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STEPHEN D. GUTIERREZ

TONY THE SHADOW MAN

I HAVEN'T SEEN THE dude in a long time, it's just chance that I see him now. I can run. But he keeps me at the park, insisting I take a seat next to him on the bench and allow him to fill me in. I don't mind. I gladly pick it up where we left off, our friendship, which was real at its height. It was sincere and close and unvarnished. Years melt away. We just saw each other yesterday, or the day before, and can talk about anything.

Well, yeah, man, it's been a while, I tell him.

Too long, brother, welcome back to the neighborhood. See any changes?

They filled this park up with too many buildings. It used to be a park.

I know, ha? Didn't they? *Scout Hut. Senior Citizens Center.* Why don't those people just sit outside and enjoy nature like you're supposed to at a park, right?

You can't have green in L.A. It threatens the environment.

Good one. Nah, we got all this tax money we got to show for. They build shit to keep it coming in. The factories around here got it made.

I guess they do.

Hey, did I ever tell you about my life?

Yeah, a little bit, sure.

Want to hear the rest of it, the true story?

I've been waiting all my life for it.

It's a serious thing.

I know.

I think I pissed off God when I was born. He threw a shadow over me that wouldn't ever go away. He asked me to serve him in this way.

What are you talking about?

My life. I catch a whiff of booze on his breath. I can back up and start from the beginning.

The beginning is always a good place to start, I encourage him.

Well, I've always been good looking, ha? Just like I am now, right?

I guess so.

I was made in a laboratory in heaven.

All right.

They experimented on the big T, Tony the tiger, just to get him right. I'm old and tired, man. I know I don't look like I used to. You must see a beaten old man right here, even though we're the same age. You don't look so bad, dude. What do you do? Watch the diet and all that stuff?

Yeah. Work out.

But I look wasted, don't I?

No.

Older, though, right?

Yeah, for sure. I'm not gonna lie about that.

I got lines on my face that the mirror doesn't hide. But it doesn't show

my insides, like my soul or my spirit.

How do they look, Tony?

They're not there. They're gone. I guess the mirror does catch them.

Aw, man, Tony, that's not true. We all feel that way sometimes.

It's true. I'm not going to sit here and lie to you.

But things change, all the time.

Not for me, they don't. Don't interrupt me.

Sí, señor.

Or pretend you know Spanish. This is better than a telenovela. Only it ain't no fucking TV show. It's my life. Zoom in. Boy. Me. Young tiger on the prowl in the concrete jungle. L.A. County. City of Commerce.

He claws the air.

Older. Handsomer. Dangerous. But just as needy. Get me?

Yeah.

Then suddenly, well, slow it down. I was floating. I was aiming for Dora Rincón who lived on Travers in that brown house with the chipped birdbath out front. It always had too many weeds around it. Remember back then, elementary school? You probably don't.

I do. I remember her. She was nice. Kind of tall and lanky for her age. Kind of goofy, always grinning.

She wasn't goofy. You're goofy, dude.

Okay, okay, relax.

Get that goofy grin off your face. She was like, well, different. She got scarred. But she didn't get scared. She wasn't goofy, just unafraid. Most

people walk around with their fists up, protecting themselves. She let her hands hang at her sides, laughing with you.

She wasn't around here for too long, was she?

She moved away in the sixth grade when her parents got divorced and came back to that house when the old man died. He left it to them, anyways. I guess he messed up and tried to make it right. He was a drunk, with some properties.

Pretty smart drunk. Enter the tiger. You're batting away the weeds, dude. Creeping up to the pad. I paw the air myself. Watch out, Dora. He's gonna spring.

Nah, I was an alley cat limping on a bad leg, dude. Just shut up and listen. I'm just me, the big T. She's the big D.

He closes his eyes. She had the nicest smile I'd met in a long time, and this way of walking that put me at attention with her long legs. She wore this pair of gray slacks, and God I wanted to buy her a fur coat or something, like one of those movie stars wear, or a long leather jacket like a rock star. Actually she had one, a black one, but she hardly wore it. It wasn't broken in yet. I said break it in. "Help me," she said, "break it in," and twinkled.

