

THE MAN WHO LOST HIS SHADOW

ISOBELLE CARMODY

Isobelle Carmody began her first novel *Obemewtyn* at high school and has been writing ever since. She completed a Bachelor of Arts and a journalism cadetship while she finished the novel. Her award-winning *Obemewtyn Chronicles* have established her at the forefront of fantasy writing for young people. She won Book of the Year for her urban fantasy *The Gathering* and received considerable critical acclaim for this and for her collection of short stories, *Green Monkey Dreams*. The title story of that collection won the 1996 Aurealis Award for the best young adult short story.

Her most recent novel, *Darkfall*, is the first in a trilogy for adults, was shortlisted for the Aurealis Award for Best Fantasy novel in 1997. In the same year her novel *Greyland* won the Aurealis for Best Fantasy novel in the young adult category. Carmody has also won the 3M Talking Book of the Year Award and the Children's Book of the Year Award for Older Readers.

She divides her time between Prague in Eastern Europe and her home on the Great Ocean Road in Victoria. She is currently working on *Darksong*, second in the *Legendsong* trilogy.

In the dark fantasy story that follows, we explore the labyrinthine cobbled streets of Prague in search of... shadows. And discover that everything has its price.

* * * *

Light floods from all directions, banishing every trace of night. Only a frozen transparency holds back the darkness.

There is a young couple in the booth opposite sitting so that although they appear to be languidly independent of one another, their bodies touch all along one side from shoulder down through the hip and thigh to the heels, their connection far more intimate than if they had been wound together explicitly. They are not foreign as I am, and even in a no man's land like this establishment, whose success depends upon its rejecting utterly any trace of the culture within which it finds itself, they belong in a way that I do not. Part of it may be because they are casually dressed while

I am wearing my formal but now somewhat crushed travelling clothes. Or maybe it is that they are young and I am not.

The girl is very tall and slender as women here seem to be — young women, anyway. The older women are as bulky as bears in their winter coats, their expressions forbidding and surly. The stewardesses on Thai Airlines, which I flew for the first part of the trip here, were as small and fragile as tiny blown-glass blossoms, while the German stewardesses on my second flight, were older. Young matrons with thick competent arms and faces. Here the young women have still, remote faces. One can see it is a general type and the girl opposite fits it. The waiter brings them two drinks — orange ade, perhaps, and a plate with two chocolate-coated cakes. A waiter is an anomaly in this sort of place, and yet his presence is a sign of the hybridisation of two cultures, each trying to consume and subdue the other.

The girl takes up the plate and cuts into the cake, her expression unchanged. Inside the coating of chocolate is a pale soft sponge or maybe some sort of creamy filling. She offers the laden fork to the boy, and my stomach spasms dully in what might be hunger. He is sitting bolt upright, although she is now resting her back against the seat, her spine bent into a delicate bow and curled around the long flat belly. She eats the two cakes slowly, licking her lips and talking, but never smiling, never showing any emotion. Her companion nods, and watches her with ravenous attention.

The waiter brings them a tall glass of fruit salad topped with a fat loose whorl of impossibly white cream. The boy's turn, I think, but he gestures at the glass and the girl sets aside the plate she had been holding and takes it up. Again she scoops up cream and fruit and offers it to him, and again he refuses. She eats the whole parfait with the same dreamy absorption. When she sets the glass down, the boy runs his hand over her belly possessively, then slides it around to pull her to him to be kissed. When he releases her, I see that her hands have not moved throughout the embrace and her body retracts automatically to its former languid bow.

The boy has become aware of my regard, and gives me a curious look. I do not glance away, embarrassed. I realise that I feel almost no sense of self consciousness. It is as if the affliction which has brought me to this strange outpost, has left me free of any need to pretend to be normal. The boy calls the waiter and pays the bill and as they leave, the young woman settles her limp, expressionless glance on me. There is no way of knowing what is going on in her mind. Perhaps nothing. Now that they have gone, my exhaustion returns and I begin to think of leaving. I wonder if I am afraid, but my emotions are slightly unfocused so that I am

not sure from one moment to the next what I am feeling.

Beyond the sheet of window glass is a utilitarian rank of petrol bowsers flooded with light, and beyond the asphalt surrounding them, lost in shadow, is a road leading back to the highway bounded on either side by a dense pine forest. That road connects to the city and I see it in the glass as I saw it through the frosted window of the taxi upon my arrival: a city street winding away and steeply up, street cobbles shining wetly. On either side of it, unbroken, ornate facades of buildings, art nouveau and gothic details picked out delicately by the buttery gold of the street lamps.

The thousands of tourists who come to see this city must feel they are stepping into the past, yet when the street was new, night would have been an all-consuming darkness so that nothing would have been visible; the brash light which symbolises the modern world thinks naively that it has banished darkness — from the streets, from corners, from the hearts of men and women. But it is eternal and it will find its way, its crack, its vein.

The castle appears beyond the glass now, seeming to be lifted above the snarl of old town streets surrounding it on beams of light, to float in greenish illumination, and I find I am back in the taxi that is not a taxi. Such is the power of the castle, this city.

