

THE OTHER

by Katherine MacLean

TREE SHADOWS MOVED on the grey linoleum of the hospital floor, swaying like real leaves and twigs. Joey blurred his eyes to make the leaf shadows green.

The floor quivered slightly to foam-padded footsteps, and a man-shaped shadow appeared across the sunlight. That was Dr. Armstrong. He was kind. He always walked softly and then stood and shuffled when he hoped you would notice him.

The feet shuffled hopefully. When Joey concentrated on the doctor's shadow he could turn the head part pink, like a face.

Dr. Armstrong's voice said something. It was a pleasant light tenor voice, a little anxious.

"What did he say?" Joey asked the Other, the one in his head who listened and calculated. And explained. "He asked *How are you?*"

"What did he mean?"

"He wants you to get up and be busy, like him," said the cool advice of his Other—his guardian and advisor. "That's what they all want."

"Not right now. I am watching the leaves. What shall we tell him?"

"Tell him, *Just about the same.*"

Joey made the effort, and spoke, hearing his own voice very close to his ears. He was ready to turn and look out the window now, but the doctor's feet were beside him, anxiously demanding his attention, afraid he would turn away.

"What did he say?" Joey asked the Other.

There was a pause, a barrier, a reluctance to speak, then the cool voice answered. "He asked about me."

"Was he—" Joey was alarmed. People meddled, people said things which got inside and hurt. And yet Dr. Armstrong had always been nice, he never criticized, so far. "No—I don't want to know. Well—tell me a little."

The voice was indistinct. "Asked who you talk to—when you . . . before talking outside to him."

"Tell him it's you," Joey said, confident and warm. The voice was his friend, and Dr. Armstrong was his friend. They should know each other. The voice helped Dr. Armstrong. "Tell him it's you."

"What name? Authority people need names for existing things. They don't understand without names."

"What are you?"

"I am a construct. You made me."

"We can't tell him that. People punish me for making up people." Joey felt pain in his middle, near stomach and heart. It was hard to breathe. "Mommee shouted and cried."

"We won't tell him that," the voice agreed.

Joey felt calmer. The voice was good, there had to be a good name for it, one that the outside others would approve. "We can find a name for you. There are so many words. What else are you?"

"I am part your mother and your father and little parts and feelings of anyone who ever worried about you and wanted you to stop doing things so that you would be all right and strangers would not be angry at you. And you made me into a grownup to talk to you. Many years. I've grown wise, Joey. I worry about you and want you to stop ..."

"Don't bother me about that now," Joey said, withdrawing himself in his head so that the voice was far away where he would not have to listen. "You explain to Dr. Armstrong that you are on his side, that you are grownup like him, and tell me what to do. I wouldn't know when to get up, or what people want . . . They would be angry."

"Doctors don't want to talk to me. They want to talk to you, Joey. They don't ask how to do something: they ask what do you feel."

"I can't talk. They'd see me. I'd cry, and want to touch arms and rub cheeks. Talk for me. Tell them you're a doctor. Use their words."

Joey heard his voice close, but too quiet and mumbly. He forced it louder. ". . . *Father image, Dr. Armstrong. He tells me what is right to say. He is strict, so it is all right.*"

That sounded good. That sounded safe to say. Joey heard the musical tenor of Dr. Armstrong's anxious, well-intentioned voice. It would be praise.

"Don't listen to it, Joey. It's not—"

Pain and grief struck him in the middle, curling him over. Got to get away quickly or die. Make it not happen. Into the past, in the dark, in the comforting dark, before people could take away their love. He was lying on the floor, curled up, and the warm dark was wrapping around like a blanket.

But the feet still stood by, shuffling nervously. That past event must be finished before it could be forgotten. Joey took a deep breath, made a shouting effort, heard his distant scream and left it be behind, screaming forever like a soundless sign on the wall on a deserted train station, at a distant place in time.

"He said the wrong thing. Tell him to go away."

Outside-people do not know the roads and paths inside the world of image, memory, and dream: they stumble, blunder and destroy among the fragile things. He decided that he should not have listened and replied. When time came around to return front darkness to the world of light, he would be silent.

Doctor Armstrong, twenty-four years old, successful and considered brilliant, walked into his small office in the hospital. He carefully shut the door behind him and made sure his latch had caught before sitting at his desk.

He put his face down into his hands. (*He said the wrong thing. Tell him to go away.*) The article about Rosen's techniques had said that Rosen talked freely with his patients, discussing their fantasy worlds with them as if they were real, and explaining the meaning of the symbols to them. Perhaps he should see it demonstrated before trying it again.

God! Joey had fallen from the chair and hit the floor already curled up, knees to chin, eyes shut, as if stunned and dead. Maybe he would be all right. Tomorrow, casual inquiry to the nurses . . . The nurses might blame him for Joey. How many other mistakes did they blame him for already?

Why was he sitting like his with his face in his hands? *I'm tired*, he thought. *Just tired.*

Doctor Armstrong leaned his face more heavily into his hands, his elbows braced on the desk as though he were tired. Tears trickled down between his spread fingers and splashed on the psychiatric journal on his desk.

It is not I who is weeping, he thought. *I am the cool and logical student, the observer of human actions. I can observe myself also, which proves that my body weeps. This wastes time could use to study and to think.*

Tears trickled down between his spread fingers and splashed on the psychiatric journal.

It is not I who is weeping, he thought. *It is that other, the childish feeling in me, who can be wounded by love and hope, and pity and confusion, and being alone. I am an adult, a scientist. It is the other who weeps, the ungrownup one we must conceal from the world.*

"No one sees you," he said to the Other. *"You can weep for five minutes. This spasm will pass."*