That's a good sign.

That's my baby. She was a classy chick is what I'm trying to tell you. She was everything to me, everything I wanted in a woman in one. "Big Dora," I'd call her, joking around, and she'd nudge me with her hip and push me.

"Shut up, stupid." But she knew I loved her.

He gulps. She knew she was the one for me.

Like tiger, like, I don't know, tigress.

Whatever, dude. We were tight.

I can tell.

How can you tell? Let me tell my story. We're Romeo and Juliet without the headaches. It was like a miracle in Commerce that nobody ever knew about, the two of us. We're both kind of private, you know, and didn't have many friends anyway. People started splitting, like you. We had a beautiful thing going. Then a black cat walked in. That's the way I dreamed about it later.

That's scary. You working? Retired yet?

I collect social security and got the house paid off after a lawsuit. I sued these fuckers who set me up with bad chemicals without telling me, real harmful stuff I was taking care of in a warehouse, like a warehouse from hell, hot and with no ventilation. I got enough to live the rest of my life without punching in again.

Good deal.

It's all right. I'd rather be punching in if I had a life to live. I loved her, you know, before I met Evelyn. And she loved me. I'm talking about Dora, my goofy girlfriend.

Sorry, I said.

You're getting the big picture now, college man? While you were up north doing your thing in school, preparing for your future, I was down here making something of myself, a better Tony. Always on the move I am. I was. Like Dora. She liked doing things, with me or by herself, and especially

liked going out at night and walking.

That's how we first met again, on a summer night, Dora taking a walk and me just hanging out in the yard, looking up at the sky. "Tony?"

"Dora?"

"Yeah, me! How you been, Tony? It's been so long!"

We hugged and stood back and smiled at each other. She told me what was happening in her life.

"There's not much, Tony." But that wasn't true.

She had a pretty good office job, and a little car that was almost paid for, and her music that never let her down. She had about a hundred albums she kept organized in her room, her favorites she played over and over, real low on her stereo or just loud enough to hear. It was kind of her secret thing, I got out of her, one of them.

"I like to dance by myself late at night, Tony, sometimes in my underwear, in the sexiest clothes I have, like dressing up for God, I know it sounds stupid."

"It doesn't," I said.

"I just close my eyes and move when the house is real quiet and the rest of the world is asleep." She closed her eyes and swayed for me, as if I wasn't there. Not like I'm God or anything.

You're not? You're not filling in for his son down here on earth, like a good Catholic?

Don't kid around about that stuff, dude. I'm not God and neither are you. You can try all you want. I know who I am. It's not the Light. But she,

she was a poet-angel or something like that, a good person with words in her, the right way to say something, a poet-angel.

“And I feel Him hugging me,” she said. “Everything is all right always.”

I fell in love with her right there, I think. Shit.

That’s the way it happens. Bam! I punch the air.

Wham! He rocks back. She had it all in my book. She had an education, an A.A., and read fucking books. She had good manners. She had taste, like I said. High-class taste with a Commerce budget. But not flashy. She could put on something cheap and look like a million bucks because she wore it right. She brought it out or something. Not that she shopped at Goodwill. Just not Beverly Hills. I don’t know shit about it, fashion, but I saw it. Style. Elegance. You’re the word man. Give me one.

Naturalness.

Fucking dude, you got it. I heard you write some shit. Well, she was the shit. But she didn’t know it. “Tony, do I look all right? Can I go out like this?”

“Shit, do you look all right? No, you can’t go out like that, Dora. You look so fantastic they’re gonna mob you. You’re like a movie star on location!”

“You’re my planet, Tony. The only spot I want to land on.”

He looks away again. And she had a dog named Casaba that slept in her room and took up a lot of her time, too, a big gray dog, all shaggy and slobbery. I saw him looking out the window at me with sad eyes when it was over. But that was later.

