



Sable Shadow
&
The Presence

William Peace

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Preface

Kenan Stadium

The revelation came to me while I was sitting in Kenan Memorial Stadium with my son, William. We had gone to Chapel Hill for the afternoon to watch the Tar Heels play North Carolina State. I didn't care about the game but William, who played running back and safety on his sixth grade team, was eager to watch the 'big guys' play.

My attention drifted to the crowd around me. No one in particular. Just a sea of people in every direction.

I thought, I am conscious of these people, of my son's shoulder, of the smell of hot dogs, of shouts of "Dee-Fence!", of the wide-screen instant replay, and of a vague sense of detachment...and of missing Suzanne.

The paid attendance had been reported and I thought, *that means there are sixty-three thousand consciousnesses packed into five acres. Some are similar, but none are identical. Each consciousness is the unique result of the identity of its owner: personality, physical characteristics, intellect, emotional profile, relationships and history.*

In my mind there formed a vision of those sixty-three thousand consciousnesses, each represented by a shimmering hemisphere. Each hemisphere seemed uniquely animated in

shape, color, texture, and even sound. Some overlapped; some seemed to stand alone. Some were effervescent; some nearly dormant. And I thought, *If one could summarize all sixty-three thousand into one consciousness, there might be a complete awareness of Kenan Stadium on Saturday, September 19th at 3:16 pm. But would it be accurate as well as complete? If it is complete, it follows that it must be accurate! But is it complete? No. Someone has failed to notice an earthworm emerging from the ground behind that goal post.* I concluded that no individual consciousness can ever be complete or accurate.

Suzanne says that I am too much the philosopher. (She is a psychologist.) But what better occupation for a thinking human being than developing revealing theories about the why and how of human existence?

My mind returned to the sixty-three thousand hemispheres, and I thought *what happens when we expand the picture? What if we include all seven billion consciousnesses in the world?* The panorama of glowing hemispheres seemed endless, but there was one change. I noticed that, over time, some began as a feeble point of light and gradually became stronger, while others declined in brightness until they extinguished. It comes into existence, it forms its Identity, and then it passes away.

And then I thought, *If I can look down – in my mind – on seven billion hemispheres of consciousness, cannot God do the same? And what about Sable Shadow? Cannot he look down, as well?* I knew from my experience that Sable Shadow could do more than look down. He (or is it she?) could bring about a biasing of consciousness, so that our awareness of that moment is not exactly accurate and, subjectively, we assign values to people and experiences. By that time, I had considerable experience with Sable Shadow's talents. The biasing of consciousness could change my behavior, and presumably, the behavior of others,

as well. One was not aware of the bias: it was just ‘there’ and seemed entirely reasonable at the time.

Well, if Sable Shadow can bring about a biasing of consciousness, cannot God do the same? I found it difficult to deny this step of logic, although, at the time, I had no evidence of this. I have said that consciousness is influenced by the Identity of the individual. Now, I had to admit that it is also influenced by ‘external beings’, including Sable Shadow and probably God.

But, I argued, if one or both of these beings has the ability to influence consciousness, does it not follow that their consciousness is complete and accurate? While I had no proof of this, it made sense. At least I could say that if they could bias my consciousness without me becoming explicitly aware of it, their consciousness had to be superior to mine in some sense: probably completeness and accuracy.

And why, I asked myself, does the biasing of consciousness take place without my awareness? Why don't they just do it in a way that allows me to recognize that ‘somebody has been messing around in my head’?

Well, for one thing, I reasoned, I would suspect somebody super-human, and leaving their fingerprints on human consciousness is against the rules.

Whose rules? I wondered. And what does all of this say about free will?

Well, it seemed to me that the conclusion one could well draw was that the individual does not have free will. In what sense could an individual call himself ‘free’ if a super-human being can control his behavior? But, for me, this was counter-intuitive. I have never felt less than free. Well, almost never.

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Then I realized that biasing is not the same as controlling. And through one's own identity and values, one could construct anti-biasing. For example, one might establish a bias against illicit sex. In this case, Sable Shadow's attempt to bias one in favor of making a play for the neighbor's wife would be stymied.

I also wasn't convinced that external biasing could continue for many years without one becoming at least vaguely aware of it. *It is likely, I thought, that external biasing would be recorded subconsciously. Not who did it, or when, or exactly what was done, but a kind of latent suspicion: I wonder why I used to think that the neighbor's wife was so attractive.*

Chapter 1

Rye, New York

My mother always insisted that we go to mass on Sunday, and while we lived in Rye, we went to the Church of the Resurrection. Even when my sister and I were small children, we were not allowed to fidget or make any noise during the service. We were supposed to sit quietly and listen. But I found this very boring. I didn't understand what was going on, and even when my mother tried to explain it (not very often), it didn't make much sense to me. So I started taking small pocket puzzles to church to work on during the service. My mother didn't particularly like this, but she permitted it, because I was sitting quietly, and I told her I was listening. (I actually found it quite easy to do a puzzle and listen to something I didn't understand at the same time.)

