

THE SHADOW

Thomas M. Disch

Thomas M. Disch
(www.michaelscycles.freeseve.co.uk/tmd.htm)
lives in New York City and in rural Pennsylvania. He is a prominent science fiction writer who occasionally writes fantasy and horror. Though his early reputation was based on the excellence of his SF novels—The Genocides (1965), The Puppies of Terra (1966), and Camp Concentration (1968)—he has a broad range and has had success outside the SF & fantasy field as a poet, critic, and novelist. On Wings of Song (1979) was his last published SF novel. He published two horror novels, The Businessman: A Tale of Terror (1984) and The M.D.: A Horror Story (1991). His most notable contributions to American pop culture are his children's books, The Brave Little Toaster (1981) and The Brave Little Toaster Goes to Mars, (1988), both of which have been made into Disney films. Though the Toaster books have the earnestness appropriate to their audience, usually Disch has a wicked sense of humor.

“The Shadow,” which appeared in F&SF, shows Disch in his dark satirical mode. It is one of several good stories we’ve seen recently dealing with Alzheimer’s. Here Disch gives this sensitive subject a treatment reminiscent of the dark fantastic tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann, something that shouldn’t work, but does!

Her neighbors said of Angie Sweetwater that she was afraid of her own shadow, and in a way they were right, though not in the way they meant and not in any way that Angie—or her neighbors, for that matter—could have understood. The thing is, Angie had a nasty shadow, always thinking dark thoughts and itching to have a life of its own away from Angie and the little brick house on Wythe Lane where she lived all by herself. She’d lived there alone like that for eighteen years ever since her husband Roy’s freak accident on I-95. He’d taken the exit ramp too fast, there was ice, and the car went over the shoulder. Roy, who never used his safety belt, was catapulted forty feet and had his head laid open by the sign that set the speed limit on the ramp at 30. The Buick wasn’t scratched.

Angie had never learned to drive a car, so after the accident she was pretty much at a loss for how to do all those ordinary things like shopping that she’d depended on Roy for. There wasn’t a grocery or convenience store anywhere within walking distance. Not that Angie ever did that much walking or would have. She got the exercise she needed out in the garden—or she used to, before the accident. The neighbors joked that she was getting to be just as planted as the old Buick inside the garage. Mrs. Deaver, two houses down the street, offered to teach her to drive, but Angie’s reply was a flat no thank you. She relied on her son Tom to chauffeur her

anywhere she needed to go, or else a taxi. And the Shop-Rite manager, who lived at the very end of Wythe Lane, delivered her groceries to her door as a special favor, even though Shop-Rite as a general rule didn't do deliveries.

So that was how she'd got along for years, eating frozen dinners and getting out of the house less and less, especially after Tom and his family moved to Tacoma. His company was leaving the area, and it was either that, Tom said, or food stamps. Once he was settled, he promised to look for a city apartment for her nearby where he lived, but that was out of the question. Angie wasn't going to start living in any city at this point in her life. Tom swore Tacoma wasn't dangerous, but how would he know? That was ten years ago, since when Tom had managed to get back for a visit almost every year, and twice, for Christmas, he'd brought his family along.

She never complained. She didn't even have complaining thoughts. But her shadow did. Her shadow got to be one big knot of gloom and hungers, like a pot-bound house-plant with its roots all sickly and tangled together. Shadows are like plants. They need sunlight simply to exist. They need to feel the air stir around them. They need to feel something physical—a bug will do—light down from time to time and rub against them. Plants like a nice squirt of birdshit that'll leach down into their dirt, and our shadows have equivalent needs. They have hungers and daydreams and vague longings for what they think would be freedom. Usually, those daydreams come to nothing, like most people's, but that doesn't matter, so long as there is some kind of input. They can get along on next to nothing. TV will serve their purpose most of the time, just like for people. Shadows may not have much of a life of their own, but what they can see on TV supplies that basic lack. But Angie didn't watch much TV. Wythe Lane wasn't wired for cable, and the channels she could receive didn't show anything but foul language and violence. That would have suited her shadow fine, of course, but it was Angie who was in control of on and off. Shadows are usually helpless in that regard.

It finally reached the point where the only time Angie or her shadow ever stirred from the house was on Sunday mornings and, sometimes, on Wednesday evenings, when Angie's friend Lucille would pick her up and take her to the United Baptist Church in Chambersville. Lucille had been a beautician before she was married, so she also did Angie's hair and nails every two or three weeks, at Angie's home, after the Wednesday prayer meeting.