This was now, dude. There were no sad eyes in our story. Her eyes were

bright and sparkly, and so were mine, she said. “Tony, are you in love with somebody?”

Shit. I didn’t know what was going to happen. I didn’t know anything about my life. If I could see ahead, I don’t think I’d have the guts to get up in the morning. I’m glad your God or my God or no-God doesn’t give us hints or anything about the worst. Not too many that we can figure out yet. I, I couldn’t get through the third part, dude, if I saw it coming.

You can get through anything, Tony.

I don’t know. Hold on. This is a three-part life story. We’re in part one or two. I’m in love with this chick I actually like. Yeah, you understand?

He wipes his eyes. That’s when the love rips you up when it’s gone, when you actually liked the person.

I nod some more.

Anyway, we didn’t spend every minute together, but after a while apart I’d call her. “It’s about time we get together, Dora,” I’d say. “Otherwise we’re gonna forget each other.” I’d be nervous like maybe she had forgotten me.

“I’m not gonna forget you, Tony, ever. You’re gonna forget me.”

“No, never. Why are we talking like this? I’ll be over in a little bit.” Then we’d go to the movies or out to eat or get on the freeway and head to the ocean just to cruise down the coast and walk on the pier and hold hands like really naturally and laugh and catch up seriously on a bench with the waves under us. It was pretty good, like all magical. We took a room when we needed to get even closer or just went home to Commerce if that’s what we felt like doing. It wasn’t all about the fucking but that fucking was a ten.

I got the beach thing in my head. What was the name of that movie?

Eleven.

She whispered things in my ear that made me stand up straight like a man, not bent like a scared kid, and gave me a reason to live. I'm not too high on myself at times, brother. You know that?

Not really.

She even wrote me a long letter on her best stationary once, with all kinds of fancy words but not like trying to impress me, just being herself, I could tell, and signed it. *Dora Diehard for You*. I didn't know. I didn't see it. She was on the skinny side but not anorexic or nothing. She didn't eat a lot. *Forever*. She put at the end.

But I didn't hear from her for a while. You lose track in the County.

Yeah, I got busted for a goddamn DUI, my third, and spent some time in the can, the *bote*. I stayed close to the *vatos* because, shit, I was Chicano and you got to get by. I threw blows only once, maybe twice, and got the fuck out of there as soon as I could, acting all good, doing what they told me to do.

"Yes, sir. I'm not going to drive under the influence." I didn't. I kept my word.

I haven't driven drunk since. Honest to God.

Congratulations. That's nice. Really.

But I still drink.

Okay.

I went up to her door first thing when I got out. I even brought some

flowers, a dozen red roses I bought at Food Giant, and her favorite chocolate. “Sorry,” her mother says, “she’s dead.” Like that. After I knock on the door and stand back.

She just stood there staring at me, between the crack in the door.

“She was sick, honey, didn’t you know that?” she said. “Real sick. She had it in her bones, all over.” She explained it to me. Then she said she was tired and had to rest.

She closed the door real slowly.

I put my flowers down on the porch, then I remembered where her bedroom was, around the corner, and I put them right there under her window, in the dirt.

“Rest in peace, Dora,” I said. I crossed myself. I split.

I hit the sidewalk and headed back to my pad trying to cheer myself up, thinking it was better for her anyway if she was hurting there at the end like her mom said she was. But I couldn’t shake it, man, I couldn’t shake it. It was too crazy, the whole thing.

“Goddamn,” I said. To myself. “Dead? How can she be dead? I just talked to her last time I was here, when I was out.”

But cancer had taken her. Dead. Like that. He snaps his fingers.

But that wasn’t the first time something like that happened to me. It was the second. Count them.