When I started first grade, my mother told me that I would be confirmed in two years, and that I ought to understand the Mass. Unbeknown to me, she informed the priest, Father Tom, that I would like to be an altar boy. As a result, I had to attend a 'briefing for new altar boys' on a Saturday morning. This 'briefing' was conducted by Reverend Robert, the Vicar. I learned where the vestments were kept, where I had to stand and kneel at various points during the Mass, and when to bow. The only interesting part was that I was to be responsible for the incense brazier. I didn't actually get to swing the brazier: that was the job of one of the senior altar boys. But, I had to bring the smoking brazier

from the sacristy, return it, put more incense in it, bring it out again and return it.

I'm sure I'll remember my first service as an altar boy for the rest of my life. I was worried about making a stupid mistake in front of the whole congregation. What would my parents say?

That Saturday night, as I lay in bed, I tried to rehearse in my mind the various points at which I had to stand, kneel and bow. As I tried to remember, I got more confused. *No! Then you face the altar and bow – or do you kneel?*

Then I heard a familiar voice, soft and deliberate - a tenor voice: *This is not for you, Henry. You can be ill tomorrow. Don't embarrass yourself! Besides, you didn't volunteer to be an altar boy. Just tell your mother you have a terrible headache tomorrow. I can arrange it, and you'll feel much better when they've left for church.*

I had heard the voice before. It was not me, and there was never anyone else in the room. It was very persuasive and, I felt, thoughtful about me. Sometimes, I took the advice of the voice. When I did, things usually worked out fine, but often I didn't feel right about what I had done. Not guilty, exactly, although sometimes my mother or someone would say, "Henry, you shouldn't have done that!" and I would feel ashamed. But what sometimes bothered me about the voice was that the cajoling tone it used, not a straight-forward announcement of advice: *Henry, here's what you should do.* And often I sensed it was playing to my weaknesses – I know I have quite a few weaknesses – and that made me suspicious.

Go away! I thought. Go away! Leave me alone!

There was silence.

The darkness in my room seemed to thicken. It enveloped me. I wanted to put my hand in front of my face to see it. But I felt powerless.

Henry, it's so easy. Just listen to me . . .

“Shut up!” I shouted. I was angry; I launched myself into a sitting position and turned, scrabbling for the light on the bedside table. I heard my water glass fall to the floor, spilling its contents, but my hand found the light switch.

Suddenly, my room was there; the darkness had disappeared. Nothing had changed. Superman in my poster was still rushing on his mission, his cape flying behind him. The grey toy bomber was still suspended from the ceiling, poised, as ever, to attack.

For a few moments, I sat assessing myself. OK. A little light-headed, still a little agitated, but OK. When my sister Jenny and I were put to bed, we were expected to stay in bed: lights out! But I didn't want another visit from the voice. I got out my flashlight, a Captain Marvel comic book, and turned off my bedside light. I read until I fell asleep. The batteries in my flashlight were dead in the morning.

My mother had shined my black school shoes that Saturday night. (Altar boys weren't allowed to wear sneakers in those days.) When I got to church, I put a heavy, red, floor-length gown and a white surplice on top of my shirt and trousers. It was hot and humid that September morning, probably high eighties in the sacristy. I was tired and kind of disoriented.

Father Tom was a stickler for doing things right. He noticed that I was in the wrong place in the procession. He physically moved me to the right place, and he corrected the way I was holding the chains of the brazier, which was emitting a plume of pungent white smoke. The bell jingled, the procession started to move, and the organ music began to reverberate through the church. The heat, the noise and the smoke, all together, were too much for me. I made it as far as the altar, but as I handed the brazier to the senior choir boy, Andy, I fainted.

I suppose this caused quite a commotion. I don't know. Somebody – was it Andy? – carried me to the sacristy and laid

me out on the floor. I woke up a few moments later, looking up into Andy's concerned face. "Are you all right, Henry?"

I sat up and considered myself. My light-headedness was gone. "Yes. Yes, I'm fine. I guess I just fainted. I'm sorry."

"Do you want to go home, Henry?"

I stood up, and looked around. I felt perfectly normal. "No. I want to go back to the Mass."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Together, we entered the apse and took our respective places around the altar. I only remember two things about the rest of that Mass. I had no further difficulties with the brazier or with kneeling, standing or bowing. And I felt an unusual sense of comfort: this was where I ought to be. I've experienced that sense of peace infrequently in my life.

