hello my name is Theo I am a perverted child molester my cock is as long as an elephant's trunk I have rubbed it with cocaine**

## **my transsexual boyfriend and I just love it!!!!**

My virus scanner assures me that the computer is fed with all the necessary updates. But of course there is also a premium version, which is highly recommended to the troubled user. Special tip: I should get some encryption software, something like that is not so easy to crack, they say. What the recommendation omits: The whole thing is quite a bit more expensive than an ordinary fire-wall, of course!

And what if I have misinterpreted the DVD? – Impossible, a mistake is almost unthinkable! What a fool I am to look at such a thing at this delicate point in my reconstruction work!

Another escape ... But this time things have gone badly wrong. After all, I can't just carry on as if nothing had happened. Maybe I should sit down at the kitchen table like a Stone Age man and scribble on a steno pad. As things go, that would be almost conspiratorial! But I don't even have any paper in the house!

So once again in plain language: Last night I watched the DVD that the shadow dealer had left for me! Spherical sounds at the beginning, gentle murmur of the sea, a weightless surf flowing through the screen – I felt truly relaxed.

After some time, very slowly, a figure emerges from the fog. At first it is only dimly discernible, then it emerges more and more clearly, but continues to swim facelessly through the surf for quite some time.

When it finally becomes clear that it is a man walking through the mist, the spherical music gradually dies down until only the back-

ground basses remain. These now grow louder in swelling staccato, like a heart beating in excitement.

At the same time, the previously shapeless surf splits into smaller swirls that begin to circle around the man with increasing speed. At the end, he himself is included in the dizzying gyrations, though he still keeps his face turned towards the camera. It almost seems as if his head detaches itself from his restless body.

All of a sudden an unnaturally clear beam of light falls on his features, he screams, but the throbbing of the bass drowns everything out. The camera pans to the space behind him, scans the ground in front of him, goes to the path on the right, then to the area on the left next to him and finally circles around him once more.

The change of shots is now so fast that the viewer becomes dizzy. The camera looks at the man from diagonally below and from diagonally above, from the right and from the left – until it finally becomes clear what it is trying to show so obtrusively: The man has no shadow!

Everything becomes very quiet, the camera calms down and shows the man again from the long shot. It watches the clouds of mist sucking him in as the bass rises to a final drum roll.

At that moment, a voice from offstage warns: "Don't let it get that far! Think about your shadow precautions in good time! Come to *Shadow Colours*, your reliable partner for shadow adaptations of all kinds. *Shadow Colours* – the colours that cover you!"

The DVD alone probably wouldn't have upset me that way. It's just an advertising film, the kind you've seen a hundred times before. The shocking thing about the film for me was the man's face – because it was, without a doubt, my own face! So either

someone secretly must have recorded me walking into the morning by the river in Hadderstetten, or the advertising guys used computer animation to turn my digital self-talk into a personal horror trip.

Or is the whole thing just a clever bluff? After all, the camera work is deliberately chaotic and the man's face is only indistinctly visible in the sea of fog. So did I just fall for the typical tricks of the commercial filmmakers – and intuitively endowed an every-man's face with my features?

I could just press "play" and watch everything again from the beginning ... But no, that would be unbearable!





## Story of a Shadow Loss/17

**Monday, July 31**

An unpleasant suspicion has crept up on me. I hope I'm only imagining the whole thing, but I just can't talk myself out of my distrust. All morning I have been trying to remember a certain detail of my second visit to Lina – but so far without satisfactory results. So I have decided to reconstruct everything once again in context. Maybe this will help me to remember details more clearly.



### 17. Strange Visit to Lina

Driven by a mixture of shame and longing, I had made my way back to Lina's house the very morning after my disgraceful performance. As no one opened the door, I assumed that Lina was perhaps in the bathroom. After a while, noises from inside reached my ears. So I rang the bell again and put my ear to the door to make sure I hadn't misheard anything.

I just managed to get up before the door opened and Lina stood in front of me, wearing nothing but a dressing gown. It was obvious that she was not particularly thrilled to see me. Sure, I could understand her. Nevertheless, her gloomy expression was a stab in the heart for me.

"Lina, I ... I'm sorry," I stammered, staring at her dressing gown. Lina shook her head. I was afraid she would just slam the door in my face. But then her anger burst out of her: "What the hell are you thinking? First you just run away, and then you suddenly show up again, just like that. Do you think I just sat down on the sofa and waited for you?"

"I know myself that I acted like a fool," I apologised. Involuntarily I lowered my voice: "But I already told you yesterday that ... that I don't have a shadow."

Lina looked at me indecisively. "All right, come in," she finally relented. "But I must tell you right away, I don't have much time today. I'm busy."

The coldness in her voice made me sad, but nevertheless I was glad she let me in. I had no doubt that she would forgive me after I had calmly explained everything to her again.

On her living room table, various documents and files were piled up. "That's how it is when you come unannounced," Lina remarked reproachfully, reading my gaze. "There's work going on here right now. I'm sorting out some insurance documents," she explained.

I noticed that she stressed every word as if she were talking to someone who was hard of hearing. At the same time, she quickly went to the opposite door leading to the bedroom. Before closing it, she made a jerky movement with her head, as if to draw someone else's attention to me.

All this allowed me to draw only one conclusion: obviously Lina had quickly found a replacement for me! With this substitute she now continued what she had not succeeded in doing with me yesterday. So this was the "business" she had talked about so pompously!

I felt like a child whose ice cream had been knocked out of the hand. "Sorry," I said curtly, "I didn't mean to disturb you." With that, I turned to leave.

Lina looked me in the eye. There was a hurried expression in her gaze. "It's okay," she replied, "now you're here. So tell me: what do you want?"

She had remained standing, so I didn't sit down either. I kept silent, partly out of pain and partly out of defiance. After all, she knew exactly what I wanted. Her question was only meant to embarrass me. Aimlessly, my eyes roamed her room. At that moment, I caught sight of something I didn't pay attention to back then. Today, however, I tremble inside when I recall it.

Yesterday I took a closer look at the cover of the Shadow Colours DVD. I just wanted to know where this strange company is based. After all, the shadow dealer neither gave me a business card nor wrote down any contact details. Not even on the brochures an address can be found.

While looking at the DVD case, a detail from Lina's flat suddenly came back to my mind. During my visit, a ray of sunlight fell on the shelf next to the computer where Lina keeps her CD and DVD collection. A DVD case was leaning half-open against the front of the shelf. And on its surface it glittered as if a hologram were depicted on it – a hologram like the one on the DVD the shadow dealer gave me!

As I said, I didn't attach any importance to this small detail at the time. After all, a hologram is nothing unusual in itself. Too bad that now I can only remember it in a blurred way! No matter how hard I try, I just can't recall it more clearly.

So am I mistaken in assuming that Lina also owns a DVD of Shadow Colours? Or is it true after all? Did she also get in touch with this ominous company?

If that were the case, it would shed a totally new light on the events. What if Lina had an artificial shadow even before our first encounter? The thought frightens me as much as it comforts me. It feels like this would make it easier for me to bear the sudden changes in Lina's behaviour – as if they hadn't actually been initiated by her.

Of course, I would then also have to re-evaluate my first visit with her – which I am reluctant to do for the same reasons for which I would be comfortable reinterpreting the second encounter.

I still get feelings of trepidation when I think back to the icy silence with which Lina drove me away; to the sharp tone in which she finally kicked me out: "If you don't have anything to say, you'd better go!"

The doorbell is ringing – probably the shadow dealer again! I just won't open the door and let him ring his fingers to the bone out there. I'm sure he was just waiting for me to watch the DVD. Maybe it gives off some kind of signal when being played. Do they think I won't notice? I'm not going to let them do everything to me!

Now he's even banging on the door! That's really ... What is this? Is he trying to break down the door?

# The Hunter of the Shadowless/1



**Tuesday, August 1**

Should I perhaps call Lina again after all? The thought that she might also have something to do with this literally obscure company still haunts me. And besides, if Lina had (or still has) contact with Shadow Colours, she can surely tell me something about the SIA – an enigmatic agency I'll probably have to visit soon. Maybe it's best if I first review yesterday's events.

## **1. Caught in the Net**

Full of rage, I had finally jumped up from the computer to end the persistent ringing and knocking at my door. I was determined to put the shadow dealer – who else but he could harass me in this way? – in his place once and for all. Now I myself wondered how he could have wrapped me around his finger like that. Well,

I would make it clear to him that I was not willing to let him fool me any longer!

But when I opened the door with a furious swing, it was not the shadow dealer who stood opposite me, but a short, somewhat stocky-looking man I had never seen before. Piqued by my impetuous greeting, he took a step back. His hair, parted on the side, shone in the light of the hallway. Whether it had just not been washed for a long time or had been rubbed with pomade, I could not tell at first glance.

"Why the hell are you ringing like crazy? Can't you wait?" I snapped at him.

The man in front of me was not at all put off by my rude tone. Seemingly indifferent – like at a ticket check when you show the properly validated ticket – he took a transparent envelope from the breast pocket of his unfashionable suit jacket, through which a passport photo and an official badge were shimmering.

"Cramer, Shadow Investigation Officer," he introduced himself. "I'm a plenipotentiary of the Shadow Investigation Agency, SIA for short ..."

He let the strange abbreviation resonate meaningfully, as if it was supposed to tell me something. But I just looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"I really don't know what you're talking about," I admitted gruffly. It annoyed me that there were obviously more people than the shadow dealer snooping around in my life. This guy from Shadow Colours wouldn't have scared me anymore. But as it was, I had to readjust to a completely new situation.

"Don't you think, Mr C., that we should go inside to discuss the matter?" The peculiar visitor looked around the hallway conspicuously, as if to emphasise the delicate nature of his concern.

With a sweeping gesture of my hand, I pointed into the flat. "You are welcome, make yourself at home!" I invited him sarcastically. But my irony probably seemed a bit forced. In truth, I was not at all in the mood for joking. After all, even this stranger was familiar with my name, as if I were a famous film actor. Surely he too had been watching me through his net telescope for quite a while.

*No, I will not reveal my surname here anyway! Whoever is watching me right now should know that I am not willing to make it too easy for him.*

Unlike the shadow dealer, who had carried his documents in a brightly polished case, the representative from the S.E.S. held a worn leather briefcase in his hand. This he placed beside the dining table like a teacher who wants to keep his pupils on tenterhooks by looking at the examination papers.

He sat down opposite me at the table, clasped his hands together and looked me in the face with the complacent sadistic kindness of an interrogator. That did not bode well.

"Well then, Mr C.," he began, "Theo C., if I'm not mistaken ..."

He made an effort to reach for his briefcase to check my personal details, but I professed to be myself straight away.

