

LYNNE PARKS

SHADOW KEYS

I WAS ALWAYS A BIT JEALOUS OF MY STEPMOTHER and her classic, cool blond looks. On the other hand, I could never suppress a shiver when she passed by. In our daily associations, I can't ever recall her saying more than five words to me. Not that she was any more forthcoming with her own children, and she certainly had a brood of them. When she took over the house, the decor starkened into black and white. She decorated with her own photographs, which were pretty good, but not as good as mine. Not that she was interested.

So it was something of a coup when I ran amok of the Shadow Man. If anything, I merely wanted her to appreciate me. I should have known that was unlikely, but I tried and she was the first person I approached with my secret.

So now the tale of what led me to recognize the shadow keys. One has to know the right shape and size of them. They require careful handling, and the placement can be tricky. You have to find just the right spot or the door won't open. I can tell you, it's quite a shocking thing to see appear—a musty, scratched-up fold-down door just like the kind we have going to the attic. And indeed that's where it led. Whose attic is a bit more difficult to explain. Let's get on to my visiting the park.

When I first saw *him*, I thought he must be a magus dressed a bit like a Victorian undertaker—a perfect Mr. Vogler. He was studying the ground closely. I thought that he might be looking for a coin or a cigarette; however, his quarry turned out to be a near perfect circle about six inches in diameter. It was a shadow cast by a child's balloon. To my amazement he pinched it up, allowing it to dangle between his thumb and forefinger. He strode over to the gazebo and lifted the shadow to the ceiling, which lapped it up like milk. There was a queer distortion and then suddenly a door appeared. He pulled the cord and unfolded a ladder. He scampered up and the ladder promptly refolded, the door closed, and there was nothing left of this bizarre spectacle.

From that day onward I haunted the park. I tried my best to pick up shadows, but to no avail. I was picking at one I thought beautifully cast by a baby's head when long fingers pushed mine aside. It was him! He glanced at my face and then adroitly pinched the shadow. He promptly put it back and let me follow his example. I was able to do it!

I invited him to my house. We have such lovely wide ceilings—and for what better use?! So I took my first journey through to the other side. It wasn't at all what I expected. When the door shut behind us, my eyes had to adjust to the gloom and cobwebs. It was an ancient space, wooden and vast, and it seemed to be full of piles upon piles of antiques, junk, and curious scientific instruments. One couldn't see far enough in any direction to find an end to it. My friend immediately plundered a nearby stack and pulled out something resembling an oscilloscope. Then he grabbed what appeared to be an old draft horse harness. As he took them both into his hands, they fused into one startling object. Securing this he picked up a handful of dust, patterned a curious symbol onto the floor, set it on fire, and a door appeared. He motioned me through, and I found myself back in my house alone.

I was terribly excited, and I immediately ran to my stepmother. I told her nearly everything. She barely batted an eye. The next day I caught her pinching shadows. By that evening she had disappeared, so I imagine she had succeeded. The only trouble was that she never returned. For you see, I hadn't told her how to get back.

Really, we were much happier without her.

It was only sometime later while strolling through a flea market that I noticed a strange exhibition of sculptures. One in particular caught my eye. If you can imagine a tricycle, a Blickensderfer, and a woman all fused together—that's awfully close to it. It was the woman I recognized.

THE BOX

THERE WAS A WOODEN BOX that sat on a high shelf in a forgotten corner of a dark room in an old house. In the old house lived an old man, also forgotten but happy in his own forgetting. He eschewed contact with his family and spent his days scowling out of windows at whomever passed by. In the evenings, in order to keep his bile up, he would stalk through the rooms and corridors of the labyrinthine manse cursing the shadows. If the phone rang, he enjoyed ignoring it. He received letters but threw them away unopened. Whenever children or beggars came to the door, he threw cans of peas at them.

The day he found the box was the day that changed everything.

He had for the first time in many years ventured into his late wife's bedroom. He found her personal things spread across the bureau, including one particularly vile brooch that he had always detested. The sight of it so repelled him that he reached up for the box and tossed the offending item inside. The next day he let his repulsion draw him back to it, but when he opened the box he found a pomegranate instead of the brooch. He was much amazed and wondered who might have broken into the house and played such a trick. He took out the pomegranate (he loathed them, although his wife had adored them) and replaced it with a powder puff. He closed the lid and then reopened it. In its stead was a scented candle. He sat down and began to ponder. Next he tried an old shoe, and the box answered with a moldy fox wrap. The old man began to get ideas.

When a stray cat mewed at the window, he put it in the box. It gave him an onyx in return. Apparently, it liked cats. Whenever he wanted to rid himself of nits, he put them in the box and in return retrieved chunks of honeycomb, which he ate with his tea. The box certainly had queer ideas of exchange.

The old man's thoughts became more twisted and dark. He put in spoiled fish and got back a stuffed rabbit. He slid in a dog turd and got a pap smear. He cut off a finger and got a tin whistle.

Finally the old man reached into his chest, pulled out his heart, and put it in the box. When he looked inside, he found nothing. The old man was enraged. He went to the medicine cabinet and found a bottle of castor oil. He poured it into the box and waited. After many hours, he fell asleep in his chair. He didn't hear the strange noises that began to fill the room. A

conglomerate creature slid out of the box, mewling and leaving a slimy rail.
It crept up the old man and smothered him to death.

From then on, the box only played music.