Angie's shadow was always keenly attentive to everything that Lucille said or did during the beauty treatments. Those Wednesdays were the high points of the shadow's limited life, and probably of Angie's as well. So when Lucille brought up the subject of *The Throne of Darkness* Angie's shadow was transfixed. It began to vibrate like a tuning fork that's heard the vibration it's been designed to pick up.

The Throne of Darkness was a paperback book by Cassandra Knye that Lucille had checked out, with four other paperbacks, from the Chambersville Municipal Library. Lucille had had a long-standing grievance with the library's book selection process and with the chief librarian, Edward Holme, but *The Throne of Darkness* represented something worse than anything up to now, an assault against the moral well-being of the entire community, especially the children. It was a threat that had to be met head on, and so Lucille was circulating a petition to have the book, and a number of others just like it, taken off the library shelves. Everyone at the prayer meeting had signed Lucille's petition, even Pastor Raines, though he'd refused to let Lucille read aloud the most offensive passages from the book, since they were there in the church basement.

But Lucille insisted on reading one of those passages now, while they waited for the tint to take. "Listen to this part, just listen. 'Locking herself away from the curious stares and whispers of the others, Sister Rosemond began to fear herself. She couldn't sleep, and when she did the figure of Ariston would appear before her robed in white with golden sandals on his feet. The sands of the desert eddied about him, as though obedient to his will. She,

too, was obedient to his will. Nude and wet, she walked toward him across the burning sand. His arms embraced her, his lips parted in an obscene invitation. He drew away his white robe to reveal his grotesque nakedness and threw her down across—”

“Please,” said Angie. “Please don’t read anymore. It’s just too... I wish you wouldn’t.”

“It gets worse,” Lucille promised.

“I’m sure it does.”

“But you can see, just from that much, that it’s Satanism pure and simple. And any child can walk into that library and check out the book.” There was no getting her off it, and Angie had to sit there while Lucille finished with her hair and listen to it all, how children were playing a game called Dungeons and Dragons and then committing suicide, and how there were books in the library along the same lines. How there were crimes that the police couldn’t explain. Children who were missing. Pets dying mysteriously. On and on. Finally Angie had to claim a headache and ask Lucille to leave without doing her nails.

When Lucille was gone, Angie went on sitting in the middle of the kitchen with the queerest feeling inside her. She looked down at her hands, where they were resting on her knees, and they looked wrong, all wrinkled and knobby and discolored. Roy used to joke that her name was really Angina at times like that when she’d sit off by herself, not saying anything, claiming a headache. Which wasn’t true, the name on her birth certificate was Angelica, but no one had ever called her by that name in her entire adult life. Roy said it made her sound like a Catholic.

While she sat there, with the peculiar feeling, her shadow was breaking loose. Shadows usually can’t do that. Most of them always stay fastened to the people they’re born with. Only if the person gets very weak and the shadow gets strong at the same time can the shadow break loose, and then the person usually dies soon after. You can see them like that in hospitals sometimes, though it mostly goes unnoticed, or misunderstood. People sitting by the bed may think a light comes into the person’s eyes just before they die,

but it's actually the reverse. Their shadows have left them, so their eyes look brighter for a little while before they finally go cloudy and dull at the very end.

Angie's shadow had been gaining strength all the while Lucille had been reading from *The Throne of Darkness*. When Lucille had taken her leave, she'd left the book behind, thinking Angie might look at it while she was by herself. Angie hadn't even noticed the book sitting there on the kitchen counter, but her shadow had.

Her shadow wanted to know more about Rosamond and Ariston, but from where Angie was sitting only the spine was visible, not the picture on the cover. So there was a kind of tug of war between Angie's feeling of queerness and her shadow's feeling, which was simpler and stronger, and finally it was her shadow who won. It broke loose, and now it was Angie who was helpless and her shadow who could move around and do things.

The shadow went over to the kitchen counter and looked at the cover of *The Throne of Darkness*. There was Ariston, his face all red but with deep shadows, as though he were standing above a bonfire, and there was Rosamond in a red silk gown that matched Ariston's face. Yes, the shadow thought. I'm so hungry. I want...

But that was as far as it could get. It couldn't think what it was it wanted. It opened the book and turned some pages, but that didn't help. Shadows can't read. Once they tear loose from people, shadows can get pretty stupid. They are like cockroaches, hungry and restless.

The shadow remembered the Buick sitting in the garage. Tom had tried to get his mother to sell the car to a dealer he knew, but when she'd proved stubborn about that, Tom didn't insist. He respected her feelings, and besides he figured the car would be his soon enough—a vintage 1976 Buick with low mileage and not a flake of rust. So each time he'd come back to Wythe Lane, he'd futzed with the car, keeping it tuned and polished. An investment.