The driver glances at me in the rearview mirror and tells me in brutish English that the lights are switched off the castle just before midnight. I think how I would like to sit somewhere — in a cafe perhaps — and wait to see it swallowed up by the night.

“You have business?” he asks, a touch of curiosity. Perhaps he senses my affliction, though it is virtually unnoticable at night. He wonders why I am here. I could tell him that the turbulent history of this country, the stony eroded beauty of this city that is its heart, fascinates me.

“Business,” I agree. A strange business.

I do not know how I lost my shadow. After the first shock wore off, I told myself it was freak chance. My shadow might not even have known what it was doing when it severed itself from me. I could easily envisage myself walking and hesitating at some slight fork in the streets, my shadow going on sunk in its own thoughts, failing to notice that it did so without me. Seconds later, I would choose the other way. Maybe after a time it realised what had happened and retraced its path, but by then, I had long gone.

That was one of my earliest theories. Hopes you might as well say.

One does not like to admit the possibility that one's shadow has left on purpose. I consoled myself with a vision of my shadow, slipping frantically along walls and paths searching for me, wailing as forlornly as a lost child, occasionally plunging into pools of shadow and emerging with difficulty because it lacked a form to pull it from the larger shadow.

But now, I can more imagine its relief at being cut loose. It may have been a fortuitous accident that freed it, or maybe it saw its chance to be free, and took it. Either way, I blame my passivity for our estrangement. Caught within the roaring machinery of the relationship between my parents, I had learned to defend myself with stillness. But having gained the habit of passivity, I could not lose it and so as an adult, I found it almost impossible to engage with life. I was a fringe dweller of the most meek and timid ilk and if someone had accused me of being a shadow in the world, I would have admitted it mildly.

But that was before my shadow was lost, and I understood by the gaping void its absence left, that it is we who need our shadows, not they us. Without it to anchor me to the earth, I became dangerously detached. I dreamed of the reassurance of its company, its small tug at my heels, its soft movement before me, feeling out my path like a blind man's cane. Without it to bind me to the earth, I am like one of those astronauts whose each step on the moon is so buoyant as to suggest that they might any second step into infinity. I am afraid that without my shadow, I will soon make just such a step into oblivion. It has gone far enough for me to understand that I am diminishing without its darkness to balance me.

The taxi swerved violently to avoid another taxi that had tried to pull out from a side street and the driver muttered what sounded like a curse. I noted indifferently that I had not felt the slightest fear at our near collision. That numbness is an unexpected side effect of my affliction.

Of course, I did not know what it meant to have lost my shadow. After an initial response of blank disbelief upon discovering it, followed by a mercifully brief period of doubting my sanity, I sought help. Ironically I went to a doctor first, a general practitioner more accustomed to removing warts and administering antibiotics and tranquillisers than to treating a man with an ailment as sophisticated and mysterious as mine. She offered me the latter and seeing the shape of her thoughts, I said somewhat haughtily that she need not suppose that anything was wrong with my mind. Could she not accept the evidence of her eyes as I had done? I lacked a shadow. What could be more empirically concrete? Yet she simply pretended to be confused by my symptoms.

“What exactly do you want?” she demanded finally.

I asked her coldly to refer me to a specialist in shadows, since her own training seemed to have left her ill equipped for more exotic illnesses. Somewhat maliciously, she sent me to a radiologist, whose view of shadows was shaped entirely by his seeking cancers and tumours in X-rays day after day. I can only say that his judgement was seriously warped by his position.

When I told him of my problem his eyes blazed and he clutched my arm hard enough to leave a bruise, proclaiming that I was the first human to have escaped the curse of shadows. He confided his belief that they were not bestowed by god as was generally supposed, but had been served upon us by some force which he refused to name. His mania was apparent when I questioned him about the purpose of shadows. He gave me an affronted look and asked what sort of man I thought he was, to ask him such a question; exactly as if I had asked the shade of his pubic hair. He examined the X-ray plate he had insisted on taking and developing, suspiciously, then pronounced resentfully that he saw no shadow.

After that, I gave up on the medical profession. I was not really ill, I reasoned. Having lost a shadow I was more like a man whose wife leaves him, clearing out their apartment with mysterious speed and efficiency. With this in mind, I consulted a private investigating firm. The man who ran the agency gave his name as Andrews. Since I could not not feel at ease addressing him in this manner, I contrived not to call him anything.

“I’ve never been asked to shadow a shadow before,” he said when I had laid the matter before him. I can only suppose he meant it as a joke but I did not laugh. I am not good at humour, and I told him this. He squinted his eyes at me and seemed suddenly sobered as if my words had made him take me seriously.

“Perhaps that’s it. Think of it from their point of view. Having to endure being dragged about, never having a chance to exert their own mind or will or taste. They’re worse than slaves because they can only emulate. Nothing they do is original. There must be millions of them constantly plotting a coup, fed by dreams of freedom. And on top of that, to be faced with living with someone who has no sense of humour. It must be unendurable.” He seemed very sincere, but a certain reticence in my own character prevented me breaking down and confessing my fear of precisely this thing — that some profound lack in me had driven away my shadow. That was a matter to be resolved between my shadow and I.