A reproving look met my eyes. "So, Mr. C., I assume you are aware of the implications regarding your misconduct?"

I decided to go on the offensive this time, especially as I had no desire to be subjected to a prolonged interrogation by the sleazy figure: "If you want to allude to my shadowlessness, then say it openly and don't act so secretive!"

He smiled subtly. "I thought it would be in your interest not to make a big fuss about your little, say, blemish for the time being." Disparagingly, he looked around my room. "It almost seems to

me," he stated, "that you are not quite familiar with the provisions of the S.L.A."

I was confused – and at the same time annoyed that he had managed to unsettle me in the end. "S.L.A.? What does that mean?" I asked, a little more accommodating in tone. After all, I didn't know what kind of powers this man – ridiculous as he seemed – was entitled to.

Mr. Cramer shook his head. His eyebrows arched in a disapproval that almost showed disgust. "Are you seriously trying to tell me that you have never heard of the Shadow Loss Act? My dear Mr. C.: Surely you don't want me to believe that you have been walking through the world without a shadow for over half a year and have never once asked yourself what regulations the legislator has enacted for such a case!"





## The Hunter of the Shadowless/2



**Wednesday, August 2**

### The Merciless Ticket Inspector

Some dreams are like salesmen who try to entice you with supposedly free offers. Once you have fallen for the bait, it won't take long before they charge you for the apparent gift.

This is also the case with my childhood dream of becoming a ticket inspector. Whenever I felt unfairly treated by someone, I used to imagine that the person was a passenger on a train controlled by me, the most incorruptible of all ticket inspectors.

As small as I was, my power had no limits. Anyone who did not comply with me could be led away by an army of uniformed men who were obliged to obey me unconditionally.

Even the slightest misbehaviour was mercilessly punished by me: feet resting on the cushions in street shoes, dripping ice balls or

music played too loudly. Whoever dared to oppose me was immediately expelled from the train.

The favourite target of my inspector fantasies was my English teacher. My scribbled writing had the same effect on him as hairy spider legs do on some people. Whenever he returned my exercise book to me, his red pen had run riot in it like a sexual offender in a sadistic bloodbath.

Once, after a particularly violent red pen attack, I even made my imaginary train stop on the open track and let the serial offender trudge home through mud and slush in the middle of winter.

The price I have to pay for my childhood dream is that it has just now returned to my memory. At a moment, of all times, when I myself am in danger of becoming the victim of such a merciless pursuer of rule-breakers.

## 2. The Shadow Loss Act

"Shadow Loss Act" – even the most zealous bureaucrats couldn't come up with something like that! For a moment I thought the representative of the Shadow Investigation Agency was pulling my leg. But I could not read the faintest hint of mockery in the eyes of my counterpart. So I involuntarily assumed a defensive attitude.

"I would never have thought that the loss of a shadow could be subject to regulations," I confessed meekly.

"You are aware, I hope," the pale servant of the law reprimanded me, "that your ignorance does not protect you from the sanctions stipulated by the law in case of transgression?"

"Sanctions?" I indignantly echoed. "But I am the one who has suffered a loss! I don't see why that should entail sanctions."

"The loss itself is indeed not criminalised by the law," the SIA representative instructed me. "Although there were and still are dissenting opinions that consider those affected as complicit in the loss. However, the law – in the interest of public welfare – provides for an obligation to report lost shadows to the authorities. Accordingly, the loss of a shadow must be declared within a period of three days from the moment of the loss.

If the person suffering the loss does not comply with this time limit, a fine must be paid, which is calculated according to the extent to which the time limit was exceeded. In the case of proven persistent resistance to the reporting requirement, more extensive penalties may also be imposed, including deprivation of civil rights."

The rest of his lecture he had rattled off like a robot – obviously I was not the first person to whom this archangel of legislation appeared. Nevertheless, his words did not fail to have an effect on me, especially as they caught me completely off guard.

I gazed at him, startled: "And what do you think I should do now?"

He answered me with the smug satisfaction of a teacher perceiving the dismay in the face of a pupil who has failed the test: "How you should behave depends – as I have just tried to explain to you – not on my personal opinion but on the legal regulations. This means that tomorrow at the latest you must go to the Shadow Investigation Agency and register the loss of your shadow there."

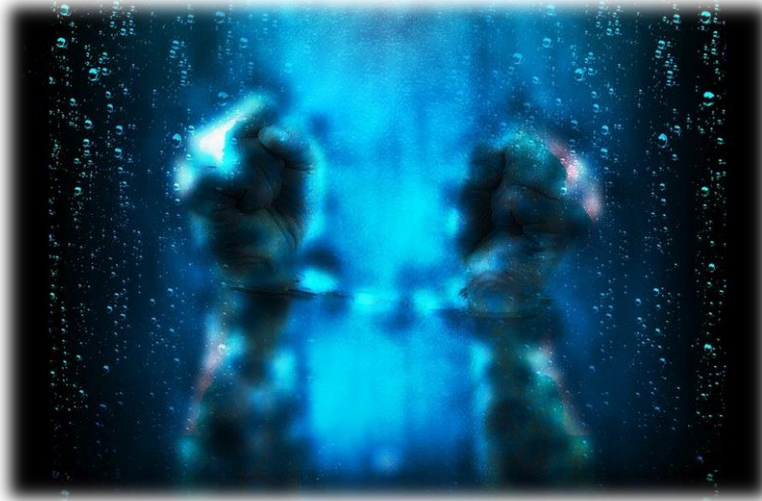
"But didn't you just imply," I interjected, "that reporting the shadow loss at this stage would be associated with considerable sanctions?"

Mr. Cramer frowned. "It's not my fault and it's not the fault of the SIA if you don't care about the laws of the country you live in." He casually glanced at his hands, which were still clasped together, the fingers playing a soundless march. "However, you are lucky in that I am not a direct representative of the SIA, but only a mediator – albeit one who is sworn in by the state. As such, I have the opportunity to intercede on your behalf with the SIA if" – he looked up from his hands – "it seems justified to me to do so."

Silence fell for a moment. I felt the lurking gaze of the stern dwarf resting on me, but preferred to avoid it. Should it be possible, I wondered, that this inconspicuous person had the power to influence the decisions of a state agency?



## The Hunter of the Shadowless/3



**Thursday, August 3**

### **Mail from the Shadow Investigation Agency**

Mail from the Shadow Investigation Agency – delivered at six in the evening by a special messenger! Apparently, they just can't wait to start swinging the whip. It is a formal summons:

*You are hereby ordered to appear at the Shadow Investigation Agency, Dept. 2, Letters C through E, at 8 a.m. on Monday, August 7. Violations of this notice may be subject to a fine of 10% of the total accumulated fine pursuant to Section 3(2) of the Shadow Loss Act. Cancellations must be made in writing. They are to be justified with a medical certificate and handed in to the SIA secu-*

*rity guard on duty by 7:50 a.m. of the day in question at the latest.*

*Brown Beadle  
(Administrative Assistant)*

**Notice of appeal:** *An appeal against this decision may be lodged within a period of two weeks from the date of service of this letter. However, an objection does not have any suspensive effect. Any costs resulting from the extension of the proceedings caused by the objection shall be borne by the defendant, unless the latter can provide substantial reasons for his appeal.*

Well great! The SIA agent has kept his word. I wonder if this spineless spider-man is now sitting in his web and intercepting my signals. After all, I could go underground, flee, emigrate, and his fat commission would vanish into thin air along with me.

### **3. Hunting for Shadow Money**

I still shudder at the thought that I held my supposed soliloquies as lectures on a virtual stage, gawked at by semi-official voyeurs like this SIA agent who, from their safe box seats, follow the misfortunes of others in order to make profit from them. I wonder how anyone can get the idea that a victim of such machinations could do to others what he himself had to suffer.

In fact, that was exactly what this shadow money hunter demanded of me. After he had painted the consequences of the illegal concealment of my shadowlessness in the darkest colours, I felt like a leper on the way to the scaffold. That is why I was initially on the verge of making use of his offered intercession at the

Shadow Investigation Office. As dubious as he appeared to me – he seemed to be my only hope.

"And what do I have to do to get you to intercede for me at the Shadow Investigation Agency?" I therefore asked him.

Suddenly, life came into this file number on two legs. "As an SIA agent commissioned by the state, I naturally enjoy certain amenities that are still part of the civil service today," he explained to me. "However, I'm not telling you a secret when I state that being a civil servant without a permanent job is not exactly a financially secure position these days. As SIA agents we live largely on the commission we earn from finding defaulting SLPs – that's our internal jargon for 'shadowless persons': the greater the overrun of the reporting deadline, the higher our earnings."

He bent down to his briefcase and lifted a stack of forms onto the table. "However," he continued, "we have the possibility of temporarily employing SLPs we have tracked down as auxiliaries to help us identify other SLPs."

With the stoic calm of a bureaucrat, he rummaged through the forms until he found what he was looking for. "If the SLPs detected by an SIA agent agree to relinquish all commissions to be earned through their own investigative work to the SIA agent, all they have to do is sign here. Then they are free of all worries. The SIA agent will subsequently forward the form to the SIA, which will thereupon issue the respective SLP with a so-called petitioner's probation certificate. This allows the SLP to prove good conduct for one year as an aide to the relevant SIA agent."

He thrust the form in front of me and fumbled a pen from his breast pocket. "As you can see, it is entirely up to you which fate you choose." He held the pen out to me, confident of victory.

I stared at him speechless. It took me a while to fully understand what he wanted from me. "So you're asking me," I finally burst out, "to spy on the internet like you do, and to deliver poor devils who have just suffered a painful loss to the executioner? No way – just forget it!"

The web spy was not in the least perturbed by my indignation. "Anything you say," he commented on my refusal, "it's your own personal decision."

With that he put the pen back in his breast pocket and placed the form on top of the pile of the other papers. "You will understand, however," he added, rising from his chair, "that I must now report your case to the authorities as soon as possible. Otherwise I will make myself liable to prosecution! And what happens then is out of my hands."

He stood up and sorted his papers, proceeding deliberately slowly and handling each sheet with the utmost care, like a priest who stows the consecrated hosts back in the tabernacle after Mass. Apparently he thought I would promptly regret my refusal. When he realised that this was not the case, he finally put the papers in his briefcase and turned to leave.

Halfway to the door, he paused and took a business card out of his pocket. With a gesture of offended magnanimity he held it out to me: "Here – in case you should change your mind. Today it's too late for the report anyway. So I can give you time to think it over until tomorrow morning."

"How generous!" I replied mockingly, but nonetheless reached for the business card. Then I was finally rid of him.



## Story of a Shadow Loss/18



**Saturday, August 5**

Dearest Lina: Do you really want to burn all bridges between us? Or was it all just an act? Did you force yourself out of wounded pride to play the ice princess, against your own feelings, when I wanted to apologise to you? Were you simply afraid that I might offend you again as I did the night before? Or were there other reasons for your behaviour?