It's not that I was particularly religious when I was in elementary school, and my parents certainly weren't religious. My father frequently found 'reasons' for not attending mass on Sundays. And my mother associated Christianity and regular church attendance with being socially acceptable. I'm not sure why this was. We lived in a large house in fashionable Rye, my father had a good job then, and we were members of one of the better beach and tennis clubs. My parents had plenty of friends with whom they socialized on weekends. So, what was the concern about being socially acceptable? Maybe Mother inherited a Protestant gene that insisted that sacrifice and hard work were the way one earned social acceptability. Anyway, it wasn't my issue. In fact, I didn't really have an issue. I liked the inescapable holiness of the mass: the light from the stained glass windows, the sonorous organ music, the scent and smoke of incense, and Father Tom's voice like a persuasive cello. I liked his voice, and I supposed that John the Baptist probably sounded a lot like Father Tom, but I didn't really listen to what he was saying during the homily. I just knew he was saying the right things. And that's how

religion was for me as a young boy: the right thing. Of course, I knew about Jesus: how he was the son of God, and died on the cross for sinners. What else was there to know or think about?

On other Sundays, when I was preparing for church, I would hear, *This is not for you, Henry. You can stay home and snoop around your parents' room. Just pretend you're ill!*

That Saturday night before I fainted as an altar boy was not the first time I heard the voice. I had heard it several times before, usually when I felt uncertain about something important. Then I would hear the voice speaking confidently about my uncertainty as if it was summarizing a conversation between us: *Henry, don't worry! The solution is easy, and you'll feel so much better about things.*

The first time I remember hearing the voice was when I was in kindergarten.

When it wasn't raining, we had an outdoor recess for about half an hour in the middle of the morning. The boys would play ball games or tag, and the girls played hopscotch or jump rope. I wasn't very good at ball games, so I usually played tag or just got on a swing.

There was a game of three guys playing keep-away while I was on a swing. One of the kids in the game was a big kid named Bobby Brobyn, who thought he was better than everybody else. Actually, he wasn't better than anybody else; he was just bigger and more selfish. I didn't like him at all.

Henry, do you want a chance to fix that Bobby Brobyn? a voice said.

I thought, *Do I ever!*

You'll get a chance in just a minute. Just get a little closer and pay attention to the game.

So I sauntered over, casually. Bobby had just thrown the ball successfully to another kid. A third guy was desperately trying

to intercept the ball so that he wouldn't be 'it' anymore. The guy who didn't make the catch would become 'it'. Being tall gave Bobby an advantage: he could reach high throws. But I knew the kid who was 'it': he could jump. Bobby knew this also, because he was gesturing to the guy who was going to throw the ball where to throw it.

Get ready, Henry!

Bobby suddenly took off. He was headed toward me, with 'it' in hot pursuit. The ball was in the air. Bobby and 'it' were looking back at the ball, but running full tilt at me.

Now, Henry!

I stepped just out of Bobby's way, but left a trailing foot behind. Bobby tripped and went down hard. 'It' crashed into him and fell on top of him. In short order, I was back on the swings.

When Bobby got up, I saw that one knee of his trousers was torn; his knee and the palms of his hands had been scraped and were bleeding. He was angry and in pain, but too proud to cry.

"You stupid idiot!" he shouted at 'it', who was still lying on the ground. "This is keep-away, not tackle!"

'It', somewhat cowed by Bobby, remained on the ground, rubbing one elbow. "I didn't tackle you."

"Yes, you did, idiot!"

"I did not tackle you, Bobby. You tripped!"

This argument went on until Bobby stamped off in a huff.

The bell signaling the end of recess rang.

"Think you're pretty clever, don't you, Lawson?" It was the kid who had thrown the ball.

I asked, "What are you talking about, Herbie?"

"I saw you trip Bobby."

"I wasn't anywhere near him. He's just clumsy."

For a while I was afraid that Herbie was going to rat on me. That would have meant me getting beaten up by Bobby. Fortunately, nothing more ever came of it. I surmised that the voice had found a way to protect me.

I tried to figure it out. There was this strange voice which knew not only what would happen, but the role I could play in what happened. Moreover, it was somehow able to protect me from the repercussions of what I had done. *Pretty nice helper*, I thought. *Come back any time.*

But the outcome wasn't always quite so fortunate. I remember one time when I hadn't received my weekly allowance of 25 cents, and I wanted to go to the little store on Forrest Avenue to get a new comic book.

Henry, you mother's purse is right there on the chair. She owes you the money. Go get it.

I took more than the 25 cents I was owed.

Somehow, she figured out that I had been involved in grand larceny. I had to give back all the money, promise I would never do that again, forego two weeks' allowance, and "Wait till your father gets home! He's going to take a belt to you!" Fortunately, my father was more interested in having his evening martini than he was in taking a belt to me. Briefly, I worried that the voice was not absolutely trustworthy.

In thinking about it later, though, I concluded that where things went wrong was that I took more than the 25 cents. Probably, if I had taken just two dimes and a nickel, my mother wouldn't have noticed.

The voice was often very seductive – even compelling. And it was often accompanied by a darkness which would sweep in and envelop my mind. When I was feeling uncertain and stressed, it was as if there was a strange darkness on the horizon. As I tried to reason my way through the uncertainty, the dark would gently sweep in and over me. It wasn't frightening or unsettling. In fact, as it embraced me, I had a sense of security – even though my mind ceased to function, and I could hear only the voice.