“Can you find it?” I asked him, finally, flatly.

He looked through a leather ledger before consulting with his secretary, and after some negotiating, agreed that he should have a modest retainer for a week. If after that time, his enquiries had divulged no promising clues, our contract would end. If he did find a lead, I would pay him \$100 a day thereafter, including expenses, until he found my shadow or my money was gone.

I gulped a little at the size of his daily fee, but a modest, hard working life has enabled me to put aside a very good sum, and to comfort myself, I reckoned that ten thousand dollars spent on finding my shadow would still leave ample for my old age, and perhaps would even run to a convalescing trip to the Greek Islands off-season, after it was all over, so that my shadow and I could re-evaluate our relationship.

Unfortunately after a week, the investigator could report nothing. He confessed that my inability to remember when I had lost my shadow was a stumbling block. I blushed when he spoke of this for his words seemed to me to suggest that I had been criminally careless. Though I continued to argue that the loss could only have happened a little before I noticed it, he seemed to doubt me, and made me doubt myself. Mulling it over, I discovered to my horror that I could not remember the last instance I had consciously noticed my shadow. I ran my mind over the day before my retirement, and then the week and months leading up to it. Finally, frantically, I began to run my mind over the years preceding, but still I could not recall seeing my shadow on any specific occasion. I envisaged all of the bright sunny days I had lived through, from forest walks in the autumn to a dip in the blazing summer heat, to no avail.

I could recall seeing my reflection many times, but not my shadow. I told myself at one point that, after all it was only a shadow, and then was chilled, for perhaps it was just such carelessness that had driven it off. If that was so, I avowed remorsefully, I would show how I valued it by the very fervency of my search.

Fortunately my retirement meant I had no appointments or ties to hold me back. In fact the investigator had the gall to suggest my retirement on the very day I had noticed my shadow missing, pointed to a link between the two events. Absurd especially since he could not substantiate his notion with anything aside from the most spurious and simplistic chronological causal link. Was he suggesting my retirement had provoked the departure of my shadow, I demanded? He bridled at my tone and though we parted politely, I did not go back to him.

“Behind there, gardens,” the taxi driver said nodding at a high graffitied wall. I wondered why the garden was walled. Perhaps it was a zoological garden and some sort of wildlife dwelt in it, but perhaps not. Already I could see this was a secretive city and in such a place, a garden might be considered to be dangerously wild, and needing to be retrained. I saw the driver watching me.

“Gardens,” I said.

But I was thinking of how I had returned at length to my building after recovering from my first horror at the loss of my shadow, having come to the conclusion that I must go away from my own country if I wanted to find it. My compatriots were not interested in shadows, after all. They were creatures of sunlight and brightness for the most part and even their violence was radiant and garish, devoid of true darkness. I needed to find an older world with crannies and corners. I needed a place where I would be irrelevant even if I was to behave in ways that would mark me eccentric or even mad. That meant a city. An old city.

And then, that evening as if in an answer to my soul searching, the person using the control in the communal television room changed channels, and I found myself watching the end of a documentary in which the camera showed a series of views of an ancient city. The last shot showed a cracked wall, where a child’s shadow walked along the shadow of another wall, beneath a rolling scroll of names. The documentary ended abruptly and I gave a cry of disappointment.

What is that place? Do you know where it is? I asked the other residents seated about in the mismatched chairs. A flat-faced, sombre-eyed man grunted that he ought to know since it was his own city. He had been a child there. Before the occupation. His parents had escaped and had emigrated. I asked if they understood shadows there. It was a risky question but there was a surreal quality to the light in the room that allowed it.

“There was a time when people had to be shadows there,” the man said.

My landlady reproached me for my selfishness when I told her of my intended journey. “What would your grandmother think of such behaviour.”

I regretted immediately that I had once spoken to her of my grandmother, but I said that if anyone, she would understand most

profoundly what I was doing.

My landlady said sharply that it was probably so, since my grandmother had been as mad as a cut snake. I could see that she was offended in the way only a woman whose mind is so convoluted in its masochism as to regard everything that occurs in the world as being somehow aimed at her. Nothing that happened, not a car crash in another city in which a stranger dies, nor the razing of a park to build a racecourse, nor the swearing of a drunk weaving from a pub, is exempt from being gathered into her aggrieved personal world view. Of course it is a stunningly self-centred, even sociopathic, means of regarding the world.

My grandmother was a woman of incredible wisdom, but it is true that she was insane. Perhaps it was the weight of all that wisdom that cracked her mind open like an egg. When she was very old, not long before the end, she became disorientated physically. She was always imagining she was in the house of her father, no matter where she was; that my home, or the hotel or mental institution or public toilet, were somehow connected to it, if she could just find the right door. She was frequently exclaiming at a picture or vase, saying hadn't that been moved from the mantelpiece in her father's study, or from the hall table, and worrying that it would trouble him.

"It is very vexing when things are moved around," she would sigh and scrub at her forehead fretfully with a tiny clenched fist.