How I would love to reconcile with Lina! But in the end she has almost avoided me like an undead who can turn others to stone with his malicious gaze. Yet a conversation with her would have meant so much to me – not only to overcome the gap that has opened up between us since the failed rendezvous. It would also have enabled me to better assess some situations in the company and to react differently.

## 18. Suspicious Praise

Not long after my embarrassing performance in the team meeting, I got a call from Ms. Henry, Ms. Zimmerman's secretary: the product manager would like me to come up for a talk.

I noticed how my hands began to sweat when I put down the phone. It had certainly been a mistake not to contact Ms. Zimmerman on my own initiative. Now it looked as if I simply wanted to pass over my blackout in the team meeting in silence instead of making an effort to give a proper explanation – even if I myself do not know what this explanation should have looked like.

To my surprise, however, Ms. Zimmerman did not touch my mishap with a single word – nor was she, as I had expected, dismissive towards me in any way. Instead, she smiled encouragingly at me as I entered.

"I'm glad you could come so quickly," she greeted me. "Had a rainy weekend, too? May I offer you a coffee?"

I still remember how relieved I felt when she spoke to me so obligingly. The coffee was also something I gladly accepted, if only because it gave me the opportunity to casually hold on to something.

In retrospect, I have to say that Ms. Zimmerman initiated the conversation very professionally – people like her probably receive special training in conversational skills.

She started with a few small talk particles that created an emotional closeness to her counterpart: "It's a real dirty weather at the moment, don't you think so? You spend the whole time sitting in your flat putting on winter fat that you don't need at all. Don't you feel the same way?"

She laughed briefly. I tried to join in her laughter, although I was actually much too tense to do so. Furthermore, I was unsettled by her inquiring look – even though she tried to justify it with an innocuous remark: "Well, at least you can afford a few extra pounds!"

In truth, the same could have been said of Ms. Zimmerman. Her well-toned body testified to the discipline with which – as everyone in the company knew – she went jogging in the park every morning before breakfast. Her facial features were decidedly gaunt, which was further emphasised by her fashionable short hairstyle.

She exuded a willingness to devote herself entirely to her job. Even her ice-grey hair, which other women around 50 would probably have dyed, underlined the self-confidence of a woman who had asserted herself in the still male-dominated predatory world of the boardrooms.

Skilfully she led over to my work. "Well, Mr C., first of all I wanted to tell you how satisfied we are with your work. It is rare to find an employee who is as conscientious and as competent as you are!"

Of course, it should have made me suspicious that she began her remarks with such effusive praise of my work attitude. At that time, however, I did not give it a second thought. I was just pleased that the conversation took place in a completely different atmosphere than I had expected. Besides, no one is uncomfortable with being praised.

"Well, Mr. C.", Ms. Zimmerman continued, "you know yourself that our company is not in a very easy situation at the moment. The overall economic situation, the unfavourable interest rate policy ... "

"Yes," I agreed with her, "as an insurance company we do live in stormy times."

The product manager smiled contentedly. "You see – I knew we'd understand each other!"

She brilliantly succeeded in involving me in her train of thought. I almost had the feeling that I myself was developing the company strategy she was now telling me about.

Ms. Zimmerman straightened her back. For a moment she almost seemed to fuse with her office chair. "As a company that is aware of its responsibility for employees and customers, we obviously cannot afford to just let things go," she pointed out. "Being proactive – that has always been our guiding principle!"

I nodded in agreement.

My superior looked at me firmly. "And here, my dear Mr. C., we come to the heart of the matter. We think that we can only meet the new requirements with extensive restructuring. For this we need committed employees who have the necessary expertise, but also the flexibility needed for such a reorientation."

My heart began to beat faster: was Ms Zimmerman alluding to a promotion? Was the reason for the conversation actually quite different from what I had assumed?

"Well, if it's up to me," I affirmed, "I'm ready for anything."

She smiled at me approvingly, but at the same time a little smugly. Moreover, she showed – as it seems to me today – a bit too clearly her relief about the course of the conversation. "I knew I could rely on you! So I can count on your cooperation in the new department we will be opening soon?" she asked me.

I hesitated – this was all happening a little too fast for me. "In principle, I'd be happy to join the new department," I confirmed.

"But what exactly will I have to do there?"

At this point, the mask of joviality disappeared from Ms. Zimmermann's face and gave way to a sober business tone. "At the moment we are still in the planning stage. But there is a coordination group that will answer any further questions you may have. The best person for you to contact is Mr. Boar, the head of the group."

Thereupon she rose slightly from her chair and thus gave me the sign to leave. The aim of the conversation had been achieved; there was no need to waste any more time. As I turned towards the door, I clearly felt her gaze at my back – that look all too familiar to me, searching for something that was not to be found.



## Story of a Shadow Loss/19



**Sunday, August 6**

### **Don Quixote, the Noble Cyber Knight**

The first emails from people who want to encourage me have arrived. Alongside this, mail from the drugs inspectorate concerning my cocaine words – so they really did fall for me!

I'm beginning to feel a certain exhibitionist pleasure. Maybe I should get my own website, possibly charge a nominal fee for reading it, or put advertising on my site. If everyone is looking over my shoulder while I'm writing anyway, I could at least earn a little money with it. Why not – after all, other people are doing that too!

**Hi fans, here is your Don Quixote surfer, called Doky! You know how it works: just enter your credit card number in the little**

**white box, click on "O.K.", and off you go on the improbable adventures of Doky the super boggy!**

Or is it more likely again today to attract attention with an emphatically serious manner of speaking?

**Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! I would like to welcome you to a new episode of our popular series *Don Quixote, the Noble Cyber Knight*. If you want to know how the story continues, all you have to do is enter your credit card number in the little flower in the middle of the picture – one number in each leaf! Then press "Confirm" – and you'll be right in the middle of the wondrous adventures of our valiant hero!**

It's all just gimmicks, I know ... I hardly manage to concentrate on my reconstruction work any more. All those past experiences are now overshadowed by the events of the last few days. (Amazing that I can still use such a word ...) And who knows what I will face tomorrow when I have to go to this ominous SIA!

In comparison, everything that happened back then suddenly seems unimportant to me. In retrospect, I have to say: Things followed a logic that was almost inevitably a consequence of the first incidents that threw my life off track. Under the given circumstances, it could not have come any other way, even if I was not aware of it at that time.

## 19. On the Sidelines

I realised pretty quickly that the transfer to the new department was not necessarily an improvement for me. At first, I was relieved not to have to work with the colleagues of my old group any longer. After all, they had all (except Lina) witnessed my embarrassing performance the day after the company outing. However, I should have known that such things are rapidly passed on to others.

So I was met in the new department with the same aloof curiosity and artificial normality as in my former team. What made me particularly uncomfortable was that my new workplace was located at a kind of junction where the main paths crossed through the open-plan office. As a result, there was a constant stream of colleagues walking past me, who – so it seemed to me – were watching the space around me in a deliberately unobtrusive way.

Of course, I cannot say for sure whether I was deliberately allocated this exposed computer workstation. The fact is, however, that on the one hand I was constantly under observation there, while on the other hand I hardly had any opportunity to get in touch with others casually.

As the main paths ran diagonally through the open-plan office, my workplace was cut into a triangular shape towards the front. Only behind it were the partition walls arranged in such a way that the workplaces joined together to form small groups.

In terms of my actual work, I didn't benefit from the relocation to the new department either. Contrary to what I had assumed after the conversation with Ms. Zimmerman, my competences had not been expanded, but curtailed. I was now assigned – which had



not been the case before – to a controller who reviewed my work day by day. And since I had almost no contact with the other members of my group, I lacked the benchmark that would have allowed me to judge whether my work was supervised more than that of others.

In any case, I found the controller's behaviour towards me extremely stressful. On average, he found fault with my work at least every other day. As a rule, these were only trivial matters. However, he always pointed them out to me in an emphatically indulgent tone, suggesting that I could not be expected to avoid such mistakes.

Although I was already suffering from sleep disorders at that time, I tried to maintain my former work rhythm. After all, I didn't want it to look as if my ability to work was limited.

One day, when I arrived at my workplace at half past seven as usual, I found it tidier than ever. I immediately had a guilty conscience: The day before I had spent a long time leafing through some old files and had not put them back in their place. So had the charlady cleared away the files for me?



## Story of a Shadow Loss/20



**Sunday, August 6, afternoon**

### ***A Call from Pleasant Work***

That was quite a shock in the morning! I'm sitting at the computer, completely absorbed in my reconstruction work, when suddenly it starts to steam out of the speakers on the monitor. It didn't smell burnt – the scent reminded me more of rosemary and was actually not unpleasant to me. Nevertheless, I immediately switched off the computer, of course.

Just as I was about to call the emergency service, my mobile rang. "Have a wonderful Sunday," someone murmured in my ear. "My name is Sandra Shoemaker, I'm from *Pleasant Work* and I just wanted to ask you how you liked our motivational scent. By the

way, we have a really attractive offer for newcomers at the moment ..."

So that was the reason for the strange computer fume! As friendly as possible, I explained to the lady that I was not interested in her product. However, friendliness in these cases always provokes intensive follow-up, so the conversation lasted longer than I had hoped.

After that, my memory thread was severed for the time being. I had to go to the kitchen and calm down with a cup of tea before I could sit down at the computer again.

But how could a simple phone call throw me off my game like that? Sure, the call had once again given me the feeling that someone was looking over my shoulder during my reconstruction work. But there was something else I didn't admit to myself right away: the client conversation on Sunday reminded me of myself – of the way my working habits had changed after the loss of my shadow.

## 20. Error!

After the relocation to the new department, I often stayed in the office until late at night. That way I didn't feel so much under observation, which allowed me to work far more concentrated than during the day.

In addition, it became more and more difficult for me to ignore the actual persons involved when processing the applications – a cardinal mistake for someone working in an insurance company, because that doesn't exactly simplify the decision-making process. Sometimes I even called up the applicants and talked to them about the incidents documented in the files.

Under normal circumstances, I would certainly not have made a habit of these phone calls. After all, the people concerned often reacted very suspiciously to them – especially since I always called them outside the usual office hours. However, since my acquaintances had almost completely withdrawn from me in the meantime, the calls were almost a personal need for me.

When I would then go home late at night, I was usually too tired to clean up. That's why the charwomen had to wipe around the files on my table in the morning. This had already led to complaints a few times, all the more so as documents could get lost or fall into the wrong hands this way.

Sometimes the lack of order was even annoying for myself – particularly when the cleaners piled the files on top of each other and pushed them aside. Then it always took me some time to find my way through them again.

