

Shadow Man

Chapter 1

Billy was scarred of the Shadow Man. The Shadow Man stood at the entrance to the tube station in Finsbury Park, balding, cheeks flecked with a two day growth of stubble, bellowing into a megaphone. He wore a thick wool coat and ratty moth eaten scarf. The coat was always buttoned right up to his chin no matter the weather or the season. It could be blazing hot and he would show no indication of wanting to remove it. He was always sweating, sometimes because the weather was hot, but usually because he became so worked up shouting into his megaphone. Billy hated walking past him, but it was something he had to do every time he went to school.

He would leave the house at eight thirty sharp, shoed out the front door along with Simon, his older brother. As their mother raced to the car, fretting that she would be late for work, she would shout reminders to them about the day. "Dentist at four! Don't forget!" or "Billy, Auntie Margaret will pick you up from the after school club. I have to work late". Billy would usually protest that he was fine to come home by himself. His mother would chide him, "You are only eight, you aren't going anywhere by yourself. That's why you go to school with Simon. Ok?"

Simon was eleven and viewed his little brother in the same way that a man with a broken leg views a plaster cast, something to be got rid of at the first possible opportunity. They would head off towards the tube for the two stop journey to school. Simon striding ahead, Billy trying to keep up. "If you don't keep up I'll set the Shadow Man on you" Simon would sneer. Billy would experience a sharp stabbing pain in his stomach at these words.

As they approached the station the breeze would carry snatches of the Shadow man's voice to them. Billy could feel the hairs on his neck standing up. Simon seemed not to notice at all, yet he could recite whole swathes of the Shadow Man's speech. Typically he did this if Billy wanted to visit the newsagent on the way to the station. They waited to cross the road, jostled in the crowds of business people commuting to work. Billy, clutching his school bag to his chest pressed close to Simon's side. Simon looked at him with barely concealed venom.

There was a break in the traffic and they were swept to the other side of the road with the commuters. A hundred brief cases, a hundred pairs of polished leather shoes clattering past, then there was a break in the crowds and the Shadow Man stood before them.

"All the liars!" he bellowed into the megaphone, "all the thieves, all the fornicators and politicians. All the murderers, all the adulterers. They are all going to burn! America burned the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic fire. The light was so intense that the shadows it cast were burnt onto walls and the glass in the window panes ran as liquid as water. This fire is nothing compared to that which will be visited onto liars. You might think that there are big lies and little lies. That little lies are nothing! You are wrong. You might be young, you might be old. You might be man or woman, mother, father, sister or brother, but if you are a liar the fire will still scour your bones!"

This last sentence was delivered with such vehemence that a howl of feed back, as if anticipating the promised firestorm, issued from the megaphone. Billy saw flecks of spit fly from the Shadow Man's lips as he stumbled past. This was always the worst moment for Billy. The Shadow Man stood directly between him and the entrance to the station. If he could slip past with out the Shadow Man seeing him he would breathe a huge sigh of relief. He had been known to giggle with relief after particularly close shaves.

"The fire will spew from the heavens!" he continued. "And all that the human race holds dear, all the lies that it has built, will be melted in the furnace blast. Cars, Gone! Melted, destroyed! Jets and helicopters. Wiped from the sky in one stoke! Skyscrapers! Skyscrapers full of liars. There will be nothing left but dust and

melted glass. The Sky will be filled with fire and the shadows will be branded on everything that falls before it”.

Struggling to keep up with Simon, Billy was swept within a couple of feet of the Shadow Man. He whimpered, his head filling with images of fire. Sometimes, in his terror, he would be unable to shake these images from his head. If Simon was not there to push him through the doors he would be so paralysed that he would ride the train to the end of the line instead of getting off where he should. Today though he was lucky. Just as it seemed that he was to be pushed into the mouldering folds of the Shadow Man's coat the swirling crowd of commuters eddied around him and he was carried safely past and into the entrance of the tube station. The images of ruined buildings with silhouettes of brutalised human forms scorched onto their walls slowly began to fade.