When we were in our early teens, I told my sister Jenny about the voice. I certainly couldn't tell my parents about it. They would have rushed me off to see a psychiatrist. But Jenny knew

me well, and she knew that while I was sometimes anxious about things, I certainly wasn't paranoid. Besides, she considered the world in a literal sense, and she was very clever at solving other people's problems.

I described to Jenny the non-existent cloud of darkness which would surround me (even, a few times, in the daytime), and this voice – this satiny, stereophonic voice which would persuade me in the friendliest tones. She said it was like a sinister shadow. And I said it didn't seem sinister, but it was dark and silky.

She paused to consider me. "Henry, it definitely needs a name. I think you should call it 'Sable Shadow'. And you shouldn't think of it as being so mysterious: it's just normal for you."

* * *

When my sister and I were young children, we lived on Midvale Avenue in Rye, New York – forty minutes north of Manhattan. It was a large white house with dark green shutters and two magnolia trees in front. My room was quite big, and it faced the back lawn. We even had a two-car garage on the side of the house. My father thought it was 'untidy' to leave a car in the driveway, so we had an electric garage door opener. When he drove home from the Rye station – it was about a mile – he pulled the Mercury sedan into the garage next to my mother's Ford station wagon. He would come into the house via the door from the garage to the kitchen and put his briefcase right beside the door. In the mornings, he would pick up his briefcase and take it with him to the car. I never saw him open the briefcase when he was in the house.

I went to Rye Country Day School, and I could have ridden my bike there, but I wasn't allowed to. All the kids had to take the school bus unless they lived right near the school. When I was on the school bus, I used to see men riding to the station on bicycles. Even when it was raining, I would see them pedaling

along wearing shiny slickers with their briefcases in the baskets of their bikes. I never asked my father why he didn't ride a bicycle. He was certainly fit enough. I guess he would have said something like, 'Bikes are always being stolen at the station', but I think the real reason was that he thought that 'executives' never rode bicycles.

I liked school pretty much, and I was fairly good at most things. Science, geography and arithmetic were my especially good subjects. And reading. I liked to read. Until I was about ten, I was addicted to comic books, particularly heroes like Superman and Captain Marvel. I liked the way they always had a plan to defeat the bad guys; they weren't just stronger and faster. From comic books, I moved to *Life* magazine, to which my parents had a subscription: this was real, and it made you think about things like why there were wars, and what it would be like to be in one.

I didn't have a lot of friends – only three or four guys that I liked to be with. My friends weren't the most popular boys at school; they were just good, smart kids. One of the guys, Tommy Bradshaw, had a garter snake he kept in a terrarium, and he used to feed it ants and insects.

I wasn't a popular kid – not that anyone disliked me – I guess they thought I was a good student and a nice guy, but sort of distant, and I didn't care about having a lot of friends.

I liked to work on projects with my friends. We used to ride our bikes down to where Blind Brook ran through some woods. Once you were inside the woods, you couldn't see any houses, and there were paths that animals used.

I said, "Let's build a tree fort in that big maple tree there. We'll be able to see up and down the river and guard the territory."

"Yeah!" Tommy added, "We'll keep the invaders out and watch out for wild animals!" (We knew that the only wild animals around Blind Brook were rabbits, a few muskrats and plenty of birds, but it was fun to imagine there might be some coyotes, eagles and maybe a mountain lion.)

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Over the course of a few weeks, we managed to nail some old planks across a horizontal fork in the tree. It was the makeshift platform of our fort: big enough for three of us to sit on, talk, and look down at the world. What we really wanted was a proper fort with walls, and maybe a roof, but we never could figure out how we were going to build walls around our platform, and by the following summer the fort on Blind Brook had been forgotten.

* * *

I can still remember it clearly, even after over forty years. The rabbits' names were Cottontail and Clover. Cottontail was the gray one with the fluffy white cotton ball on her rear. It bounced up and down when she hopped along. Clover was a beige female who particularly liked to graze on the clover when we let them out of their hutch to play on the lawn. I liked to sit on the grass with Cottontail in my lap. If she wasn't hungry, she would lie between my legs, put her ears back, and rest her head on my leg while I stroked her. She was beautiful and soft and sweet, and I think she was very fond of me; I used to feed her carrot sticks. My sister Jennifer, who is two years younger, liked to lie on the lawn next to Clover, watching her eat. Clover didn't like carrots, but Jenny kept trying different treats on her, and one day she found out that Clover liked broccoli – fresh and uncooked. Unfortunately, this didn't solve the problem that Jenny and I had with the cursed broccoli we were frequently served at dinner, even if we could have spirited it out to the hutch inside our napkins: Clover didn't like cooked broccoli, either. Even though Jenny was only six at the time, we took turns feeding and caring for Cottontail and Clover. They were our very special, and only, pets: we didn't have a cat or a dog.