One morning, however, I found my desk completely deserted. Only the computer was still in its place, the files had been removed. Had the cleaning ladies just misplaced them? Or was this a deliberate measure to make me handle the documents more sensitively?

I decided to look into the matter later and check my emails first. So I booted up the computer and entered my password. "ERROR!" the computer snapped at me. A second attempt, another rejection: "ERROR!" The computer kept insisting not to know me. Maybe a system change, I thought. But a quick glance at my colleagues showed me that everything was going on as usual. So the problem had to be with my own computer or with my password. For a while I tried to outsmart the computer in various ways. But in vain – I should have known that it was incorruptible. So I finally overcame my shyness and asked a colleague for advice.

Bored, he shrugged his shoulders: "For me, nothing has changed. Why don't you ask the controller what's going on?" With that, he turned back to his work.

That morning, of all mornings, the controller came into the office much later. When I asked him about my problem, he replied absent-mindedly: "Oh, excuse me! I forgot all about that. There's so much going on today, and I just can't be everywhere at once."

"What exactly did you forget?" I followed up.

"Just a little streamlining," he explained to me. "Nothing of importance."

I looked at him in dismay. "Streamlining? What do you mean by that? Am I being dismissed?"

"How do you come up with that?" he asked back. "We just had to schedule your work differently. But I can't give you precise instructions before tomorrow – the coordination team doesn't meet until this afternoon. Why don't you just take the rest of the day off: you've got overtime to use up anyway!"

The next day, a new colleague, whom I had never seen before, sat at my place. When I asked where and how I was to be deployed in the future, the controller told me to wait until the next day. Unfortunately, he said, a final decision on my matter had not yet been made. The next day he put me off again until the following day, then again until the next day, the day after that, and so it went on for a whole week.

In the end, I found it almost unbearable to spend the whole time in the office doing nothing. After all, I wasn't simply sent home. On the contrary, I was condemned to drift uselessly among my colleagues' workplaces from morning to night. Most of the time I stood in a corner near the controller, who from time to time graciously bestowed small, insignificant tasks upon me.

In the long run, it was impossible to endure such a working day without work. I went to the doctor, and the doctor declared me ill: for one week, for another week, and finally – because I was indeed suffering from serious sleeping problems and in the meantime also from heart rhythm disorders – for two more weeks.

When I called in sick for the third time, Mr. Boar, the head of the department, phoned me. He said he regretted that I had obviously fallen quite seriously ill, wished me a speedy recovery and assured me that the company would support me in any way, if necessary.

Then he casually mentioned the controller, who had told him about my situation. Maybe, he concluded, it would be best to part from each other, on good terms, of course, he could also promise me a severance pay amounting to a full month's salary, that goes without saying, after all, I had always dedicated myself to my work with great commitment, there was nothing to complain about, etc.

He didn't have to persuade me for long. I had long since realised myself that it couldn't go on like this. Three days later, the notice of termination was in my letterbox.

## At the Shadow Investigation Agency/1



**Monday, August 7**

This morning I went to the Shadow Investigation Agency. It was much worse than I had imagined. Now I see everything in a different light. Maybe I should take a closer look at the offer from *Shadow Colours* after all.

### 1. The Summons

It took me a while to find the building where the Shadow Investigation Agency is located. The address on the summons led me straight to the center of the town, to places I had passed by many times before without ever taking any notice of the SIA. But that in itself is nothing special. After all, there are offices with the

strangest responsibilities that you simply don't care about as long as you have nothing to do with them.

I finally found the SIA in a side street that I had scoured before without success. No wonder: the SIA could only be reached through a gate that led into a dark backyard. True, a sign next to the gateway pointed to the SIA, but it was of the same colour as the wall on which it was mounted. That's why I had overlooked it at first.

Crossing the backyard, I came to a building that was completely inconspicuous from the outside, with the plaster already crumbling away here and there. The windows on the ground floor and on the first floor had bars. Behind most of them, curtains were drawn.

In front of the house stood a small, box-shaped building that was obviously a porter's lodge. As I was about to pass it, a uniformed man called out to me from inside: "Hey! May I ask where you're going?"

"Excuse me," I replied, puzzled. "I didn't know it was necessary to register here. I have an appointment for today with ..."

"Just show me the summons!" the man growled.

Fortunately, I had taken the letter with me. The doorman seemed to study each word individually. "First floor, second door on the right!" he finally barked through the speaking hatch. Then he closed it again and turned to his colleague, who was sitting bored in the corner behind him.

From the inside, the building looked like a former barracks. The corridors were very long and lit by old-fashioned light bulbs hanging at regular intervals from the slightly vaulted ceiling. Between the doors leading to the offices I saw rickety wooden benches, on which a few tired-looking figures were waiting. I



went to the door the porter had told me and was about to knock when – just in time – a man sitting behind me intervened.

"You have to take a number first," he instructed me without looking up.

It was so quiet in the corridor that I involuntarily winced. "A number?" I asked, turning to him.

He raised his right arm, with which he had been leaning on his knee, and pointed to a grey box about halfway down the corridor. "Over there," he mumbled. Then he dropped his arm back to his knee.

In fact, there was a sign hanging from the ceiling next to the box: "Please draw a number and then wait until your number is called!" Obediently, I let the box spit out a ticket for me and then went back to the door with the crumpled man sitting in front of it. As he didn't seem very talkative, I preferred to lean against the wall next to him. Somehow I felt uneasy about him.

"Also lost your shadow?" he asked after a while.

I glanced over at him. The light was very dim – that's probably why I only noticed now that he was as shadowless as I was. When I took a closer look, I was deeply shocked, like someone who is suffering from a serious illness and meets another person in whom the same illness has already reached an advanced stage.

I answered the question with only a faint nod. It was meant to be dismissive, because I did not feel the slightest desire to engage in a longer conversation with the man.

The latter, however, had not looked up at me at all and simply continued talking without paying attention to my reaction. "It's your first summons, right? For me it's already the fifth time – without any result! Shadow *Investigation Agency* ..." He laughed bitterly. "The name is just a bad joke!"

He reached into his trouser pocket and took out a packet of chewing gum. Casually, he held it out to me. "Want one?"

"No, thanks," I muttered.

He took a strip out of the packet and freed the gum from the paper, which he carelessly threw on the floor. "I don't suppose you have any idea what awaits you here?" he then asked me, smacking his lips with relish.

I shook my head. "No – I only got a short message without any explanations."

"Do you think they would have explained to others what they were going to do with them?" He made a snide gesture with his hand. "That's just the trick! They only ever talk in hints, so you can never please them. For that you'd have to be able to read their minds."

It bothered me that he spoke to me so confidentially. There was something complicit about it, and I certainly didn't want to make common cause with this guy. So I replied coolly, against my own convictions: "Maybe the people here are just doing their job. After all, it's their duty to watch over the observance of the law!"

"Well, just wait and see," he returned with a shrug as he continued to work on his chewing gum. Then he leaned his head on his arm again and stared at the wall.

Silently we waited side by side. Now there was nothing to hear but the advancing of the hands on the big clock hanging on the wall at the end of the corridor.

I wondered why there was no sound escaping from the rooms into the corridor. Moreover, I didn't understand why we had to wait for so long. The person who had been called in before us must have settled everything long ago. The conversations in there couldn't possibly last that long!

Three quarters of an hour later, the door to the room on the right of the office opened. A stooped figure in a ragged coat stepped out and quickly moved away. As the person passed, I was met by a flickering gaze. Disconcerted, I stared after the figure – had I looked at the man next to me in the same way?



## At the Shadow Investigation Agency/2



**Tuesday, August 8**

For the first time, I feel like I'm reaching my limits with my writing work. Even thinking about what happened to me yesterday makes me break out in a sweat. The word "Shadow Investigation Agency" is enough to make my heart skip a beat.

Should I better wait a little longer before describing what happened? Maybe in a few days I won't find the events so stressful anymore. Then it might be easier for me to face them. On the other hand, the more recent they are, the better I can remember the details.

The third alternative is the one I like best: simply not writing down anything at all. But now that I feel at home in my writing world, I can't do that either. That's the price you have to pay when you build yourself a house of words!

## 2. The Shadow Loss Form

Shortly after the man I had been waiting with at the Shadow Investigation Agency had been called in, the door to the room next to the office had opened again. A woman in a dark blue costume addressed me.

"Number 487?" she asked.

"Yes," I said with relief. At last the wait was over!

"Is this your first time with us?" she inquired.

"Yes, last week I received ..."

"Then you have to fill out this form first," she interrupted me.

"Please write only in block letters and press firmly so that the copies can be read easily." With that, she disappeared back into her realm on the other side of the door.

One thing became immediately clear to me as I turned to the form: Secrets were not meant to be kept in the world of the Shadow Investigation Agency! Everything had to be revealed, every detail had to come to light.

Right from the start, the form gave me a headache. The first question was about the "personal details". That sounded innocuous – but here, among other things, the "date of loss of shadow" had to be noted.

I was not sure whether I should state this truthfully. After all, the shadow money hunter had pointed out to me that exceeding the statutory deadline for reporting the loss of a shadow could result in a considerable fine.

I wondered what this self-righteous denunciator had written in his report. Perhaps he was not as well informed as he pretended to be! It may have been foolish to put my hopes in this. However,

in view of the impending fine, I basically had no choice but to leave the column blank.

The next question was about the minimum and maximum extension of the shadow – a question that is completely incomprehensible in my eyes! After all, who measures a shadow in different light conditions, who pays any attention to it at all, as long as it is considered a self-evident part of one's existence?

It is true that the form only required "estimated values", but even this I couldn't provide. It was no different with the question about the "special characteristics" of the shadow, which I also could not remember – if they should have existed at all.

Other questions were apparently intended to help clarify the hereditary side of the matter. Thus, previous cases of shadow loss in the family – on the mother's and father's side – were asked for, and the interviewees should indicate to what extent fears of shadow loss had been expressed by closer and more distant relatives.

The question about "special incidents" that might have preceded the loss of the shadow possibly pointed in a similar direction. Here it was requested to check even seemingly trivial matters for deviations from the norm, as only in this way could the issue be handled to the satisfaction of all involved.

Finally, a statement had to be made as to whether the person concerned had made use of makeshift shadow constructions – such as "shadow prostheses", "shadow dummies" or "illusory shadows" – or had gathered information about them since the loss of the shadow.

To be on the safe side, I ticked "no" here, because I did not know whether this might be punishable. I did not even have the feeling that I was lying, because I had not approached Shadow Colours

on my own initiative. Therefore, it could not be said that I had actively "gathered" information about the services of this company.

Shortly after I had completed the form, the dark blue lady came out of her office again and asked me if I was finished. When I handed the document to her, she remained standing in front of me for a while and skimmed the entries.