He holds up two fingers. The second time. You remember Arlene and how she got cancer and died? She was my first real girlfriend, my first serious relationship, I’d say, not puppy love. I was in eighth grade. She was

a grade below me. Suva Intermediate School. We were in it for real, sending notes and talking on the phone all night and meeting in the long, dark hall after school, the make-out tunnel, “the tunnel.” We put our names on the wall in red marker. *Tony plus Arlene equals luv*. We spelled it with a “u” for some reason. Dropped the “e.” You probably know about that.

Not really. It was some sixties thing, left over, I think.

We were fresh, anyway. We weren’t leftovers. We and all the rest of the kids got down to it, making out forever until the janitor came and swept us all out, with an actual broom in his hands, sweeping away. “Everybody out, lovers! That’s enough for today. Get home and do your homework. Out!”

We all spilled out of the niches in that big, stone building, remember?
Yup.

We held hands. She had me. She had those soft brown eyes and that split between her teeth, remember? It looked good on her, right. When she smiled, I didn’t have a chance. She made something inside me flip and get on its head for her. She ran the show.

He shakes his head in wonder, like still not over being knocked over. She kept me in line, dude.

“Tony!” She punched me in the arm and made me pay attention to what she was saying.

“Listen to me! There’s nothing over there. Just your dumb friends and that stupid girl who likes you.”

“I’m not looking at her,” I told her one time. “I just got to fart and don’t want to.”

“Tony!” Then she covered her mouth and started laughing. “That’s why I like you, Tony.”

“Why? Because I fart?”

“Because you make me laugh, Tony.” She spun me around and pointed to the bathroom. “Go and fart all you want. I won’t tell.”

We just cracked each other up. “Tony, you’re so stupid.”

“Arlene, you’re so smart.”

“You don’t know how smart, yet!” She gave me the pepperoni neck after the fall dance. Actually, we ditched it. We split and got lost in the neighborhood there in Bell Gardens. We ended up in an alley, going for a world record grind, me, with her mouth on my neck the whole time. It sure was worth it when I felt my boner up against her, you know, just kind of hanging over her shoulder forever. Only the next day one of you jokers made the homeroom announcement for the whole school and mentioned me, thank you. “And Tony, please return the vacuum cleaner to the office. It’s done enough damage on your neck.”

The whole school cracked up! I heard it, from my homeroom, with the door open. Fucking assholes. My friends, right. Bunch of babosos, like a step or two behind me.

Everybody envied you your neck, Tony. Pepperoni Man. Mr. Hoover. Señor Kirby. You had the look.

Fuck you. You guys were just jealous. I had the girl, Arlene! She had me. She said so. “I got you now, Tony! You’re mine!”

Cancer comes when it sees a smile is too bright or a body too happy, a

spirit too strong. I should know, right?

You've got some say in it.

Ronnie barely tackled her at their graduation picnic the next year when they were playing a football game. I was already in high school, first year. But I heard. She lay all limp in the grass with a broken ankle. He didn't even tackle her, just set her down on the ground, you know the way we played with the girls.

And she's crying, hurting. "Ronnie, it hurts."

They took her to City of Hope Hospital in Duarte, kind of far. I guess her doctor saw something he didn't like, when he tapped her leg or felt around and asked how she was feeling. He drew some blood. He sent her to that place, like immediately. It is a city. You been there. You saw it.

It's big. They're curing cancer, man.

I know. I know they're doing good for children. Arlene was just another one of them suddenly. She wore a blue gown and always looked a little woozy. She got there in an ambulance without a siren, she told me, no big deal, no emergency, but they already had the tubes in her as soon as they knew.

"They're sticking me all over, Tony!" she laughed when I visited her in the hospital.

"Well, it's good for you, Arlene."

"I guess. Come visit me when I'm out."

I did.

So did I.

Yeah, I know. We all went together sometimes. But I made like special trips on my own. I was just a kid but I knew something big was happening, something preparing me for my life. I'm still walking by your pad on Senta, on my way to her pad down the street. I'm getting closer to the end of the block where she lives by the alley, in the pink house with the porch painted white, a big tree in the front, and her dad's truck at the curb, the blue Ford pickup. Do you know what I really remember? There was a wooden swing under the tree that I used to push her in, softly, when she was well.