Angie's shadow got the keys from the kitchen drawer and went out to the garage and started up the Buick and backed it straight into the garage door. Each of the four little panes of glass

in the door was cracked, but they didn't shatter. The shadow didn't know quite what to do. It tried to raise the garage door, but it had got stuck to the Buick's bumper. It got back into the car and put it into Drive and managed to tear the back bumper off the car. And that was it for the Buick. Its battery was dead. The shadow wasn't too stupid to understand that.

At that point Angie's shadow gave up on any idea of having a night on the town and went for a walk in the night air, which was freedom enough after all the time it had sat beside Angie in the house, doing nothing and wishing Angie were dead. It walked through the nearest backyards, setting a few dogs to barking, and then along a drainage ditch, where it finally fell asleep beside a cyclone fence designed to keep the neighborhood children from wandering onto the highway. Shadows need their sleep the same as people.

The shadow was awake and back in charge at the first glimmer of direct sunlight. For someone who had spent the night in a drainage ditch Angie looked in pretty good shape. Her metabolism had risen to the occasion, and though she was stiff in all her limbs, once her shadow had got her on her feet and brushed off the dead leaves, she looked like any other old lady standing in a drainage ditch at five A.M. on a May morning. Ordinarily just that would have been unusual and embarrassing enough to have incapacitated Angie, but the shadow had no compunctions about the neighbors and what they might have thought. It was aware of them, but only as a cockroach might be aware of the jars and boxes in the cupboard it inhabits, as potential sources of what it needed.

One of the neighbors in question appeared before the shadow now, Natalie, Mrs. Deaver's teenage daughter. She said, "Mrs. Sweetwater—you're up early."

The shadow smiled, and extended Angie's hand to be shaken. It said, "Could I have a cigarette." When there was no immediate response, it remembered to add, "Please."

"A cigarette? I'm afraid I don't smoke. I didn't think *you* did either, Mrs. Sweetwater."

“I used to. Then I didn’t for a while. Now I’m a smoker again.” The shadow smiled its most plausible smile, but it resolved, even as Natalie politely disengaged and started jogging again, not to risk another such encounter. The strain of pretending to be even such a simple creature as Angie Sweetwater was too taxing.

The shadow returned along Wythe Lane to Angie’s little brick house, drawn there by its memory of something on the kitchen counter. And it was there still, unemptied, the ashtray in which Lucille had stubbed out her three cigarettes last night. One of the things that Angie, and her shadow, had enjoyed about Lucille’s Wednesday visits was that Lucille was a smoker. Roy had been a smoker, too, and Angie had been as addicted to his secondhand smoke as Roy had been to it at firsthand. “I like how it smells,” she would tell people when they asked her if they could smoke when they visited.

She even liked the smell of these old butts in the ashtray, or her shadow did. It bent low over the little square of stippled amber glass and took a deep, luxuriating whiff. Shadows have a special affinity for the *other* side of anything, its inverse, or obverse, or opposite. Not just whatever lies in darkness, but the dregs and refuse and wreckage that is left behind by floods or fires, the ashes in the grate, the fumes that linger in a garage or a basement. They take to such things by the same simple tropism that makes plants strain toward the sun or attracts bees to bright colors.

While certain complex tasks would have been beyond the shadow’s limited competence (it could not have done the laundry, for instance, or made the bed), the shadow did understand that to smoke one of the butts from the ashtray it would have to be able to light it. But it could not think where Angie kept the matches, since she so infrequently had need of them that using them was not an ingrained habit, an automatism that came with the vehicle. It stood there stymied and peevish until it realized (it would probably have taken Angie as long to do so) that the stove could be used as a cigarette lighter.

It turned on the right front burner, and then, positioning the

cigarette in Angie's pouted lips, stooped to get a light. It took care not to let anything but the splayed tip of the butt get close to the flame. At the first sting of smoke it drew back and savored the vaporized poisons of Lucille's Salem.

The very qualities that made tobacco lethal to human health made it dear to the shadow, but even so the tissues of Angie's throat, unused to the tickle of the smoke, reacted badly. The shadow could not stop coughing, but neither could it resist another drag of mentholated smoke, nor a third, though by then the coughing had become violent, a convulsion. It flicked the cigarette across the kitchen, a bull's-eye into the plastic garbage can beside the sink. Angie herself would not have been so accurate. In many ways her shadow was more comfortable in her skin than she.