"The date of the shadow loss is still missing," she remarked sternly.

"I'm sorry," I regretted with a forced innocent expression, "I can't remember that exactly."

The lady gave me a disapproving look, noted something on the form and then disappeared again behind her door.

When my fellow sufferer finally stepped out of the office, I had already been waiting for over an hour and a half. Before the man even closed the door behind him, he put a new piece of chewing gum in his mouth and flicked the paper wrapper onto the floor.

Immediately, a storm of indignation broke out in the office: "How dare you! Our agency is not a rubbish bin!"

The man grinned at me with the same complicity as before, when we had waited together in the corridor. I avoided his gaze, not wanting to be associated with this troublemaker. After all, I had enough problems as it was.

## At the Shadow Investigation Agency/3



**Tuesday/Wednesday, August 8/9**

Almost midnight – and I just can't fall asleep! As soon as I close my eyes, I have the impression that someone is turning on a spotlight and pointing it directly at my eyes. Or rather, as if this someone were placing it under my eyelids so that the light burns straight into my pupils.

A piercing voice then emerges from the surf of light. Half asleep, I feel as if it is materialising. Flickering wavy hair surrounds it like an avenging angel. And as soon as it reaches me, it transforms into a lightsaber that cuts glowingly into my throat.

There is no choice: I have to confront the interrogation by the shadow investigation officer once again. I must try to detach the interrogation from the nightmarish form it has taken in my memory. If I don't succeed in forming the interrogation by writing it down, it will end up overwhelming me from the inside, breaking all forms.



### 3. Interrogation by the Shadow Investigation Officer

After I had handed in the shadow loss form, I had to wait for another good quarter of an hour. Then finally the number 487 flashed up. When I knocked, a buzz sounded, and I could enter.

The glaring light that hit me inside made me involuntarily close my eyes. The sudden brightness was in painful contrast to the dim light that prevailed in the corridor. Besides, I had been avoiding exposure to a bright light source for months.

"Theo C.?" someone addressed me as if through a luminous mist.

"Yes, that's me." I squinted into the light flooding in on me but could not recognise anyone.

"Sit down, please." I took a step forward and looked around the room. With my eyes now gradually adjusting to the change in light, I could make out a desk and a low chair in front of it. Blinking, I felt my way towards it.

"May I ask you to provide identifying information first?" a disembodied voice prompted me.

"In what way?" I asked into the mist of light.

"Only general information, please," the voice commanded.

The request seemed pointless to me, since I had already entrusted everything worth knowing to the form. Nevertheless, I complied without hesitation. The bright light had an intimidating effect on me. Moreover, I was unsettled by the fact that I could only vaguely make out the person sitting behind the desk.

"You have provided incomplete information here," the voice stated after I had rattled off the personal details once again. "I assume you are aware that knowingly withholding information can have very unpleasant consequences for you?"

"Yes, of course." Sweat broke out on my forehead – and not just because of the interrogation lamp pointed at me.

The rustling of paper could be heard. Then the next verbal blow followed: "The review of the recordings from our cameras installed in Lumenberg and Hadderstetten has shown that the loss of your shadow can be dated to the night of 18 to 19 November last year. Are you seriously saying that you can't remember that?"

"I ... Well, all these events ...," I stammered. "It's all so long ago." In a cutting tone, the voice made clear: "The fact that it was a long time ago has not escaped us either. Fortunately, we have some very committed colleagues who brought your case to our attention. You have been shadowless for over eight months now! Why didn't you report the loss straight away? Apart from the social costs that a case like yours causes, the whole thing must also be very unpleasant for you personally."

Was there a hint of empathy in the voice? Or was the seeming compassion only meant to make me submit to the arm of the law? Uncertain, I mumbled: "You are right, of course, but ... I didn't know anything about the existence of this agency, and no one gave me any information about the duties that ..."

The voice took on a mocking tone: "No one gave you information? Don't you follow the news? Are you not interested in the laws of your country? Do you want us to go from door to door and explain the rights and duties to each citizen individually?"

"No, of course not", I confirmed meekly, "I just wanted to point out that I didn't break the law on purpose."

For a moment silence reigned. I heard a sound like a pen being tapped on a hand. In its impatience, it contrasted strikingly with the steady clatter of a keyboard coming from an out-of-side al-

cove beside the desk. Obviously a secretary or assistant was busy there writing down my statements. Since a recording device was also running to absorb my utterances down to the last whimper of my voice, this struck me as an almost luxuriously exaggerated attentiveness.

"And about the shadow constellation in your relationship, you can't tell us anything either?" the voice continued to ask.

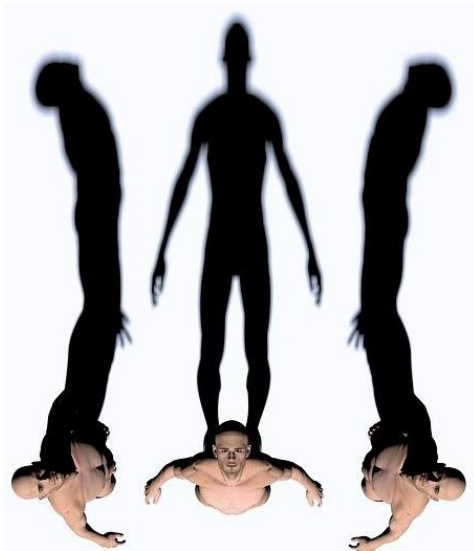
"No, otherwise I would have entered it in the form," I replied, slightly irritated.

"You will understand that we have some doubts about your willingness to provide information. I hope you are aware of the consequences!" It sounded like a threat.

Something moved behind the desk. I supposed that the questioning might be finished sooner than with the persons interrogated before me. Unfortunately, the opposite was the case.



## At the Shadow Investigation Agency/4



**Wednesday, August 9**

### A Shadow Dream

Tonight I had a strange dream: I was strolling with Lina across a wide plain. It is evening, we are walking towards the sun, and suddenly I feel: something is different. I look over at Lina, but I can't make out her face, the sunlight is too bright. Then I turn around – and see that I have a shadow again: a long, dark strip that sticks firmly to my feet.

An infinite relief flows through me: at last I am rooted in the world again, at last I too can dive back into the all-connecting sea of shadows!

At the same moment, however, I feel how the shadow detaches itself from my body. It rises behind my back, the slanting sunlight

has nourished it magnificently, it looms over me as a large black tower. Silently, the dark figure bends down to me. And as its cold breath strokes my skin like a disembodied finger, I suddenly know: it will pull me, along with Lina, into an abyss from which there will be no escape for either of us.

It's all the fault of that Shadow Investigation Agency: their insidious bureaucracy is haunting my dreams!

#### 4. The Shadow Measurement

When the questioning was over, the voice behind the interrogation lamp turned to the assistant who had written down my statements.

"Ms. Hampel," the voice ordered, "you can now start the shadow measurement. – And you, Mr C.," I was admonished, "please do everything my colleague tells you. A little more cooperation on your part seems absolutely necessary and would also have a positive effect on the evaluation of your case. At the moment – I have to tell you quite frankly – it doesn't look good for you at all."

The assistant rose from her seat, walked towards me and touched me lightly on the back. "Please come with me," she asked me in a quiet but firm voice.

I was led into an adjoining room where, to my relief, it was almost completely dark. Only in a corner to my left did a red control light glow. Despite the darkness, the assistant moved towards it with great certainty. Apparently, this path was part of her daily routine. In the light coming from the office, I saw her put on a white gown and then flick a light switch.

Several wall lights came on at the sides of the room, bathing it in a uniform but still pleasantly subdued light. I realised that I was in

a large hall, somewhat reminiscent of a gymnasium in terms of its dimensions.

The assistant told me to close the door to the office. "I may now ask you to undress," she then instructed me in the tone of a stewardess asking an airline passenger to fasten the seatbelts. She pointed to a bench located on the opposite wall: "Over there you can take off your clothes. After that, please stand in the red circle in the middle of the room and wait for further instructions."

I was too confused to resist her commands. Besides, she gave them in such a matter-of-fact tone that it seemed silly to object. So I went to the bench and stripped down to my underpants. Then I stood in the red circle in the middle of the hall.

Over the loudspeaker I heard the assistant complain: "I must ask you to undress completely. Otherwise, a proper performance of the shadow measurement cannot be guaranteed. You can be assured that the entire investigation will be kept strictly confidential." Apparently, behind the red light was some kind of control room from which the hall could be overlooked.

Even though I felt deeply reluctant to do so, I complied with the request. I went back to the bench, took off my pants and stood – now completely undressed – in the red circle again. I had hardly taken up my position when the wall lights went out. Instead, a spotlight mounted above the control lamp took aim at me. It became steadily brighter, while at the same time the assistant pointed it precisely at my face.

"Lift your head into the light," she prompted me from the control room, as if she wanted to take a passport photo of me. "A little higher – no, not quite so high – that's good – now move your

head a little to the side – stop! – not quite so far – now please stand perfectly still!"

The light increased in intensity once more. At the same time, I heard a whirring sound, as if an X-ray was being taken. The spotlight now began to palpate me – apparently automatically – from top to bottom. Every fibre of my body was scanned, not even the smallest wrinkle was spared. As soon as it reached my chest, it began to make horizontal movements in addition to the vertical ones. In an achingly slow way, the fingers of light stroked over my body.

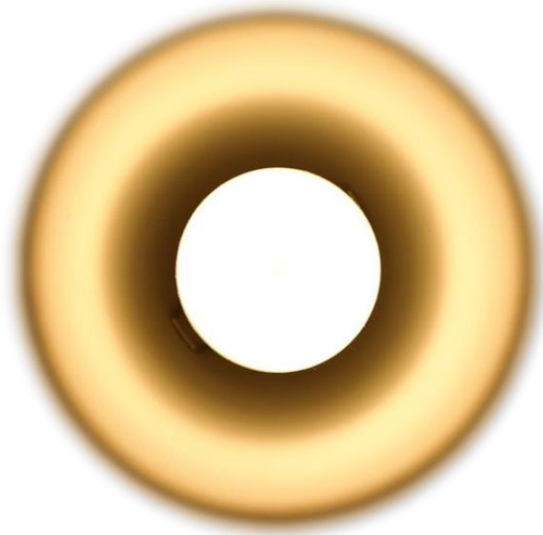
When the spotlight reached the level of my pelvis, I heard the assistant's voice again: "Now please raise your arms slowly upwards. – Slowly! – Much more slowly! – Start again from the beginning. – Yes, that's better! Now slowly lower your arms again!"

Finally, the spotlight reached my feet. But this was by no means the end of the procedure, as I had hoped. On the contrary, another spotlight came on at the left wall, with which the whole process was repeated once again in exactly the same way. Then I was measured from behind and from the right side, after that from above and finally from below. For this I had to spread my legs. Directly below my genitals, a flap opened from which a spotlight shone up at me.