It took some time for me to realise her apparent confusion was in fact an awareness of links which are buried under life, and hidden from reason. Children see these links between things very clearly, I believe. It is why they weep at one stranger and smile at another. So do the elderly, who slough off reason without regret, see these links. Indeed, perhaps with the same gusto as many of them throw off their clothes in public, they welcome back to themselves the Eden-like simplicity and clarity of childhood. Even before my grandmother died, I had begun to realise that her confusion was simply a deeper seeing of the world and the documentary had suggested to me that finding my shadow might take such vision. That frightened me because that manner of seeing cannot be learned or treated as a trick. That which allows one to see such links, of necessity blinds one to other things. Nevertheless, I vowed that at least I would follow this one strange clue without question.

I told myself that bereft of its caster, a shadow must be forced to all sorts of ruses and opportunistic leaps to shift itself about. Chance must rule its progress and I was ready to let go of all the comforting order and planning that had so far hedged my existence, and give myself to the roads

of chance. If one would enter the kingdom of heaven, one must come naked like a child. So my grandmother used to say.

The airport had been very crowded, or so it seemed to me. But perhaps it is always like that in the international terminal. I presented my ticket and little bag to the departure desk. Boarding the plane, I felt exhilarated and thought of a quotation I had read on my desk calendar the day I left work. "What does not kill you will make you stronger." It can only have been a warning, for little more than an hour later, walking to the tram stop in bright afternoon sunlight, I noticed that I cast no shadow. I stared down at the ground in front of me, feeling the sun pouring on my shoulders and on the back of my head. I turned and looked up, intrigued and puzzled to find out what second light source had erased my shadow. The shadow of the light pole alongside me fell on a wall. With a feeling of unreality, I held up a hand to the wall, but it cast no shadow.

I have no memory at all of the remainder of the trip home. How had I managed it staggering with terror, yet neither losing my hat nor briefcase heavy with the paraphernalia from my desk?

Another taxi swerved across in front of us, forcing the driver to run over the tram lines. The cobbles made the wheels drum under the seat, and I closed my eyes, remembering intimately the way I had been pressed into my seat as the plane left the earth and launched itself into a long, drawn out vibrating dusk in which the sun seemed to hang for hours half submerged by the horizon. I had declined food, despite my hunger. I dislike the prefabricated nature of airplane food and resolved to treat the long flight as a period of fasting and mental preparation for my search. I did not drink any tea or coffee, but took only water as if I were on a religious pilgrimage. Night fell and twelve hours later, it was still night. I felt on that plane as I feel now; as if I have entered an endless night that will not be broken until I am reunited with my shadow.

When the plane landed, it was so dark a day outside that it was indistinguishable from night. It seemed an omen to me. People exclaimed over the fog and there was talk of long delays for connecting flights. The woman at the transit station explained reproachfully to a complaining man from my flight that we were lucky to have been permitted to land at all. She looked interested to hear my destination.

"That's becoming very popular. Some say it is the Paris of the 1920s all over again," she approved in round vowels so plump they were like fruit waiting to be picked.

Day passed imperceptibly into night and still there was no call to board. I resisted suggestions to stay overnight. The smell of food made me feel faint and I decided to break my fast and while the hours away with a leisurely meal — perhaps even a light beer. The last meal I had eaten was a dinner of lamb chops and boiled potatoes prepared by my landlady the night before I left. I was so hungry that the thought of even that grudging meal made my stomach rumble. Nevertheless, I was grimy and sweaty after the long hours of travel and I decided I would bathe before eating. I exchanged my last bank notes for English pounds, and managed to locate an attendant to unlock the shower and give me soap and a towel.

In the booth, I undressed slowly and took a very hot shower, enjoying the water on my tired skin. Another effect of the loss of my shadow has been to render my skin dreadfully dry and itchy. After what seemed a very short interlude, the shower attendant hammered on the door and in an indescribable argot, gave what can only have been a command to make haste. I obeyed, surrendering the soiled towel and giving her a pound tip to demonstrate both my disapproval and my high mindedness.

This transaction reminded me that I would now need to change a small travellers cheque if I wanted to eat. Coming out of the restrooms, I patted my pockets searching for my wallet. Unable to find it, I decided I must have left it in the shower cubical. Although I was convinced that I had not taken it out there, I checked. Then it came to me. I had removed my jacket to be hung in the plane, taking out both the wallet and the thick plastic sleeve containing my travel documents, and sliding both into the seat pocket. On arrival, I had taken out the travel agency pouch, but I had no recollection of retrieving the wallet.

I went to the information desk, puzzled by my lack of apprehension. I put the curious deadening of my feelings down to jet-lag.

“If you had realised immediately,” the man said regretfully, a touch of Jamaica in his tone. Nevertheless he would make some calls. Can I come back in an hour. Not a question. I sat down for a while near his desk, then it occurred to me to see if I could simply report the cheques stolen and have them replaced. Money, after all, was my most pressing need. My cards and other papers could be replaced at another time.

I spoke to the young woman at the Thomas Cook counter, who assured me the cheques could be replaced quickly, so long as I could provide their numbers which were supposed to be kept separately. I explained that the sheet of numbers was packed into my bag, which had been checked in some hours earlier, and might already have gone on

ahead and even now be waiting for me at my destination.