Loud barking and snarling woke me up. I listened for a moment, then I turned on my bedside light and looked at the yellow plastic clock on my wall. It was in the shape of a cat,

and the tail swung back and forth, like a pendulum. Three-twenty. This wasn't right. Nobody let their dogs out at three in the morning. These had to be dogs from somewhere else. *The rabbits! Oh my God!* I rushed to the window and peered out behind the curtains, but I could see nothing from my bedroom. The hutch was at the back of our property, on low stilts, farther to the right, and out of sight. *Jenny's room!* I thought. I dashed out of my room and burst into Jenny's room next door. Her room was dark, but when I switched on the light, I found her sitting up in bed, and looking very confused.

"What are those dogs doing?" she asked.

"The rabbits! They're trying to get the rabbits!"

Outside, there was a loud thump. The barking had ceased, replaced by savage growls and high-pitched squeals.

Jenny went to her window, pushed aside her curtains and was looking out. "There are dogs there! What can we do?" She screamed, "Mom, they're after the rabbits!" and she started to sob.

I ran down the stairs, through the kitchen and out the back door as fast as I could. Outside, in the near darkness, I could make out three large dogs milling about in a frenzy by the overturned hutch. I rushed at them. "Go away! Let them go!" I shouted. One of the dogs turned on me, snarling viciously. I tried to kick it, bare-footed, and I felt a hot stab of pain as it bit my ankle. I lurched forward, trying to recover the gray body which was gripped in a snarling black muzzle.

"Henry, get away from those dogs! They'll bite you!" It was my mother shouting from the kitchen door.

Suddenly, the gray body was free. I had it shielded in my arms, but the black dog, denied its prize, launched itself at me, snapping its teeth on my arm. I kicked at it in a rage, refusing to let go, and retreating toward the house.

"Get off him!" my mother shouted, and she struck the black dog with an empty watering can, the first implement that came to her hand. The black dog released me and slowly backed away toward the hutch, snarling ferociously.

“Here, take her!” I said to Jenny, and handed her the limp gray body. I looked about; there by the back door was a mop, set out to dry. Picking it up, I rushed at the dogs.

“Henry, come back! The dogs will bite you!” my mother shouted.

Heedless, I swung the mop, striking the dogs with random fury. “Bad dog!” I shouted, “Let go of Clover!” The dogs turned and fled. But they took Clover with them.

Jenny had set Cottontail down on the kitchen table. She had put her head down next to the rabbit and was weeping uncontrollably. “Why did they have to kill our rabbits?” Jenny sobbed.

I sat down next to Jenny and sweeping the bloody, mangled body into my arms, I too began to cry. “It doesn’t seem fair,” I sobbed, tears streaming down my face.

“Let me take the rabbit, dear.” It was my mother standing behind me.

“No. I want to hold her,” I said.

“Henry, dear, you have to get back to bed.”

“Not right now. . . . We should call the police. They should shoot those dogs; they deserve to be shot!”

Jenny looked up. “Yeah!” she stammered through her sobs. “They should shoot them!”

My father, bleary-eyed, came in the kitchen in his pajamas. He said nothing for some minutes, taking in the scene before him. “Henry, a big boy like you shouldn’t cry over a rabbit.”

I looked up at him, trying to stifle my sobs and understand. “But I loved her, and now she’s dead.” I looked down at the still-warm bundle of torn fur in my arms.

“You can’t really love a rabbit, Henry, and you certainly can’t cry about it when it passes on. Here, let me take it.”

“What are you going to do with her?”

My father hesitated.

My mother put in, “We can bury her tomorrow, Henry. Would that be all right?”

I nodded, and gave Cottontail to my father who wrapped her, quite carefully, in newspaper. He turned and surveyed me. “Are you bleeding there, Henry?” he asked, indicating my arm. I nodded, pushed back my chair, and looked down at my right leg. My ankle, too, was scored with tooth marks and blood. “Come over here to the sink and let your mother clean you up. You’re quite a brave young man not to cry when a dog bites you like that,” he said.

The shock of the attack had passed, and my arm and leg were really starting to throb. But after what my father had said, I had to grit my teeth and try to ignore the pain. At least I didn’t dissolve into tears as my mother washed the wounds.

“Were any of the dogs kind of foaming at the mouth?” my father asked. My mother looked at him in alarm.

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. “They were just bad dogs.”

My mother said, “I’ll take him to the doctor in the morning.”

My father disappeared and returned with a small, dark vial, which he handed to my mother. “Just to be on the safe side,” he said.

My mother took a deep breath. “Henry, I’m going to put some iodine on these cuts in case the dog had some infection. This is going to sting, dear.”

I remember feeling that my mother was painting me with fire. I cried out and struggled until my father took hold of my shoulders, and kept whispering, “Be brave, son! Be brave!”

With my arm and ankle wrapped in gauze, I was returned to bed. I don’t know whether it was the pain in my body which kept me awake, or whether it was the agony in my mind. *How could this have happened to the two sweetest creatures on earth? How could God let it happen?*

After a time, I felt a soothing comfort come over me, as if some invisible Presence had joined me and placed a blanket of anesthetic over me. There were the words: “**You loved Cottontail and she loved you. Remember this.**” I didn’t think the words; they came to me, as if in response to my question, “*How could*

God let it happen?" I lay in bed, feeling strangely at peace. In my mind there was an image of Cottontail lying in my lap, her soft warmth against my leg. There were no thoughts – just loving memories -- and I fell asleep.