While Angie's lungs recovered from their coughing fit in the platform rocker in the living room, the cigarette smoldered inside the garbage can, as it was engineered to do. A single wadded Kleenex caught fire, and flared, and, as it died, relayed its flame to the dry corner of an otherwise damp paper towel. Those flames in turn reached the crumpled cellophane that had been a cookie wrapper, after which, the entire contents of the can became a torch, the flames of which rose high enough to ignite the roll of towels in the dispenser and then the kitchen curtains and the flounce above.

From where it sat in the living room the shadow could not see the fire in the kitchen until it had spread beyond the area around the sink. Even when it became aware of what was happening it did not bestir itself to phone for help. Indeed, its impulse was rather to feed the flames than to damp them, from a sense that they were its own. Anyone who has built a great leaf-fire and seen the flames leap high has felt a similar vanity. It is our own shadow's rapture we share at such a moment, its sense of itself as something immense and unbounded, the shadow in mad-emperor mode.

As the flames spread through the house, flitting among those things most flammable, they also kindled scraps of psychic tinder in Angie's own sere soul. For it was she, not the shadow, who

began to hum “Some Enchanted Evening,” which long ago, at a bar in Orlando, Florida, a pianist had sung to her at Roy’s particular request on their fourth anniversary. Somehow this May morning, as she sat in her burning house, the dear old tune seemed the key to her whole life. The melody seemed endless, with no point along the way she could stop at, so that finally it was the shadow and not Angie who had to take the initiative and stagger up from the rocker and out the front door, almost invisible by then behind the billowing black smoke.

While the neighbors gathered to watch the arrival of the firemen and their losing battle, Angie sat on the other side of Wythe Lane, sprawled in an Adirondack chair, a spectator at her own disaster, yet as little distressed as if it had been a crisis on the evening news, a war in West Africa or riots at the Mexican border.

The shadow, meanwhile, gorging on the fire’s triumph was in a state of comatose surfeit, like a tick swollen with blood. When the emergency medical team showed up, it was determined, after Angie didn’t answer their questions and they had filled out the appropriate forms, that she was in a state of shock. To spare everyone the discomfort of her inappropriate and weird lack of affect, Angie was sedated and taken off in the EMT ambulance.

When the sedative had worn off, Angie continued to pose a problem for the staff at Mercy Hospital, for she would not remain in her bed in the recovery ward (a temporary assignment) but would go wandering through the halls and lobby, confused and querulous. She couldn’t understand why her clothes had been taken from her and she had nothing to wear but a paper examination gown that left her backside bare.

Anger was not an emotion in Angie’s usual repertory. She could do nothing but weep and ask to talk with her son in Tacoma. But Angie could not remember his number, which was unlisted. The shadow, still gorged, did nothing to help, nor could it have. It let her dither about in the public areas of the hospital and make a fuss like an ill-tempered pet locked in a parked car.

By the time Tom was contacted and had got to the hospital, Angie had calmed down, and the shadow had again assumed control. It lay in the hospital bed and glowered dully at Tom and the various strangers who had questions about the fire. Once or twice it had asked for a cigarette, but this produced no response except, from Tom, a suspicious string of questions.

The hospital's diagnosis, which Tom did not think to question, was advanced Alzheimer's. Tom did not want to complicate his life by bringing his mother back to Tacoma with him. To what purpose? She couldn't be trusted under his family's roof, even if his wife would have accepted that idea, since Angie had probably been responsible for the fire that had destroyed her own house. A neighbor's daughter had seen Angie wandering about in a dazed manner on the morning of the fire, and at the hospital they had had to use restraints to keep her in her own bed. It was a sad situation, but not really that unusual.

For Alzheimer's the standard solution was a nursing home and then an averted gaze. Living at a great distance might actually be an advantage—out of sight, out of mind. And so, before Tom returned to Tacoma, Angie was taken to live at Raines Adult Home outside of Chambersville. The home was operated by Amos Raines, a cousin of the pastor of United Baptist, which made it seem not quite as heartless as leaving Mrs. Sweetwater with complete strangers. She would have her own room, and Tom was introduced to two of the other female residents, who were sufficiently self-possessed to shake his mother's hand and, with prompting, to say hello to her.

However, those two ladies, Mrs. Filbin and Mrs. Lynch, were about all the establishment could show for itself in terms of good P.R. The other residents, six males and three females, had been placed there by Chambersville Psychiatric Center under an adult care contract with the state. Basically, the Psychiatric Center used Raines Adult Home as a storage facility for its most hopeless geriatric cases, those with diagnoses, like Angie, of advanced Alzheimer's. Most of them were also like Angie in being under the

control of their shadows, a not uncommon condition among those in nursing homes. Indeed, just as certain insects and the orchids that imitate them have co-evolved over the centuries so that their resemblance becomes ever more congruent, so shadows have co-evolved with those genuine behavioral disorders which offer them an alibi and a disguise—Alzheimer's commonly, but also autism, bipolar disorders, and some forms of schizophrenia.