“That is against regulations,” she told me with certainty. “The bags must travel with the clients. Always.”

I said nothing, knowing as she did that bags sometimes went without their people, just as shadows sometimes travelled alone. It wasn't meant to happen, but it could. The announcement for my flight to board came over the air.

“I will have to get the cheques once I arrive,” I said.

“You can't mean to go there without money,” she exclaimed. The genuine concern in her tone simultaneously touched me, and reminded me of the mysterious nature of my trip. It came to me that this mishap was a sign that I was failing to understand.

The young woman mistook the question in my eyes and leaned over her smooth counter to explain her words. “In a country like that, you must have money. Everything is for sale. Everything costs and you are safe as long as you can afford the price. Safety has a price, just like comfort or food or coffee.”

I sensed that under these words, she was telling me something important, but I could not seem to understand. My mind felt numb. I told her that I had made up my mind to simply go on. Surely this would be the most unreasoned response to what had happened, and therefore the most apposite. Maybe it was even a kind of test. At my request, she wrote the address of their office, saying there was surely a cheap bus to the centre and I could walk from there. Alternatively, I could take a courtesy bus to one of the bigger hotels. The Hilton, for instance, where they would not want money immediately, and would quite likely sort the lost cheques out for me.

She was kind, but I had no desire to spend any of my money on a hotel like the Hilton, which raised in me the same objections as pre-packaged airline food or MacDonalds. I would not find my shadow staying in such a hotel and to go there would signal surrender. I would get a bus to the centre of the city after changing the little remaining cash I had, and walk about until day broke. Then I would get the cheques replaced. I did not try to make any plans beyond that, for even that might be too much.

I checked back with the airline attendant who said no-one had handed in the wallet. I gave him my landlady's number in case it should appear. I disliked doing that, but I had no-one else's name to give other than my

employer, who was not the sort to maintain warm connections with former employees. The severance payment was generous enough to make it clear that I was to expect nothing more of him.

Boarding the small plane that would carry me on the last leg of my journey, I wondered what my boss would think if he knew I was on my way to a city full of shadows and danger, where everything had a price, although I had no money, or so little as to be meaningless. Perhaps he would even regret my retirement, and wish he had persuaded me to stay on. The thought should have given me pleasure, but it was tasteless, and I began to feel uneasy about myself.

On the plane I ate the small club sandwich offered, and drank as many cups of coffee as I could fit into the short flight. The food seemed only to make me hungrier and the sense of disorientation increased. It was no longer possible to pretend that I was not sickening.

The face of the customs official at the airport was flat and severe, but his eyes were the same soulful brown as the man in the television room of my apartment house, and absurdly as he took my passport I wondered if they could be related.

“Reason for visit?” he asked. His thick finger tapped a blank space in the form I had filled out. He slid a pen through the small window in the glass separating his official niche from me. I took it up and noticed my fingers were trembling. I tried to focus my thoughts. It was incredibly difficult, for even when I had understood the question I could not seem to think how to answer it. I looked at the official and found him staring and cataloguing my features for a report to be added to a file of suspicious foreigners.

I could feel sweat crawling down my armpits. I forced myself to write.

“Research,” he read. “What kind of research?”

I felt I might be about to faint or have some sort of convulsion. All of my glassy calmness seemed to rupture. My heart beat in jerky arrhythmic spasms. Then suddenly, with a feeling delirious clarity, I understood that my reaction was a premonition connected to my ailment, and to my arrival in this country. Without thought, I simply told him why I was there. I felt as if I had peeled my skin off in front of him. I felt that having told him my secret, I could not draw a breath without his having permitted it. I felt a drowning, tremulous emotion as if I had put my life in his hands. I had powerful urge to kiss his hands.

“Your shadow.” He said this, not as a question, but as a repetition so exact I realised he had not understood the word. His English must be regulation minimum and solely connected to his job. He stamped the passport and slid it to me with the visa folded on top. As I took it up, I felt as if I had shown myself naked to a blind man.

But by the time I walked out into the night carrying my bag, I understood that this had been a necessary encounter, an emotional procedure to be endured, and no less vital for entry to this country than getting an official visa. I felt stronger, though more detached than ever.

From the timetable, it seemed as if I had missed the last bus to the city. A short, swarthy man sidled over and asked if I wanted a taxi.

“Special taxi. Very cheap for you.” He had grasped the handle of my bag and was trying to wrest it from me. I held on and he ceased pulling at it. Perhaps he was surprised at my strength.

“It’s impossible,” I said. “I don’t want to take a taxi.”

He looked around furtively, and I had a memory of the Thomas Cook woman warning me about taxis in this city. She had claimed the majority were run by a vicious local mafia, and many of the drivers acted as pimps for gypsy prostitutes. She had told me of a taxi driver leaping out of his cab and beating two American tourists with a truncheon because they had crossed the street too slowly in front of him. Such fearless brutality suggested powerful if illicit approval had been bestowed officially. But the man holding onto my bag did not exude any air of power nor even of particular malignity. In fact, he looked more desperate than anything else. His clothes were ill fitting and grubby, the cuffs of his jacket and trousers badly frayed. I wondered if he really had a taxi, or merely sought to lure me to a discreet corner of the carpark and mug me.