I think that was the first time I encountered The Presence. That's what I call him. I can't call him God, because even though I'm a Catholic, I don't believe that God would come and speak to me. I'm sure He has better things to do. I wondered if the voice might be my name saint, Saint Henry, but I considered this unlikely. Saint Henry was a Holy Roman Emperor in the eleventh century, and from what I've read about him, he grabbed power from his cousin and then waged a series of bloody wars to secure his position. The voice I hear from time to time doesn't sound like Saint Henry would have sounded. Could it be my conscience? I suppose it's possible, but if the voice doesn't sound like Saint Henry, it doesn't sound like me, either. So I just call him The Presence.

I also thought about who Sable Shadow might be. It can't be the devil himself, because why would the devil spend time with an unimportant person like Henry Lawson? I can see why he might want to have a go at Jimmy Carter, or even at Saint Henry (before he was canonized). But Henry Lawson? A waste of time. I've thought that the devil would likely have some kind of organization under him, and probably Sable Shadow is one of his first level supervisors or team leaders.

* * *

I have always had a soft spot in my heart for my sister. I was very protective of her when we were kids, even though Jenny was quite independent and feisty enough to take care of herself.

I recall a time when we were still children living in Rye, and we used to go to Playland, the big amusement park about

six blocks from our house. Jenny particularly liked the merry-go-round, and she was fond of a big white horse on the outside of the ring. She could have spent the entire day on that horse, watching the world swirl by as the horse cantered up and down. The trouble was, we had only one dollar each to spend, and a ride was twenty cents. I didn't want to spend all my money on the merry-go-round, so I'd get off after one ride.

"Come on, Jenny," I'd say. "The ride's over." And I'd get off.

"Sshhsh," she'd say, and she'd go hide on the inside of the ring until the ride started up again. Then she'd make a dash for her favorite horse. If there was a new rider on his back, she would peremptorily order him or her off. "That's my horse!" This way, she could get at least two extra rides per ticket. Her policy was to buy three rides at intervals of around an hour, and steal about half a dozen extra rides. She figured that if she paid for some rides, the operator would lose track of what she hadn't paid for.

If somebody had asked me if I approved of this, I would have said something like, "She's my sister, and she's not hurting anybody."

There was also the time we stopped at one of those game booths where you can win a prize, in this case by knocking over ten pins by throwing three balls. The prize was a small stuffed panda bear, which Jenny immediately coveted. "You can do that, Henry!" she urged. (She had great respect for my brain, which she thought should extend to my physical skills, as well. In fact, I was not particularly well coordinated or sporty.) I bought a ticket, and Jenny stood next to the row of pandas at the front of the booth. I threw the three balls and each time I knocked over two or three pins, but some pins refused to go down. "Sorry, Jenny," I said, and we walked away. I suddenly realized that she was holding a panda.

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

“I took it,” she said. “That guy was cheating, so I cheated, too.”

That’s Jenny for you. She’ll make up her own rules if she feels that the given rules are unfair, or not to her liking. Me? Well, I tend to feel that I’m just stuck with the given rules, and I’ll lament an unfortunate outcome. Jenny doesn’t lament; she gets even.

Maybe my dependable adherence to the rules is why Sable Shadow liked me.

My mother was always a sort of puzzle for me. She was very sociable and imaginative, but she was kind of distant. She didn’t spend much personal time with me or Jenny. Occasionally, Jenny would get a hug from her, but I seldom got one. Sometimes, I felt that my mother really did love me, particularly when I had done something clever.

I remember when I was about eight, I made a wren house out of one of those wooden vegetable crates that we used to get at the Acme market. In one of my Cub Scout magazines there was a design for a wren house. The house had a steep roof, an entrance hole, and a little perch just below the entrance hole. It looked really nice in the magazine, and I thought, *if I were a wren, I would certainly like to live there*. So I decided to make it and see if any wrens came to live in it. But my father didn’t have many tools: he wasn’t what you would call ‘handy’. Also, I didn’t have the right kind of wood. (The directions said you needed half inch white pine or plywood, but we didn’t have anything like that, so I rode my bike to the Acme and picked up a wooden crate.) The trouble with the crate was that it was made of pretty thin, splintery wood, and you couldn’t really nail it together. Instead, I decided to use lots of glue. (My father always had plenty of glue.) There was a rusty saw in the bottom drawer of an old chest in the garage, along with a hammer, a

pair of pliers, a dull chisel, a blunt screw driver, and a metal box full of nails and screws. I soon found that the teeth of the saw were too big: instead of cutting, the saw just splintered the wood of the crate. I had to go see Mr. Ciborowski. He was our neighbor in Rye and he had a really good workshop in his basement. He was a nice man. When he learned what I wanted to do, he took me down to his basement and laid out the tools he thought I'd need. (A couple of years later, when we moved to Bronxville, he gave me my own tool box, with lots of beautiful new tools in it.)