It was empty now. But she was inside living it up till the very end.

They had her in a hospital bed in the living room because her room was too small with her two sisters in there. It always had balloons and flowers around it. Lots of people loved her. I went over two days after the operation. They let her come home finally. She was drugged up, but still Arlene. She was like trapped, on the other side of the bars, the hospital bed fence. Then she stuck her tongue out at me, and lifted herself up, like doing a mighty pushup, like she was Super Woman, Chicana style or something, Super Teen Girl, and she was.

She was. I remember her. We were pals, Tony. We were all tight.

You know what she says? She says this. And she's hanging over the fucking rails. "Tony! Wipe that frown off your face, boy! It's only a *pierna!*" It's only a fucking leg, man.

I swear to God I got it or something then. I bit my lip not to cry. But I did anyway, and I didn't care that she saw me, my eyes. She was looking after me, not herself. She didn't give a fuck about her leg or her life, only

me and whatever I might have to go through in life. I swear to God I saw it in her eyes.

She was an angel in a hospital bed in Commerce.

“It’ll be all right, Tony,” she said. “Everything. Hey, don’t step on my foot! It hurts!” She got me again that time, made me hang my head with a little smile so she wouldn’t see my eyes. Her mom brought some cookies in and I munched out with a napkin under my chin, and split.

“Bye, Tony! Say hi to everybody! The gang!”

“I will! We all miss you! We signed you up for the Disneyland trip at the park.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna climb the Matterhorn with my one *pierna!* Meet you at the top, Tony!” She dragged herself up there, with a smile on her face. She didn’t throw in the towel. God grabbed it from her.

“God bless!” She was a Christian, you know, a Baptist, not a Catholic.

The months go by. I don’t know what happens. But when I go to see her one time her mom says, “She’s dead, Tony.” She snivels at the door like it just happened, drying her eyes with a Kleenex.

She’s wearing a cross. They’re all Christians. But they walk the walk. They don’t even talk the talk. They act and live like they’re supposed to.

Arlene’s mom pulled me into her family as much as she could. She liked having me around. She never put me down or warned Arlene about me because I already seemed like a partier, smelling of pot in the 9th grade. Between the two of them, shoot, the whole family, they let me know. Tony the tiger was an all right cat, yeah.

Always been.

I go bouncing up the steps and find out the truth.

Remember that summer? We were all at Camp Commerce for Teen Week not even thinking about Arlene, more like thinking she was going to live forever in that hospital bed. She wasn't going nowhere soon. We didn't have to worry about losing her. I stood there scratching my head.

"Do you want to come in, Tony?" her mother said. "Sit down for a while?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Garcia," I said. "I better go home."

He pauses to take in the sky. It is faultlessly blue.

The tree above us covers us in shade.

Then the third one I don't even want to talk about. But you know. You know what happened to me a couple of summers ago. Yeah, everybody knows, he says to himself.

Little boy in the street. Trouble. Danger. Watch out. Don't blame Papa. Papa's a messed up guy like you. If you're anything like the people I know, Papa ain't no different, not much.

"I'm only fucking human!" I cried out to God, dude, after it was over.

"Only human like your son, on the cross, making my mistakes, but doing my best. I never gave Anthony anything other than my best. I'm not all bad."

"No, you're not. But I picked you to suffer," God answers me. "So buck up."

Did you hear him?

I heard you in pain, Tony.

Yeah, I'm in pain. I still look out the window in the living room and see where it happened. Evelyn split. It's just me and the pictures in the house.

That sounds terrible.

It's not so bad, except when I'm drunk, bouncing around. It's okay when I'm awake in the morning. I kind of feel them all there.

That's good. I'm glad you got some company, Tony.

Are you being smart with me?

No. I think things are going on around us we don't sense most of the time. I think you do have company.

I have some now.

You do.