“I don’t have the money for a taxi,” I said. He stared at me in sullen bewilderment and so I made a dumb show of the day’s events, reaching for my wallet and discovering its loss.

He let go of the bag. “No crown?” Now it was I who didn’t understand. Was it that he now somehow imagined I was like royalty who are reputed never to carry money? “You no want taxi?” This possibility appeared to confound him.

“Later,” I said, pointing away from myself as if at some hours distant. Then it occurred to me that the best way out of my dilemma might simply

be to ride about in a taxi until morning, when I could visit a Thomas Cook office.

“I don’t want a taxi, but I would like to make a tour of the city?”

“Tour? Now?” He gaped at me.

I nodded firmly. “An all night tour. Fixed price. No meter.”

“Tour,” he said, as if he was sucking the word to decide if he liked the taste of it. He nodded judicially. “Fixed price tour. Cheap. You come.”

I made him name a price, then let him take my bag. After all, it contained little other than a change of clothes and several changes of underwear. He ran ahead into the misty darkness, and I tried to calculate how many hours since I had slept last, but was defeated by the time difference between my country and this one, and by daylight saving on top of that. Did they bother saving daylight here, or did they save night instead? I realised at some level that I was becoming dangerously light headed. My nostril hairs seemed to be on the verge of freezing and the air was so cold it hurt to breathe it in.

He was standing by a car. “No taxi,” he said.

I took off my jacket and let him bundle me into the car.

He drove quickly and it seemed to me it was uncannily dark outside. There were no lights along the highway, and no moon or stars. I told myself it was overcast, yet I could not help but feel the darkness was thicker here than back home, congealing at the edges. He did not slow as we reached the outskirts of the city. I stared out at the streets which flickered by like a jerky old black and white movie. Everything looked grimy as if the dense blackness were slowly rubbing off onto the city.

“Metronome,” the driver said, nodding at a set of dark steps leading up from the roadside, and pointing up. “Up,” he said.

“A metronome?” I asked doubtfully, thinking I must have heard wrong.

“Doesn’t work,” he said. “Bad. Stupid.”

Another taxi roared past us so fast the car shuddered. Its red tail lights burned like coals in the misty air. “Taxis very bad here,” the driver muttered. “All criminals.”

All at once we rounded a sharp bend only to find our way blocked by the taxi that had passed us. Or perhaps it was another taxi. It had parked in such a way as to block the road completely. My driver stood on his brakes and tried to turn without stopping. The car slewed around and mounted the sidewalk with a great thump that at first made me think we had struck someone. Before I could speak, there was the sound of running footsteps and the driver's door was wrenched open.

He gave a thin scream as two huge men dragged him out of the seat and began punching him savagely. He did not fight back. He merely held his hands over his face, and when he fell, he curled into a foetal ball. I could not see properly then, because another of the assailants was blocking my way with his back. I groped for the door to let myself out, but the lock button had been removed. There was a lot of screaming and shouting outside, most of it from the driver. Then there was an ominous silence filled with heavy breathing.

The big man whose back had blocked my view, climbed into the front passenger seat and turned to look at me. His hair was dyed white, but his eyebrows were dark and almost joined over the bridge of his nose. Another thin man with dark greasy-looking hair slid into the driver's seat and turned the key. The big man continued to stare at me expressionlessly as the car backed down from the sidewalk. Then he pointed solemnly through the window. As I turned to look, he hit me on the head hard, and a second, deeper night consumed me.

* * * *

I woke to find myself lying full length along the back seat of the taxi that was not a taxi. My jacket had been thrown over me. From that position, I could see nothing except that it was still night. Gathering my strength, I sat up. Outside the car windows the darkness sped by. There was no sign of the city nor of any buildings. We were on a straight open highway, driving very fast.

The driver said something and the big man turned and lifted a truncheon. I shook my head.

"There is no need for that," I said.

I don't know if he understood me, but he lowered his arm. He studied me as if my calmness interested him, then he said something in his own language to the driver. The other man shook his head and began to shout.

The big man said nothing until he was silent, then he turned back to me and pointed through the front windscreen.

“Karvu. Coff-ee,” he said.

Looking down the road, I saw a faint illumination on the horizon. The brightness grew until I could see that it was an all-night petrol station attached to a fast food restaurant. The car pulled off into an access road and curved round to come to a grinding halt in the gravel car park. We were at the farthest point of the light. There were only two other cars parked alongside the restaurant. One was very new and red.

“You come,” the big man said. He said something else in his own language that sounded like a warning, and I nodded.

They walked one each side of me as we approached the restaurant. The driver pointed at the bowzers and the big man shrugged, steering me deftly through the shining glass doors. The harsh light hurt my eyes and I was glad of the thick paw on my shoulder. I thought I might vomit because of the light, but could not think how to express this. The big man pushed me into a booth and eyed two men sitting in the opposite booth.

“I just wish you wouldn’t bring up the war,” one said in an American voice. “It’s a sore point with these guys. They think we betrayed them.”

“You did,” the other man snorted in laconic German-accented English.