Anyway, I used a ruler, a pencil and a fine-toothed saw to cut out the pieces I needed, but I wasn't sure about how to cut the entrance hole. The directions said, 'Don't make the entrance hole any larger than a quarter, otherwise the wrens won't use the house'. The article explained that if the hole was too big, the wrens would be afraid of other, larger birds getting in. I asked Mr. Ciborowski. He gave me an 'eggbeater' drill to start the hole, and then he showed me how to use a coping saw to cut out the little circle I had traced around a quarter.

When the pieces were all cut out, I used some tape to hold them together while I squirted glue against the joints on the inside. The next day, I came back, took the tape off and glued the roof and the perch on. It really looked good. (Well, there were some cracks where the pieces of wood didn't quite fit together, but I thought, *The wrens probably won't notice.*) Mr. Ciborowski said that the house really ought to have a proper roof and be painted. He found some grey asphalt shingles, and he cut one to fit on my roof. (I wasn't able to manage the big shears he used to cut the shingle.) He gave me some green paint and a brush. I painted the house. I remember I got a big smudge of paint on my shirt. Mr. Ciborowski came and admired the little house. "That's a very nice piece of work, Henry."

I wished my father could be more like Mr. Ciborowski -- you know: taking an interest in teaching me the things I wanted to know.

With a ladder we had, I put the house up in a maple tree on the back lawn. I stood there on the ground looking up at it, and I thought, *It looks very inviting!* I thought I heard someone whisper to me: “**Well done, Henry!**”

There was a family of wrens that lived there the next couple of springs. When we moved to Bronxville, I decided to leave the house there in Rye; it didn't seem fair to take the wrens' house and give it to some other wrens.

My mother was very impressed with the wren house. When my parents had people over for cocktails, she would always take the guests outside to see it. “That's the wren house that Henry made from an orange crate. Isn't it good? He made it all by himself, and he's only eight!”

But it was quite another thing when I did anything wrong. For example, she was really mad about the green paint on my shirt. “Oh, Henry! What's the matter with you? You've gone and spoiled that new Lacoste shirt that Aunt Edith gave you for Christmas! I don't know what's the matter with you! Why do you always wear your best clothes when you're doing messy things?”

I wore that shirt because I liked it. I was sorry I got green paint on it, but it was still my favorite shirt. It never came back when I put it in the wash.

I remember another time. It was probably August, because Jenny and I weren't in school. It was really hot and muggy, and I knew my mother wasn't going to take us to the beach, because she was making preparations for a cocktail party they were going to have that weekend. There was nothing much to do except read comics, but I had read all I had; I just wanted to cool off and have some fun. It suddenly occurred to me that if I turned on the lawn sprinkler, this could be an excellent solution! I went to Jenny's room. She was sitting on the floor talking to two of her dolls. I said, “Come on, Jenny, let's go in the sprinkler!”

“What sprinkler?” (She was about seven.)

“You know! The one Dad uses to water the lawn.”

“OK.” She tucked her dolls under the covers of her bed, and followed me downstairs.

I took the coiled hose off its hook, pulled the sprinkler to the edge of the back lawn, and turned on the water. There was a spluttering sound, and then the sprinkler came on. It wasn’t one of those modern ones that sweep back and forth; it just sent up a circular pattern of spray. Jenny let out a squeal of delight and dashed into the jets. She was still wearing the pink smocked dress that she had put on to have a party with her dolls. “Jenny!” I called. “Take off your dress! It’s going to get it wet!”

“I don’t care!”

For my part, I was stripping out of my T-shirt and shorts, leaving only my underpants. I joined Jenny in the delightful spray. We cavorted about, dashing from the bright sunshine into the cool, tingling water.

“Jenny, take off your dress! It’s getting soaked!”

“OK.” She hurried over to the patio, pulled the dress over her head, and flung the sopping garment onto a deck chair. She considered for a moment, stripped off her underpants and rejoined me in the sprinkler. Neither of us wore shoes in the summer, except when we were going somewhere.

I decided that Jenny was right. I took off my wet underpants and hung them on a chair next to my shirt and shorts.

For about half an hour, we had a splendid time running through the multitude of needle sprays. A couple of times, Jenny slipped and fell: she got quite muddy on her knees and elbows, but it washed right off.

Then, I remember that my mother came out the back door. She shouted, “Henry, Jennifer, stop this minute! What are you doing? Stop it right now!”

“We’re just playing in the sprinkler, Mom.”

She turned off the spigot and came stalking toward us. I could tell that we were in trouble – or rather that **I** was in trouble.

“Henry, what is the matter with you?” she demanded. “Look at what you’ve done to those zinnias!

I looked. To my horror, where Jenny had slipped and fell there was a brown, muddy patch littered with crushed yellow and red flowers. I stood forlornly, looking up at my mother.