It was baseball season. He was just playing catch with his best friend the way we used to in the street, too lazy to go to the park. Or it's kind of fun in the street, too, you know? Yeah, it is. It's like a cement field. Anyway, his partner threw it high in the air and he was backing up to catch it with his mitt up in the air. He didn't even hear anything coming behind him, I'm glad, at least. It happened so fast.

It didn't make any sense. It was not normal. Everybody said so.

"We know all the cars that pass on this street." They knew it like clockwork.

"There aren't many strangers in Commerce." But this was like a phantom car zooming around the corner out of nowhere and keeping its nose pointed straight ahead. This thing is just getting bigger on the road like in a movie,

a bad movie, getting closer and closer at full speed until it's done its job and nobody can see it anymore, and it's on Washington Boulevard and gone, a big black phantom, probably a fucking drug dealer dropping off a load at the bikers' pad.

I went over there and asked them after the funeral, loaded. I didn't give a shit.

"Who killed my boy?" I stood at the door and stepped inside on a mission.

"We don't know, man." They said it, no hesitation.

I checked them out, each and every one of them. They looked at me back and shook their heads, kind of sad about it all too, I could tell.

"Nobody knows, Tony, it wasn't anybody who came here. Put that piece away and have a beer."

It was stuck behind my pants.

"I'm sorry I bothered you. If you find out anything, let me know. He's dead."

I walked out of the room broken, not mean and dangerous like Clint Eastwood or some movie hero. Lee Marvin, you know, all tough in a black vest. It was just me, little old Tony, but smaller and older than ever, dead on my feet. I was unimpressed but a little scared of me. I knew what I could do. I would have coldly gone through with my plan a second ago if I had seen the owner of a long, black car sitting in that room, no questions asked. If I had learned that anybody had hidden him, I would have shot him in my son's name and done my time in the state pen without any regrets, brother.

I would have just asked them to let me keep my son's oiled leather mitt in my cell. It was brand new and he was breaking it in that season in the city league, you know, the fun league we played in.

Fuck yeah, we had fun, I tell him.

You know it, those years, with somebody's dad up in the bleachers, sneaking a tall can. My boy, he was a center fielder with his little cap on crooked, playing the ball all right, missing a few, having fun just like us, brother.

That's cool.

Waving at me, his dad in the bleachers.

Hold on to the good stuff, Tony. Forget the rest.

He doesn't know what's coming, not the next day or the next week, whenever. He just knows it's summertime in Commerce, playing ball.

He'll always be out there, Tony, smiling at you.

I interviewed the neighbors.

"Didn't nobody get a license plate number?" But they looked like they'd been run over.

"Tony, we heard a sound like...I can't describe," they said. "That's all. And then running and screaming, all of us."

My son is still waiting for me to come home in my mind, standing there at the counter, drinking a glass of Kool Aid in the kitchen. "Hey, Dad, I played catch today. I'm getting better with high flies." The animal who hit him isn't even in the picture.

Good. Let him fade.

But he tossed my son into the air like a plaything. He lay on the ground like a puppet, with a broken back. He's wearing his baseball cap and jeans. God's got his hands on the strings ready to snatch him up and make him walk again. But he doesn't. He can't. He can't do nothing for my boy, the Almighty. It's a joke, all of that stuff. He's left alone on the hard asphalt. Like a dog, I can't even pick him up and hold him. I figure he's still warm for a few seconds, breathing, and he needs his father. But I'm not there. Only crazy Louie, his best friend, is standing over him, in shock. At least he's got that face to look into before he fades, before he dies.

"Dad?" he says in my head, even though his is all fuzzy. "Dad? Where are you? I need your help."

He's dying on the street in Commerce, and I'm at work in a warehouse, zipping around on a forklift with his picture taped on the cage that protects me from the world, from some bad accident happening to me. It wasn't supposed to happen the other way. I had an insurance policy for him.

"I'm doing this for you guys," I had argued with Evelyn. "It's worth it."