Chapter 2

School wasn't so bad. Simon hated school and would tell Billy, “It's all different when you get to big school. All you do is work and work and work all day, then at night you have to do home work. You get home work every day, even for the weekends. All you do is play”.

Billy did not think this was an accurate or fair thing to say. It seemed to him that he worked pretty hard at school and he had assignments to do in the evening too. There was always a book to read, or spellings to learn or a picture to draw; although he had to admit that he did not mind the drawing at all. Drawing was fun and he would draw for his own amusement even when it was not required for school. Simon would also tell him that the teachers at big school were evil monsters who would as soon chew on a pupil's bones as mark their homework. He made them sound like something out of the Shadow Man's speeches. Billy could have believed him except for the fact that he knew Simon was a real slouch at school. Their mother would always chide him for “hanging around with the wrong crowd” and frown in consternation when he came bottom of the class in any kind of test. Billy knew that teachers were fine and that they left you alone so long as you did what they asked. Most of what they asked was that you do your school work, so Billy diligently tried to learn his spelling and practice his English composition.

While there were certain lessons that he liked, the best parts of the day were always break times. It was a glorious release to escape the confines of the classroom and go screaming round the school yard with his friends. Some days they would play football. Some days they would concoct elaborate games set in complex imaginary worlds (based almost exclusively on what they had seen on TV the night before). Every now and then they might even talk to one of the girls. All this was fine but the best part of any break was when his friend Jonathan rummaged in his bag and brought out his latest cool thing.

Jonathan always had cool things. He was not like the rich kids in class who always had the latest toy or the newest trainers. In fact he was slightly scruffy and not that interested in the newest thing, rather, the cool things he had were always slightly strange. He knew they were strange and he could explain to you why they were strange. One time it was half a credit card, the half with the hologram on it. “It's been torn in half”, he asserted, “because it was stolen by a gang. They used it to buy a million pounds worth of drugs and then tore it up because if you want to get away with a crime you have to destroy the evidence”. Billy was very impressed. As was everyone else, even Gash, the school bully. Another time it was a pair of sunglasses minus the lenses. The frames were reminiscent of the headmaster's glasses and he happily let anyone try them on so they could pretend to be him. Another time it was a peacock feather. It caused something more than a minor stir in the class when he gave it to Lizzie Lowe.

On a scale of one to ten the cool thing for today was only a three or four. Jonathan rummaged in his bag and produced a magazine. The glossy pages were covered with images of aircraft. Huge airliners jostled for space with pictures of helicopters and jet fighters, their wings so laden with bombs and missiles it was a wonder that they could stay airborne. True it was like no magazine Billy and his friends had ever seen before. They were all familiar with comics and newspapers but this was something else entirely. Who would have thought there would be such a thing as a magazine full of jet fighters! Gash ambled over to have a look.

“Cool” he assented grudgingly. “You know there are magazines full of pictures of girls with no clothes on too” he said so as not to be out done. Jonathan, probably at great personal risk, gave him a disbelieving stare. Billy meanwhile was lost in a world of his own.

Examining the article minutely, as he always did with Jonathan’s cool things, he realised that this magazine was brand new. The others had already noticed this and it was for this reason that the article was deemed only just a cool thing. The crucial found factor was missing for them. To Billy however, this was an extraordinary development.

“Where did you get this?” he asked, straining to keep the excitement out of his voice.

“You know that newsagent on Seven Sisters Road? Third shelf up. You have to hunt around a bit but they have lots of stuff like this. There was one on boats and loads on cars, but cars are boring”.

“Yeah” agreed Gash as he flipped through the pages.

“I’m going to get one these” Billy announced but no one was listening. The bell was ringing, calling them back to the class room.