The thin driver sat down, and gave the two men a dangerous look, but the big man patted his breast pocket and shook his head.

“All of that is ancient history. It’s in the past,” the American’s tone was irritated. Neither he nor the German seemed to have noticed our arrival.

“Nothing is past here. Haven’t you learned enough to know that?”

Silence fell between them, and I wondered what had become of my original driver. Had he been killed? The big man rose and went to a phone. The driver squinted at me through a fug of evil smelling smoke, looking as if he wished I would make an attempt to escape or call for help.

“We could have got coffee closer to the border,” the German said.

“Coffee. Sure,” the American’s voice was ironic. “We’ve got a

deadline, Klaus. Why don't you wait until we get somewhere civilised."

"You don't understand," the German said with friendly contempt. "You don't understand anything but disinfectant and prophylactics. You're afraid of everything, including your own shadow."

The mention of shadow galvanised me. For the first time, it occurred to me that the final step on my journey might be death. I realised I had known that all along, but had feared to look at it squarely. To distract myself from the horrifying realisation that I was not much troubled by the thought of dying, I wondered what border we were to cross. Or perhaps we had crossed it already and were travelling in the opposite direction to the German and the American.

"Aren't you afraid of getting a disease?" The American asked, fastidious but curious too.

The German laughed. "The possibility makes the pleasure more intense. Darker. But this place offers deeper pleasures."

"A stretch of god-forsaken highway where the snow looks like dirty sperm. And those women. The way they just loom up suddenly in the headlights with their black leather skirts and fishnet tights and fake fur coats, their eyes like petrol bombs about to blow up in your face. They scare the hell out of me. How can anyone stop. How can you get aroused by that?"

"They wouldn't be there if no-one stopped," the German said almost coyly. "I've stopped every time I pass this way, since the first time and every time I do, I am afraid. Nothing is more terrifying than to stop and take one of these women into the car. They take me down into the dark so deep I don't know if I'll ever come up. If it's possible."

"But they're just whores. Terrible rough whores with scars and thick thighs. I read in *Time Magazine* that they're the worst, most dangerous prostitutes in the world." The American's voice was lace-edged with hysteria.

"It's true," the German murmured.

"I'm not afraid. It's the disease ..."

The German laughed and called for the bill, and as he paid, the big white-haired man returned from the phone. He nodded at the two men as they left, then slid back into the booth beside me. It came to me that the

phone call had been about me. That they had been waiting for it to decide my fate. Would they now kill me or beat me up and leave me for dead? Were they going to try to ransom me? Or use me as a hostage? These thoughts fluttered distantly through my mind, like leaves blown along a tunnel.

The waiter brought three espresso. The white-haired man must have ordered them when my attention was elsewhere. I drank, enjoying the cruel strength of it. I had never tasted such bitter coffee before, like the dregs of the world. The caffeine hit me like a punch to the heart.

An hour passed and the phone rang. The waiter glanced at our table in such a way that I realised he knew my assailants. Probably even knew that I had been abducted. The big man went to take the call. He nodded. He shook his head. He shrugged and said a few words. He nodded again. He put the receiver back on its cradle and came back to the table decisively. He said two words to the driver. Who lit another cigarette. Neither of them spoke to me. Neither of them looked at me.

A strange tension devoid of emotion filled me.

“What will we do?” I asked.

The big man tilted his head. “We? There is not we.”

I grasped for something to say, to link us. To hold me to the earth.

“There is the war,” I said.

“The war is always going on.”

I felt a sense of loneliness, of being finally detached, that overcame a dull surprise at his speaking English so easily.

There was the sound of an engine approaching. Both men looked away through the glass and I felt abandoned. The noise increased until the headlights loomed and fused with the light from the petrol station. The car had tinted windows so it was impossible to see who was inside. There was the sound of a horn and the engine continued to run. The big man rose from the seat beside me and nodded to the driver, who reached into his pocket and threw a set of car keys onto the shining Formica.

“You have your own business, eh?” the big white-haired man said, and he winked solemnly and paid the bill. The two of them sauntered out

the glass door and climbed into the waiting car — a taxi, I saw, as the doors slammed behind them, and it sped away sending up a spume of gravel in its wake.

As the car drove out, another car pulled in. A young couple emerged and stretched. They entered and I watched them slide into the booth where the American and German had sat. Their bodies touch all along one side from shoulder, down through the hip and thigh to the heels, their connection far more intimate than if they had been wound together explicitly.

Walking into the freezing night some little while later, I glanced back at the blazing lump of cement and glass. It looked surreal. Like some outstation at the end of the world. It began to snow lightly, white flakes swirling against the blackness. Climbing into the driver's seat of the taxi that was not a taxi, I inserted the key. The car started the first time despite the rapidly dropping temperature. I let the engine idle a moment, then put the car smoothly into gear. I felt no impatience and no fear. My body felt weak, but my hands were steady as I drove out onto the verge of the highway. I had no idea which way was the way back to the city.