I was doing better than ever at that time. I wasn't drinking so much and playing the big man with all the knuckleheads around here, all the partiers. I was working overtime. I was putting away some money. I was doing it all for my son, really. Anthony. Tony, Jr. And Evelyn. I was thinking things were going to be okay for all of us, our little family there on Elkgrove, not like when I was a kid with my old man all crazy on his *boracheras*, yelling at us all the time.

It's still going to be okay, Tony. It is.

Who knows? That's one thing I learned. Nobody knows anything about tomorrow, nothing.

Nah, they don't, Tony.

When I got home from work a big crowd is in the street crying, all shaken up, and they part for me like I'm a king. Without a word, they point me toward the house. I go inside, sure. Evelyn was there, and wasn't there, in the kitchen, so pale, man, and her eyes just like wet blobs. Like this, man, see?

He holds his hands in front of his eyes to indicate two blobs, or Oedipus ripping out his eyes, something like that. That's what it reminds me of.

"We'll never see him again," she says. I stepped up close to her, and held her elbows, just lightly, with all my love for her in my hands, and told her we had a beautiful boy.

"I know."

"And we made him, Evelyn. Don't ever forget that, for his sake. He's watching us."

"No, it's not like that, Tony. He made us." She took my face in her hand like she had never seen me before. Already people were crowding in the kitchen. I couldn't stay. I left out the side door and hit the sidewalk and kept walking like a madman, with my head down. I didn't stop until I got to the cemetery on Whittier Boulevard in East L.A., that far away, Calvary Cemetery.

I went through the fucking wrought iron gate where I got family buried. Like my great-grandparents who I never met, *de mexico*, they're

there. “Hola,” I said. I was crazy. I lay down on a hill under a tree and cried so hard with my face twisted so ugly and my heart so heavy inside me like it was going to explode until I couldn’t feel nothing, nothing anymore. I was just a shell or a husk or something, a rind, scraped clean, brother, by the hand of God. He scooped me out like a pumpkin.

That’s crazy.

Threw all my brains and shit out like when you clean a pumpkin for Halloween. Make a Jack O’Lantern. See my stupid face? There’s no light behind it.

There’s plenty of light there.

Nah, there isn’t. Don’t lie to me. My mug brings people down. I got my dead girls, though. I still hear Arlene, “Cheer up!” and Dora, “You’re still my one and only, big T! Forever and ever!” They check in on me and make me smile. Tony, Tony asks me to take him to the park to throw the ball around and get an ice-cream sandwich at the snack bar. He’s the one who makes me get up in the morning and not do anything stupid so I can meet him naturally. He’s the one cheering me on, brother.

“Go, Dad,” he says. Yeah, in my head. All day, all night. In the morning, too.

“You’re the man!” That was our little joke. Who was the man?

You’re the man, Tony. You’re still the man. You’re in charge of your life. God loves you. I’m a Catholic, right? We’re both Catholics.

God was gone that day in the cemetery, brother. He was only a whispering breath in the trees. I heard that in a movie somewhere.

I think I saw the same one.

I was finished. I rolled over on the grass on that hill with the dead around me, so peaceful, and rose like a ghost. It was over for me, life on earth, basically, as stupid as that sounds. Star Trek or something, I don't know. No, not Star Trek. Life Trek. I didn't have anything inside me, brother. It was lost, all gone. Whatever was inside me. Good and bad and in between. Sucked out. Say a prayer for me on the road.

I'll say a prayer for you now.

This has been a prayer.

It's been long, and true. But I'm sorry to hear about it all, Tony. I wish you didn't have to go through that.

I figure everybody has to go through something.

I guess.

But some people go through more than others.

That's for sure.

You know who I am, man?

My friend, Tony the tiger, clawing his way out of the jungle, ready to pounce on some fresh meat. I don't know what the fuck that means.

I don't what any of it means. But I got a name for me.

What's that, brother? I look at the trees against the fading light in the park, and the darkness that forms behind them.

I'm the shadow man, "Tony the Shadow Man," meant to take away your pain.