It went so far that I myself considered the procedure to be imperfect. After all, the diagonal could have been included in the measurement, or it could have been carried out in a circle in order to take into account every possible angle of incidence of the light. But perhaps – I suddenly had to think with a pounding heart – this was reserved for future measurement dates.

The assistant's voice pulled me out of my thoughts: "So, that's it," she announced. "You can get dressed again. Next to the bench you will find a fresh towel to dry yourself with."

With these words, she switched off the spotlights, and the wall lights came back on. Although the light was now much more indirect than before, it was only at this point that I became aware of my nakedness again. I felt like an actor seeing the spotlight go out in the middle of a performance, so that he is suddenly looking into the expectant faces of the audience.





## At the Shadow Investigation Agency/5



**Thursday, August 10**

### *The Disciples of Darkness*

An email from a group called *Disciples of Darkness* – an interesting name for an association of shadowless people. They ask whether I would I like to join their association.

The central concern of the group is to encourage each other to openly confess to their own nature. Shadowlessness, the email says, should not be seen as a flaw, but rather as an opportunity that opens up new prospects not only for those affected, but also for society as a whole. For this reason, the rights of shadowless people are to be openly promoted and specific actions are to be taken to improve their situation. The term "shadowless" should be freed from its negative connotations and redefined in a new, affirmative manner.

Shadowless of all countries, unite ... I really don't know what societal development should have to do with the loss of a shadow. It seems to me as if the members of this club wanted to flee from their own personal problems by shifting them to a general level. Sure, no one lives in a vacuum, everything has a social meaning somehow. Yet I can't imagine what a union of shadowless people should look like. An army of Don Quijotes – is such a thing even possible? And what would be the point of it? But for me it all comes too late anyway. Since my survey at the Shadow Investigation Agency, I can't shake the feeling that I've lost the game. Maybe I couldn't have won it either way.

## 5. The Brand

It took a while before I could free myself from my torpor after the shadow measurement had ended. Faltering, I went to the bench where I had taken off my clothes. Only there did I notice that my whole body was wet with sweat. Mechanically, I reached for the towel lying there and dried myself. Then I slowly put on my clothes. The fabric irritated my skin as if someone had rubbed it with sandpaper.

Just as I finished buttoning up my shirt, the assistant returned from the control room. Apparently she had waited there until I was fully dressed. She walked across the hall as if she didn't notice me. Only at the door leading to the office did she turn to me. "Please follow me!" she urged me. Silently I obeyed – what else could I do?

In the meantime, the lights in the office had been switched off. The room was bathed in a dim daylight that filtered through the drawn curtains. Obviously, the officer who had conducted the

interrogation was now on his lunch break. On his desk I saw a few files neatly placed side by side, along with a pencil box and a notebook. Near the window I noticed a small, mobile computer desk where the assistant had probably recorded my words. The two side walls were almost completely covered by filing cabinets. Trotting behind the assistant, I crossed the office. In the opposite room, the lady in the dark blue costume was already waiting for us. She said nothing, but glanced conspicuously enough at her watch to let us know that we were quite late. Apparently, she had also wanted to go to lunch some time ago.

However, I was not conscious of any guilt. After all, it wasn't my fault that the shadow measurement had taken so long.

"You can take his handprint now," the assistant said to her colleague. "I'm going to lunch." With that she disappeared.

The dark blue lady led me to a device in the back corner of the room. With a slightly annoyed swing, she lifted its cover. My gaze fell on a glass plate, under which I discovered something like a small camera.

"Put your right hand on the glass plate and don't move," she instructed me. Adjusting the device, she inquired: "You are right-handed, aren't you?"

"Yes, that's right," I confirmed, pressing my hand firmly on the glass plate. This time I wanted to do everything right, hoping to shorten the procedure this way. It was indeed not going to take as long as the shadow measurement, but it proved to be at least as unpleasant.

"Now hold still," I heard her say. A second later, a burning pain shot through my body. It was as if someone had poured hot water on my hand. I wanted to pull it away from the plate, but it was glued to the hot glass, under which the machine was doing

its work with a bored hum. At least it only moved back and forth once, then it was all over.

As soon as the heat subsided, I removed my hand from the glass plate and embraced it with my other hand. I had no feeling in it, but at the same time it was like electrically charged. It hurt to touch it.

"You can go now," I heard the lady in the dark blue costume say. "You're done for the day."

Still half stunned, I shuffled to the door. Contrary to my habit, I opened it with my left hand. When I was almost outside, I recollected myself and turned around once more. "And what about the results?" I asked. "Won't I get to know them?"

I was met with a reproachful look that probably related as much to the timing of my question – the lunch break had long since begun – as to its content. "You will hear from us in the next few days," was the curt reply.

I mumbled a parting word, then stepped out of the room with a bowed posture.



## Second Visit from the Shadow Dealer/1



**Saturday, August 12**

### A New Identity Card

This morning, a messenger from the SIA brought me my new identity card. It is blood-red, with a large black circle in the middle, slightly protruding from the surface, which immediately identifies the person concerned as shadowless at every check. Instead of a photo, incomprehensible codes are engraved, and one spot is even made of some kind of metal – possibly my thermal imprint.

I didn't have to ponder for long what to do with the thing. It immediately landed in the bin, where it is now moldering away – embedded in eggshells and the tomato sauce from the jar I dropped yesterday. I think I have assigned it to the only sensible use.

Of course, I know that this was just a childish rebellion against a process that can no longer be stopped. After all, the identity card only documents what the authorities have ascertained about me. Whether I keep it or not doesn't change anything at all. At most, I will get into further trouble if I am picked up by the police without the document.

Yet it seems to me that these are fears from another time. The strange thing is: I have the impression of being free without feeling free. Everything looks different to me, although nothing has changed.

I can't figure myself out any more – which is probably a consequence of meeting the shadow dealer again! The next time he comes, I'll just shut the door in his face. The man really gives me the creeps.

## 1. Reciprocal Service Provision

Yesterday – it was already late afternoon – a piercing ringing at the door startled me. That could only be the shadow dealer! I was sure he would come. After all, he had already announced another visit when we parted two weeks ago.

He stood in front of me as if we had just said goodbye – in exactly the same ridiculous salesman's suit, on which the advertising lettering gleamed at me like freshly polished. His appearance still alienated me a little, but it now seemed far less exotic to me than when we first met.

For a moment he looked me in the eye with an encouraging smile without saying anything. "I'm the man from Shadow Colours," he then introduced himself again, with a certain understatement. "I don't know if you remember me ... I hope I'm not incon-

veniencing you? I just would like to enquire if we can count on your order."

Unlike his last visit, he did not enter of his own accord this time. "Please, do come in!" I therefore invited him.

I closed the door behind him and suggested to sit down in the living room. Politely but firmly, he declined: "I'm sorry, I don't have that much time today. Friday evening is a very popular meeting time for our clients. And you know: the customer is king!"

Compared to his almost pushy behaviour from his first visit, he seemed remarkably reserved to me. Was he so sure of himself? Or did he simply not want to invest any more time in customer advice?

I felt uncomfortable making such an important decision in passing, as it were. So I tried to bait him with a cup of coffee. But it was no use: He insisted on discussing the matter in the corridor.

Annoyed by his behaviour, I briefly considered asking him about the ominous promotional DVD – which I had actually no longer intended to do. In fact, I was still convinced that this had been an intolerable invasion of my privacy. But what good would it have done to complain about it now? No, it made more sense to go on the offensive and ask about Shadow Colours' payment terms. After all, the small print in the brochures didn't quite make sense to me.

He seemed to have been waiting for this question. Routinely, he slipped into the role of the compassionate helper: "Don't worry about that! We are prepared to accept any form of payment you are comfortable with: credit cards, crossed cheques, cash, bank transfer – it's entirely up to you. Of course, payment by instal-

ments is also possible! Our interest rates are extremely moderate. Many of our customers make use of this option. For exceptionally trustworthy customers, we also offer a cost-neutral form of payment based on the principle of reciprocal service provision."

In view of my tight financial situation, this offer seemed particularly interesting to me. "And what would that look like exactly?" I therefore inquired.

He didn't answer right away, but silently folded his arms across his chest. Slowly, the fingers of his left hand crawled over his chest and then slid through his pointed chin beard. Since I had neglected to switch on the light in the corridor, I could not see his facial expressions clearly. It seemed to me, however, that his lips were twitching barely noticeably. Was that supposed to be a smile? Or was it just a reflexive grimacing?

"May I interpret your question in the sense that you are interested in shadow adaptation?" he finally asked.

I felt caught off guard by his directness. "No ... that is: I already told you that I would like to know more about the payment terms before I make a decision. So, to come back to this 'reciprocal service provision' ..."

He swayed his head, frowning, like someone who has to make a difficult decision. "Well then," he finally said, "let's give it a try! You do indeed seem to be someone who will prove worthy of this form of payment – which is reserved only for a select number of customers!"

He stepped a little closer to me and lowered his voice: "The reciprocity of this payment method is based on our side on the adaptation of a shadow of the quality level *De Luxe*. In return, the cus-



tomers provides us with at least one more customer per year who wants to have a shadow adaptation done on him."

In response to my sceptical frown, he added: "Customers who enter into such business relationships with us of course also enjoy a certain preferential treatment in other respects. Our contacts reach into the highest circles of society – we have paved the way for many a successful career!"

He looked at me expectantly. Indecisively, I avoided his gaze. Once again I had the feeling that I was dealing with a charlatan.



## Second Visit from the Shadow Dealer/2



**Sunday, August 13**

A few years ago, I was bitten by a dog. It had been my own fault. True, the little dog had run towards me with its tail trustfully wagging. But I was well aware that small dogs in particular tend to snap when they feel unsafe. So it should have been clear to me that it was not a good idea to lean down towards him too jerkily. It ended up with quite painful caresses for me.

The bite wound was rather small, but nonetheless hurt like a prick with a red-hot needle. In addition, an unpleasant numbness emanated from the spot. That's exactly how I feel now, after shaking hands with the shadow dealer.

A ridiculous comparison, I know. Once again, one of those devious associative paths my overwrought memory leads me down. But it's no different here than with the dreams that accompany us into the day. You know very well that they are fantasies – yet the dream shapes the things you perceive that day like a bitter aftertaste.

## 2. The Snake Hand

The best thing would have been to throw the shadow dealer out of the flat immediately after he had explained the terms of the contract to me! In fact, that had been my first impulse. His proposal to have a shadow adapted for me if in return I would bring him new customers had been suspicious to me right away. It reminded me all too much of what the SIA commissioner had asked me to do, even if – as far as the shadow itself is concerned – the process was in a sense the other way round.