I went left, remembering to drive on what was for me the wrong side of the road. It produced a queer feeling of unbalance in me, and as the light of the petrol station fled behind me, I reflected how strange and surreal it was to be driving into the unknown with such a feeling of absolute Tightness. I could almost feel the proximity of my shadow in the paradox of it. The snow was still falling, yet blackness pressed against the car so hard I fancied it was slowing it down. After several kilometres, I realised that the car was indeed slowing. The petrol gauge showed the tank was empty.

The car coasted and I steered it, my mind a blank. I felt no need to make a decision. I had gone too far to pretend control over my life now. I had gone out of the blue and into the black. Snow flew like huge moths. I squinted to see the white line through them. The snow thickened and I realised I could no longer discern white from black.

The car was slowing right down, and I directed the wheel a little to the right, and at the same time, the snow ceased to fall, and I saw her, a woman standing beside the road against the vast rising mass of the forested hill behind her. She wore a slick black jacket and long black boots. As far as I could tell, she wore no skirt or stockings. Her long legs shone with the same blue-tinged white as her neck and face. Her hair was so blonde as to seem to give off its own radiance.

The car rolled to a halt a few steps from the woman. She turned

slowly and my heart beat slowed. I told myself she could not see me, that it would be impossible to see anything in all of that streaming light; but her eyes seemed to swallow the light, and penetrate to me.

She came towards the car, approaching the passenger door in a sturdy undulating stride. She tapped at the window with nails as long and curved and transparent as a dragonfly's wings.

Aside from her hand splayed against the window, I could see only her torso; the patent leather, a liquescent black, outlined her round hips and breasts. The passenger door opened and she entered the car as smoothly as a dancer to slide into the car, and with her came an icy blast of air. She was older than she had looked from a distance and more stocky. Her hair shone with such a silvery pallor that it might have been stranded with grey. She might have been close to fifty, and although her skin was like fine velvet, there were intricate webs of wrinkles at the edges of her eyes like the sort of embroidered lace created by wizened nuns in some strict fanatical order of silence. Her mouth was purple-black, as if she had sucked some dark potent fruit whose juice had stained her. Eve's lips might have looked like that, after she bit into the fruit of the tree of knowledge. But her eyes were the bright shining miraculous blue of the skies above my own land, and nothing is more pure or relentless than that.

"You are tired?" she asked in mangled English.

"I have not slept for a long time," I said. The words were difficult to formulate, as if my lips were reluctant to obey me. As if it was too late for that.

"It is long. The road."

She reached out and switched off the headlights. We were plunged into the intimate ghastly green of the dashboard light. The colour made her look as if she were a corpse and her eyes seemed transparent. Her hair was black now as if it had become saturated with the night, or with something seeping out from the heart of all her whiteness. "What do you want?" She spoke English as if through a mouth full of liquid.

"I am looking for my shadow," I whispered. My own voice sounded foreign.

"But it will cost you," she said.

She leaned away from me, and slowly, her eyes on my face, drew

aside the slick black edges of the coat like the lips of a wound, to reveal the full smooth curve of her breasts where they were pressed together into a voluptuous cleavage. They were white as milk and downed like a peach. She reached a pale hand between them and scooped one breast out. It was so soft that her fingers sunk in it. Only now, with her hair swept back to bare her throat and bosom fully, did I notice that there was a vein coiling from her neck to her breast. It writhed under her skin as if it had its own life. It was as delicate as the threaded flaw in purest marble and it moved towards the tip of her breast as if to drink, or escape.

I began to shake my head. I wanted to tell her that she was mistaken. I was ill, but not old. Not so old. She reached out her free hand to slide around my neck, and pulled me towards her. She was strong as a peasant and a ripe odour flowed over me as she lifted the breast, offering the thick nub of her nipple.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

I had just left my home on the Great Ocean Road in Australia when I wrote "The Man Who Lost His Shadow". It was the end of spring, so the days were chilly, but though it lacked heat, the sunlight suffused the sea-mist with gold and the world smelled tantalisingly of salt and the summer to come. As ever, Australia never seemed more beautiful and precious than when I was leaving.

I had met Jack Dann at the Melbourne Writers Festival, and he mentioned that he and Janeen Webb were putting together a collection of science fiction and fantasy stories. I was keen to be involved, but had nothing to hand and can't write to order. However, Jack was not prescriptive at all, and I did have a story floating around in my head which I wanted to write for Nadia Wheatley to thank her for launching *Greylands* for me. I had decided to make this my first project when I returned to Europe. If it didn't come together in a few weeks, I would give it up. Stories are harder for me to write than prose for a novel because they seem to demand something very intense from me.

I didn't reckon on how I would feel coming back to Prague. It is a beautiful ancient city bisected by the bridge spanned Vltava and built where woolly mammoth hunters once roamed. There are labyrinthine cobbled streets and a multitude of churches and lovely buildings, but it was so dark

and the stone seemed so hard and heavy. Never before had the grimy film left on this city and its people by decades of totalitarian oppression seem more in evidence to me. The sun didn't shine for three weeks as I wrote. Daylight seemed no more than the brief grey flicker and at three in the afternoon, night closed over the city like a lid. You could almost hear the clunk. I felt like Persephone caught between darkness and light, and of course, this permeated the story as a subtext...

— *Isabelle Carmody*