It was not only Angie and other residents of the Raines Adult Home who were ruled by their shadows; so were two of the employees, the twin brothers Wilbur and Orville Halfacre. The Halfacres had spent almost their entire lives in institutional care, first, when abandoned in infancy, as recipients, now as dispersers. They were neither of them very bright, but they had both earned high school equivalency diplomas and gone on to receive training as medical technicians, and, in Wilbur's case, as a cosmetologist. Thus, they were qualified to minister to the needs of the home's residents, and the residents, in turn, met theirs.

Angie became the Halfacres' particular favorite, chiefly because there was something unusually docile in the way she submitted to male sexual demands. That had been so with Roy, who had tried to encourage her to play a more active and responsive role in their conjugal relations. It was even more the case with the Halfacres, who had spent some time in custody in their teenage years for practicing necrophilia. Because of their age there had been no permanent record of that unfortunate episode, but during the time they spent in a supervised environment their shadows had become ascendant in their lives. That they should become employees in such a place as Raines Adult Home had been almost inevitable, shadows being drawn to other shadows in the way that insects swarm about light bulbs. If it had not been the home, it would have been one of the local prisons, or a school of Special Education.

Such were the Halfacres. For we may as well speak of their shadows as though they *were* the Halfacres, and of Angie's shadow as though she and it were the same entity, for when a shadow has

long been in command, the conventional boundaries between self and shadow blur and become unimportant. Who shall say that a particular crime was the work of someone's shadow or her own? More than once in her years at the home Angie's shadow committed an opportunistic act of malice (accidents are so common among the elderly), and the other resident shadows did the same, or tried to. Had her role ever been discovered, Angie could have protested that she was innocent, that she could not remember having released the switch or pulled the plug, and she might have passed a polygraph test when she testified to that effect. But increasingly Angie remembered nothing that she did, as her mind continued its long slow fade to gray. In such cases innocence becomes a semantic quibble, as it is so often in courts of law.

When shadows dominate those who are young and virile, like the Halfacres, their control has a different character than with someone like Angie. The shadows of the robust must give their hosts a freer rein, so that they can play an active role in the everyday world—at a job or a gym, on the highway, in a bar—and still be on call, as it were, for the shadow to command. These are the shadows who become momentarily notorious for some impulsive and seemingly motiveless crime, pushing a stranger in front of a train or shooting another driver in a fit of “road rage.” Working at the home, the shadows of the Halfacre boys had achieved a *modus vivendi* that made such extreme outbursts unnecessary. Like children taking ritalin or diabetics protected by insulin, the Halfacres got along from day to day with the calming assistance of their own private harem, among whom Angie, as the most recent arrival and sturdiest, figured as *odalisque-in-chief*, a golden-age and mute Scheherazade.

Even for a genuine Alzheimer's victim, someone too out of it to resent having no other wardrobe than a blanket and adult diapers, the Adult Home might have seemed a sorry fate. Angie did have moments unattended by her shadow when she became conscious of the horror of her circumstances. Orville or Wilbur would be spooning cubes of Jell-O into her mouth (to their credit,

they kept their charges clean and well-nourished), and she would be overwhelmed by a sense of abasement that made it impossible to swallow the food. Tears would run down her heavily rouged cheeks (Wilbur used his cosmetology training to keep his old ladies looking nice), and Wilbur would pause in his duties until the fit had passed and her feeding could resume. Surely, the oblivion of complete submission to her own shadow would have been preferred to such nightmare flickers of self-awareness.

As well to wish for death, however. Oblivion is never one of our options. Half of all Adult Homes would stand empty if one could just wish away unremitting misery and pain. Africa would be depopulated, along with all the prisons in Texas.

But who is to say there is no joy in Africa or in the prisons of Texas? Or none in the life of Angie Sweetwater, at least in her life as a shadow? She enjoyed good physical health, the attentions of two devoted admirers, and an uncommonly long life. When she was dressed for public display and it was her turn to be taken to a Sunday morning service at United Baptist, everyone agreed that Angie Sweetwater was the most presentable and best behaved of any of the visitors from the home. Sometimes just this mite of respect was all the comfort she required. At other times she would remember what churches were for and she would fold her hands and pray for her deliverance.

And you must pray along with her, good people, and hope to die before the same thing happens to you. For it makes no difference whether you are rich or poor, a homeless beggar or an ex-president, like Ronald Reagan. Like Angie, we all have shadows. Stand in the light and you will see your own.