On the other hand, the memory of the morning at the SIA was still very fresh at that point. The thought that I, like the man who had waited there with me, would have to go to this agency several more times seemed unbearable to me.

"Supposing I were to accept this offer," I asked cautiously, "how should I go about finding further customers for you? And what would happen if I didn't succeed?"

"Don't let your hair grow grey about that!" the shadow dealer reassured me. "It will all work out in time. Besides, I already told you that we do not abandon customers who enjoy our special trust. You can count on our support in this respect as well."

His voice had taken on a warm tone. In its monotonous, even flow, it had a very appealing effect on me. Nevertheless – or precisely because of this – I did not want to make a hasty decision.

"I would like to think about the whole thing again in peace," I asked. "Just leave me your mobile number, and I will contact you in the next few days."

The shadow dealer shook his head regretfully. "I'm terribly sorry, but that's completely against our terms and conditions. You know that I am willing to turn a blind eye sometimes – even if basically

I'm not allowed to do so. But unfortunately I have no room for manoeuvre here. The offer is only valid for today. By the time I walk out your door, it will have expired."

"You can't expect me to sign a contract that would have such far-reaching consequences for the rest of my life without a closer look!" I objected indignantly.

"Who's talking about a contract?" he countered. "Something like that would strikingly contradict the trusting relationship we maintain with our clients! If you accept our offer, our agreement will simply be sealed with a handshake. We are firmly convinced that our clients' word of honour counts for more than any contractual obligations. At the same time, our clients thus can be sure that they will not get caught in the pitfalls of the small print. They can rely on our promises to one hundred percent."

Once again I was puzzled: if there were no real contracts to be concluded with this company, the shadow dealer was obviously just a fraud who wanted to exploit my plight with some ulterior motive. It would be absolutely necessary to search the corridor again later for any changes! Maybe the whole thing was a sophisticated form of market research, with a microphone or camera secretly installed in the customer's home.

The voice of the shadow dealer pulled me out of my thoughts: "I just have to ask you," he concluded, "to make a decision right now. I regret not being able to offer you more intensive advice, but there are other customers waiting for me."

Pressured like this, I decided to take advantage of the company's peculiar business practices. After all, why should I not shake hands with an insignificant salesman? If, in the end, I decided against a business relationship with Shadow Colours, I could

withdraw from the agreement whenever I wanted to – it would not be legally binding anyway!

In this way, I thought, I could also check how serious my business partner was about his word of honour. I would be able to find out whether I was in fact contacted for the shadow adaptation, what such a procedure would look like and whether it suited me. And if it was not to my taste, I could refuse it without further justification. So why shouldn't I just go for it? I had everything to gain from it!

"All right," I finally said, "I accept the offer!" With these words, I held out my hand to the shadow dealer.

"A sensible decision!" he praised me. Simultaneously, he released his fingers, which he had been kneading in anticipation of my answer, from each other and stretched out his left arm to me. In doing so, he proceeded – as it seemed to me – unnaturally slowly and looked me in the eye in an unpleasantly piercing way.

When our hands touched, he didn't immediately press firmly, but let his fingers slowly slide into mine. Disgusted, I sensed the cold, slightly damp flesh snaking around my skin. It felt like reaching into a hole full of maggots. However, I was too dizzy to pull my hand away. So I was all the more startled when suddenly the fingers snapped shut and closed tightly around my hand. It was not a normal handshake. Rather, it struck me as a bite that made my blood throb through my veins in a sudden rush.

It took me a while to come to my senses. Dazed, I looked around: The shadow dealer had disappeared. All that remained was the smell of cold sweat, but this could just as well come from my own body. Now the whole thing was definitely creepy to me. I decided not to get involved in any further contacts with this company.

## Chance Encounter with Lina/1



**Tuesday, August 15**

### Feelings of Paralysis

Since the visit of the shadow merchant, a strange paralysing feeling has taken possession of me. It is not that I am generally lacking in drive. My everyday life goes on as usual. I even get out of bed a little better in the morning and no longer fear the piercing glances of passers-by so much when I go out the door.

The paralysis is more related to my mind. It is as if I no longer have proper access to myself; as if someone else is thinking for me, and I only have to carry out what he has decided for me.

As a result, I no longer feel as restless as before. But the calmness that has seized me is the calmness of a paralysed person who does not strive for any movement, knowing that it's impossible to carry it out anyway.

Now I almost want back this feeling of groundlessness that accompanied me until recently. By the end, I had almost gotten

used to it. Of course, the constant restlessness was also a great burden for me. Nevertheless, in retrospect it seems to me that I was somehow more alive with it than I am in my current state. Would I be better off if I hadn't met Lina? – Probably not ... Nothing would have changed in the situation as such. If only we had talked to each other earlier! Maybe then I would have taken a different path. But would that have been within my power?

### 1. A Trip to Hadderstetten

Why I went to Hadderstetten on Monday, I don't remember myself. Sure, it was a really nice summer day, pleasantly warm, not the least muggy ... In principle, it's quite normal to take a little trip on such a day.

On the other hand, I hadn't dared to step outside on unclouded days for months. And if I had, I would certainly have avoided a waterfront like the one in Hadderstetten, where it was impossible to escape the all-revealing gaze of the sun.

Of course, there wasn't too much activity by the river on a Monday afternoon: mothers with children, a few old people, here and there some tourists who had accidentally come across Hadderstetten – on the long promenade, they all quickly got lost.

I felt a strange exhilaration that I had not experienced for a long time and that completely pushed my shadowlessness into the background. Perhaps it was the inebriating effect that unfiltered sunlight has on someone who has long eluded it, or maybe it was simply the high spirits of the daydreamer. In any case, I suddenly no longer had the feeling that I needed to hide.

I moved completely without constraint among the other walkers, as if nothing distinguished me from them. Possibly that was why

nobody stared at me with this alienated look that with embarrassing meticulousness seeks the reason for its own alienation. Once again, the thought occurred to me that perhaps my real problem was not the shadowlessness, but rather the lack of courage to confess to it.

I walked along the promenade all the way to its end, sat on a bench and enjoyed the view of the river disappearing between the hills, then walked back again. Gradually, the lightheartedness fell away from me again. The main reason for this was probably that it was now closing time in many places. Apparently, quite a few people had decided to use up a few hours of overtime in the nice weather and finish work early. Thus, the number of walkers suddenly increased noticeably.

In addition, the late afternoon sun was now casting longer shadows on the path. This made me more aware of my flaw again. When I came near the terrace café, I therefore involuntarily looked over to the tables standing in the shade, hoping that I could wait there in peace until the stream of strollers died down.

Fortunately, most of the shady spots were unoccupied. Almost all the guests preferred to let themselves be caressed by the mild afternoon sun. While I was still looking for the shadiest spot, my gaze suddenly caught on a woman sitting alone. She had taken a seat under an old maple tree with overhanging branches, where she could be sure not to be hit by a ray of sunlight.

This was exactly the table I would have chosen. Since the woman, despite the shady surroundings, wore sunglasses, I initially took her for a stranger. Only when I looked more closely did I recognize her: it was Lina.



After all the days I had spent thinking about whether and how I could approach her again, this encounter seemed like a twist of fate to me. I did not hesitate a single moment. Quickly I walked past the tables of sun worshippers to the upper terrace where I had caught sight of Lina. Despite the crunch of my footsteps on the gravel path, she did not notice me until I was standing directly in front of her. Lost in thought, she looked up at me.

"Theo!" she exclaimed in amazement. "How come you're here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," I countered. "May I sit down?"

Lina smiled. The corners of her mouth twitched slightly. "Of course, you have free choice," she invited me, pointing to the empty seats at her table.

Excited as I was, I began to talk about all sorts of trivialities: about the happy people of Hadderstetten, who had such a beautiful waterfront in their town, about the blackbirds scurrying through the undergrowth behind us, even about the weather and the weather outlook, although at that moment nothing was more meaningless to me than the murmurs of the meteorologists.

When the waitress came to our table, I ordered an iced coffee. Since Lina had almost finished her coffee, I wanted to invite her for an ice cream, too, but she declined.

We were silent for a while, then Lina asked: "By the way, I haven't seen you at work for weeks. Have you been sick?"

I looked at her in surprise. "Didn't you know I was laid off? That's been over a month now."

She seemed honestly concerned: "What do you say, they laid you off? I'm sorry about that, Theo, really ..."

"Don't worry about it," I downplayed the dismissal. "By now I've come to terms with it." I was surprised how much interest she suddenly took in my fate. It didn't seem to fit in at all with our

last encounter in her flat, when she had given me the cold shoulder.

The waitress came and brought me my iced coffee. Again, I tried to adopt a casual tone: "And how are things at work? Anything new?"

Lina sighed. "Oh, what could be new there? After all, it's the same routine every day."

For a moment she silently stared ahead. Then she added: "Sometimes I feel like just taking off and leaving it all behind."

Since I had only just told her about my dismissal, I found the remark a bit inappropriate. Yet I tried to encourage her: "You're not married to the company, are you? Why don't you just apply for some other jobs?"

Instead of answering, Lina thoughtfully waved the coffee cup in her hand. The black puddle almost sloshed onto her blouse. Then she said tonelessly, as if she were talking to herself: "Other jobs ... That sounds like a big change. But we can't run away from ourselves. Our shadow follows us wherever we go."

Slowly, as if it was a great effort for her, she reached for one of the temples of the sunglasses and took them off. She turned her face towards me so that I could look into her eyes. They seemed a little reddened to me.

It annoyed me that she spoke about her shadow in that way. Did she want to allude to my shadowlessness? "What do you mean, Lina?" I asked. "You know that I ..."

"It means," she interrupted me, "that sometimes I wonder if I shouldn't have stayed shadowless."

She glanced in my direction, but looked past me.

## Chance Encounter with Lina/2



**Wednesday, August 16**

I find it increasingly difficult to fight my way through the jungle of my thoughts. Why do I even bother? Wouldn't it actually do me good to stop listening to my inner voice and let myself drift into a new life, free of all disturbing thoughts?

On the other hand, it still has an invigorating effect on me to converse with the computer. It somehow keeps me afloat ...

The cursor as a lighthouse without which I lose my bearings? Well, as soon as I devote myself fully to the job search again, we'll see how I manage without the crutch of constant self-talk. The first applications are already underway.

## 2. The Confession

"Sometimes I wonder if I shouldn't have stayed shadowless ..."

Lina's words still resonate in me.

At first I hadn't understood what she wanted to tell me. "You'll have to explain that to me in more detail," I had asked her. "You know as well as I do that 'shadowless' has a very concrete meaning for me, and so I don't understand why ..."