“What in the world’s got into you, Henry, running around with no clothes on? And . . . oh, my gosh! Jennifer! **You** have no clothes on! Go in the house immediately! . . . Where are your clothes?”

“Over there, Mommy.” Jenny pointed to her sodden dress lying in a heap on a chair.

“Oh, no, Henry! Your sister’s very best party dress is spoiled! I expect you, as the older one, to look after your sister! Not tearing up the garden, spoiling your sister’s dress and running around naked for the entire world to see!” She cuffed me smartly on the back of my head. “Your father will be angry when he gets home tonight and he hears about this! You can expect a good spanking!”

Forlornly, I picked up my T-shirt, shorts and wet underpants and went upstairs to my room. For perhaps an hour, I lay on my bed, smarting with the injustice of it, but mainly feeling unloved. *My mother only loves me when I’m good, I thought, but when I make a little mistake, she hates me.*

How many times would that same thought recur to me over the next fifteen years?

That night, Sable Shadow spoke to me from the darkness: *You are my treasure, Henry!*

I thought, *Maybe that’s why Sable Shadow loves me, because my parents don’t!*

* * *

My father was a remote figure. He was kind to me and Jenny, but he never demonstrated much affection. In the evenings, when he got home from work, he and my mother would have drinks together, and then we would be called to dinner. Conversation at

dinner was pretty much confined to a discussion by my parents of the adult events of the day. After dinner, I would finish my homework, and then it was bedtime.

On weekends, my parents were usually busy with their friends.

My father worked for a large advertising agency called Crossley & Barnett, and I think that when we lived in Rye, he was what you would call an ‘executive’.

But something happened at my father’s office – at the time, my parents never talked about it with Jenny and me – and my father became more like an inside salesman. When that happened, we moved to Bronxville, New York – about half an hour north of Manhattan – to a street called Cottage Place, about a hundred yards from the New York Central train tracks. It wasn’t the best part of Bronxville, but it was probably the best my father could afford then. Every weekday, he’d walk up to Main Street, cross the tracks, and take the train from Tuckahoe station to Grand Central. He was always dressed as an executive: double-breasted suit and a felt fedora hat – it became a straw hat in the summer – and brown wing-tip shoes.

Moving to Bronxville was difficult for Jenny and me – particularly for me. We no longer went to the Rye Country Day School; we had to go to the Bronxville schools. This was a big shock. We not only lost all our friends, but we had to go to a ‘campus’ on Pondfield Road where all three of the Bronxville Public Schools were located. The campus was huge; it was at least five times the size of Rye Country Day. For me – less so for Jenny – I felt as if I had been downgraded: moving from the best private school in town with its smart uniforms and where all the best kids went, to an ordinary public school.

I remember the night at dinner after Jenny and I were told we would be moving that I protested. “I don’t want to move,” I announced.

“We can’t afford to live in Rye anymore,” my father said.

“Why not?”

“Daddy has had to change jobs,” mother said.

“Well maybe we can get a smaller house,” I suggested.

My father simply shook his head.

“Henry, we’ve found a nice little house in Bronxville, and that’s where we’re going to be living.” From my mother’s tone of voice, I knew she considered the matter closed, and that it would be fruitless for me to protest further.

All I could do was commiserate with Jenny. I went to her room after dinner that night, and we cried together quietly.

When my mother came to tuck us into bed, she ignored our tear-stained faces, and our dispirited demeanor. “It’ll be all right, you’ll see.”

To me it made no sense: I had lost my old friends, I had all new teachers, I was living in a new (old) house, and it would take me some time to make new friends. I was lost and resentful.

Jenny was different. She was sad until she had spent about four days at Bronxville Elementary. Then she made some new friends, her old life was behind her, and things were looking up. She has amazing resilience.

When we had been at Bronxville schools for about two weeks, she came into my room after dinner. I was sitting at my desk morosely looking at my Social Studies text book. Jenny sat on my bed and considered me for a time. I looked over at her. At first she said nothing. Then, she said, “Henry, you’ve got to cheer up. It doesn’t do any good to be sad all the time.”

I shrugged but said nothing.

“Henry, you’re in a new school now. This is your chance to become important.”

“I’m not important. What are you talking about, Jenny?”

Sable Shadow & The Presence

“Henry, you’re a really smart, nice, good-looking guy. If you wanted to, you could become important.”

“Let’s be realistic, Jenny. I’m not the chatty, slap ‘em on the back, athletic type that it takes to be important.”

“I’m not talking about that kind of person, Henry. I’m talking about somebody that people listen to and look up to.” She paused to gauge my reaction. “You’d be a lot happier if you were like that.”

“Well, maybe.”

“Not maybe, definitely.”

I lay in bed that night thinking about the interesting but impossible task that Jenny was proposing for me.

Jenny is right, Henry.

Maybe she is, but I can’t see any way to get there.

It’s not so hard. You just have to seize the opportunity I’m going to give you.

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