"When I say 'shadowless', I mean it exactly that way." She was still gazing steadfastly over my shoulder. Even when I looked her straight in the eye, I didn't get the impression she was meeting my gaze.

"Are you saying that you used to be without shadow, too?" I uttered after a short pause.

"Exactly," she confirmed without hesitation, even though her voice sounded strangely brittle.

Only now did I remember the dark premonitions that had come over me a few days ago. Nevertheless, at that moment I didn't want to believe what Lina was confessing to me. "But that ... I would have noticed that!" I stammered. "You ... you always had quite a normal shadow, just like everyone else!"

She abruptly detached her eyes from the large maple tree waving its branches behind me. For the first time our eyes met. "Did it really seem that way to you?" she asked.

"Well ... You know I've always paid, let's say" – I tried to smile, but it only turned into a helpless twitch – "special attention to you ... But I never noticed anything unusual about your shadow." Lina's lips trembled. She regained her composure immediately, though, and said in a calm voice: "Back when I started at your

company, I had just got my makeshift shadow from the SIA – you must have had to deal with them too, I suppose ..."

A look into my widened eyes showed her that she was right. "Well," she continued, "as you know, they take your measurements there and then fit you with a replacement shadow that looks like a real shadow to outsiders. So I could have used it to move around normally again – and apparently it looked like I was doing so to outsiders. But I always felt very uncomfortable with the artificial shadow."

Lina wiped an unruly curl from her forehead. Her eyes were fixed on the jagged maple leaves, through which a light breeze was blowing.

"You know," she said, "this kind of shadow always remains something external to you. You don't really feel connected to it. It's as if someone who has nothing to do with you is imitating you. So I kept feeling shadowless, although to everyone else it looked as if I had a normal shadow. This made me suffer even more than before, when my shadowlessness was visible to the outside world as well."

Lina looked at her hands, lost in thought. It was as if her fingers had a life of their own, as if they were speaking in a secret language that she was struggling to fathom.

"Besides," she finally added, "the replacement shadow also has a control function: it is connected to a heat sensor in the SIA, through which the authorities are aware of all your activities. At some point I just couldn't stand all that any more."

"Lina!" I exclaimed. "What are you talking about?" It was almost as if I was hearing myself speak.

She snapped out of her thoughts and looked at me compassionately: "You only just got the SLP pass, right? In my case, it

also took almost two months before they fitted me with the replacement shadow. The worst thing for me was that no one told me what was going to happen to me. One day this strange thing stuck to me, and I had to deal with it somehow."

"And then?" I urged her. "How did you cope with the situation?"

Lina took a deep breath. "At first I tried to ignore the artificial shadow, just like other people don't pay attention to their shadows. But I just didn't succeed. I always had the feeling that someone was after me, controlling my every move. At night, when I couldn't see the eerie substitute, it was particularly unsettling. Then I could often only sleep with the light on. In the dark, I felt like someone was suffocating me."

I gazed at her in dismay. "Why didn't you ever talk to me about it? We could have helped each other!"

"That's what I wanted! But you ..." She swallowed. Her eyes gleamed wetly. "Well, you know yourself how everything ended up back then."

Embarrassed, I looked to the side. The question was on my lips whether – if she wanted to talk to me – it wouldn't have been better to do without eroticism. But the question seemed inappropriate to me, so I refrained from asking it.

As if she sensed what was bothering me, Lina said: "You left me lying on the sofa like a piece of meat that no longer smelled fresh that day. That's when I suddenly realised that I could never be close to another person again as long as I was tied to this terrible shadow."

"I'm sorry, Lina, I didn't know ..." I felt for her hand but didn't dare touch it.

"In that situation," Lina continued, "I probably made the biggest mistake of my life." She sighed. "At that time, I was visited regu-

larly by a very strange person who claimed to be a representative of a company called 'Shadow Colours'."

I winced, but remained silent at first. I didn't want to interrupt Lina.

"This man," she went on, "had come to see me quite soon after the loss of my shadow and told me something about a new kind of procedure for replacing shadows. The whole thing seemed extremely suspicious to me from the start. Moreover, I wasn't entirely comfortable with the guy himself. It would never have occurred to me to get involved in a business deal with such a literally 'shady' character."

Lina looked me in the eye, but immediately avoided my gaze again. "As I said," she kept remembering, "I didn't want to have anything to do with that guy. Since his first visit to me, however, he has been standing in front of my door every week, telling me again and again that this would definitely be his final offer. When I had rejected even his last and his very last offer, he began to bombard me with emails. In them, he described the consequences of my situation in the darkest colours. Or he told me about the wonderful future he could offer me with a shadow of his company. It was real terror!"

Lina sipped her cold coffee. "Well," she concluded, "it was just a very unfortunate coincidence: the morning after you had left me head over heels, he was standing in front of the door again. And that's when I suddenly said to myself: What the hell, you've got nothing left to lose anyway – and I accepted his offer. Shortly afterwards you showed up at my place again. But by then it was already too late.

## Chance Encounter with Lina/3



**Thursday, August 17**

A maggot has taken up residence in my brain. A maggot that eats its way deeper and deeper into the convolutions of my mind. It won't take long until it will have replaced the DNA of my thinking with its own.

Will I ever see Lina again? And if so, will we still be who we were when we first met?

### 3. The Shackle

The dizziness that seized me when Lina told me about my second visit to her from her point of view has not left me since. I still stand before the abyss that suddenly opened up before me – for it was immediately clear to me that it was none other than the shadow dealer who had been in Lina's flat that morning!



I see myself mechanically reaching for the glass of iced coffee, of which I had hardly taken anything yet. Still I felt no desire to taste it. Instead, I clasped the glass with my hands as if I had to protect it from something.

For a while we sat next to each other in silence. Lina was lost again in the unfathomable dances of her fingers, and I stared like a fortune teller at my iced coffee, in which the ice gradually melted into a sweet mush.

"I had contact with him too," I finally confessed without looking up from the iced coffee.

Lina roused herself from her apathetic posture. "With whom?" she asked, as if she hadn't heard me correctly.

"With the shadow dealer," I replied, catching her gaze.

Lina looked at me incredulously: "But ... you didn't make a deal with him, did you?"

"Unfortunately, I did," I had to admit.

Lina averted her gaze from me again. "Then you're finished," she said tonelessly.

I contradicted her, although I immediately sensed that she was right. "What do you mean by 'finished'? You said yourself that you accepted his offer because you couldn't stand the artificial shadow from the SIA any longer." The blood galloped wildly in my temples.

"But I also said it was the biggest mistake of my life." Lina looked down at the ground, where the shadows of the maple leaves floated weightlessly around each other.

"You know," she finally explained, "it's like this: The SIA shadow mimics you, it also controls you – but it doesn't touch your person as such. Maybe I should have learned how to deal with it, then I could have even outsmarted it here and there. But the

shadow I received from Shadow Colours doesn't just control me – it shapes me, it intervenes in my life, it directs me without me noticing it!"

I shook my head in disbelief. "But that's just impossible, Lina!"

"Well, you'll see," she replied with a shrug. "If you've accepted the offer, it can't be long before you get the shadow."

"I haven't signed anything yet," I made clear. "So nothing can happen to me!"

Lina looked at me tiredly. "But you shook his hand, didn't you?"

I nodded.

"Then you're lost, Theo, you'll just have to face the truth!" Her voice sounded as compassionate as it was implacable.

"What if we ran off together?" I whispered, following a spontaneous impulse. "No one from Shadow Colours has shown up at my place yet, after all."

Lina smiled mockingly. "Do you think this is going to be like fixing a broken toilet? The plumber comes, takes out the pliers, spins them around three times, and that's it?"

I fell silent. Lina's sudden sarcasm worried me.

"You won't even notice when they put the shadow on you," she added in a calmer tone. "It will just suddenly be there, like a shackle that someone ties around you while you sleep. And then, all of a sudden, you won't be the master of your will anymore. You will no longer know whether you really want what you think you want, or whether it is only the shadow that makes you want it. You will become the servant of interests you don't even know. In the end, you'll be just a puppet of your own shadow."

"Lina, for God's sake, there must be a way out!" I implored her.

"Let's escape, together we'll make it! We are free human beings after all!"

Lina looked apathetically in front of herself again. "Our freedom is the freedom of puppets; we can no more escape than they can. We are both hanging from our strings, moved by foreign interests, but also unable to hold ourselves upright without a string. Even if you could tear yourself away from the string that holds you, you would still be unable to move without it – so how will you be able to run away?"

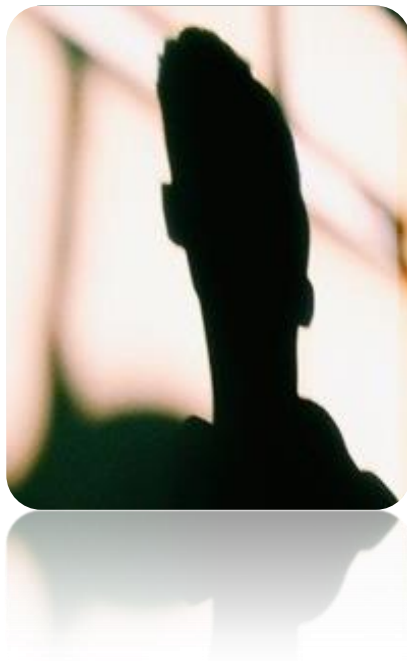
Hectic spots flickered on Lina's cheeks. Or were they just the wafting shadows of the leaves? She took a deep breath, then added: "Suppose you actually succeeded in escaping: Do you really think there is any place in the world where you are safe from these people? They will enforce their claims on you, you can be sure of that! Besides, you can never know whether the desire to run away is not itself the result of a will which is not your own, but comes from interests completely foreign to you, instilled in you by your shadow."

"But I don't have a shadow yet! I'm going to fight with all my might against having one put on me!" I insisted, like a child who is being talked out of the existence of Santa Claus.

That's when I noticed how Lina fixed her eyes firmly on a spot diagonally behind me, where a circular sunspot fell on the gravel path under the maple tree. Following Lina's gaze, I turned around and also looked at the spot she was staring at.

At first, nothing in particular caught my eye. But then I realised that between the movements of the leaves dancing in the sunspot, there was something round that I hadn't noticed before. At its upper end, it was surrounded by something that looked like a fringe of hair. The closer I looked, the more vigorously the black circle in the sunspot seemed to move, like a swirl pulling me toward it with irresistible force.

I felt the blood drain from my veins. For a moment my life stood still, even my heartbeat seemed to stop. Then things gradually came back to my consciousness, albeit as if through a filter that had imperceptibly been placed in front of my senses. I rushed down the gravel path into the blazing sun, looked in front of me, looked behind me – but there could be no doubt: I had a shadow again.



## Picture Credits

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