The rest of the day passed very slowly. All Billy could think about was the magazine. The price was emblazoned on his mind £3.40 and he itched to get his hands on one all for himself. Instead of concentrating on the history assignment they were reading he doodled fantastical flying machines in the margins of his exercise book. More than once he was reprimanded by the teacher and told to “concentrate on your work”.

As the clock crawled towards three fifteen the class began to become restless. School ended at three fifteen. Some of the kids could escape straight into the streets to play. Billy attended the after school club which ran until five. Like school itself it generally was not too bad. Today though Billy could think of nothing but the magazine. Tomorrow he would have a cool thing to match Jonathan. The excitement built inside of him until he was ready to burst. It was almost like Christmas Eve.

At three ten the teacher told them to pack away their books “But I do have a homework task for you” he said. The class responded with a loud groan. Undeterred the teacher pressed on. “We have been reading about the nineteen fifties today. I want you to find something from the nineteen fifties in your houses. Some of you might have to go to an aunt’s house or an uncle’s house to find something this old. Some of you might have to ask a grand parent. Now it can be anything, a toy that belonged to one of your relatives or a photograph, it doesn’t have to be anything big. Ok?”

“Ok” they chorused.

“Good” said the teacher. “And Billy, as you seemed to be less than interested in the work today I’ll expect to see something very interesting from you to make up for it. OK”.

Billy felt the blood in his veins turn to ice when the teacher said this. “Yes sir” he said as politely as he could.

The bell rang and everyone ran for the door.

At home that evening Billy’s head was filled with aircraft. He spent the hour leading up to dinner time constructing a fleet of paper flyers, their wing tips decorated with gaudy insignia. He bolted his dinner, eager to begin flying missions. The fuel that drove these missions was the knowledge that in his piggy bank were enough assorted coins to purchase one of the aircraft magazines. He did not care if it was filled with helicopters or gliders. Fighter planes would be ideal but he would be quite happy with passenger jets because then he would be just as cool as Jonathan and come the weekend he was certain Jonathan would want to come over and join his games. The only problem was getting away from Simon in the morning and slipping

into the newsagent.

He had considered asking Simon nicely. Having counted the money in the piggy bank he had discovered his riches amassed the princely sum of five pounds and sixty two pence. Enough to buy a magazine and have change for some sweets left over. Maybe he could buy Simon some sweets? Any thoughts of bribery evaporated when looked across the dinner table at his brother. Simon picked despondently at his food. His face, pale in the harsh fluorescent kitchen light was pale, his eye lids drooped low and his lips had a downward cast. His mousey brown hair, so similar to Billy's own, hung limp across his forehead. Billy wondered what was wrong with him. Some days he came home from school in a foul mood having been given extra homework due to some misdemeanour in class. This was something different though. He looked closely at his brother trying to gauge what was wrong. Was he simply tired? He certainly looked exhausted, but as young as he was, even Billy knew things were rarely that simple. He looked across at their mother in the hope of finding a clue.

His mother wore a similar downcast expression. It was not as pronounced but it was there never-the-less. Suddenly Billy knew what the problem was. It was Wednesday night. His father should have called. But there had been no trilling of the telephone, no insistent beep of the answer machine. Billy barely remembered his father and consequently did not miss him. On the rare occasions that he came around to visit Billy found him somehow unnerving. He had never been able to put his finger on exactly why he should find the man so . . . disturbing, but there it was, deep down he was slightly afraid of him. Had he been older he might have rationalised this feeling as the fact that he was dealing with a virtual stranger and that is always unsettling no matter how close the blood ties. An eight year old is only given to so much introspection though. Concluding that he could not bribe his older brother his thoughts moved onto other things. Somehow or other he would have to slip away from him and get to the newsagent by himself.

After dinner Simon slumped in front of the television. His mother had an argument on the telephone, possibly with his father. Unnoticed, Billy slipped away to his room and flew a dozen missions to far off lands through turbulent skies.

Chapter 3.

“Wake up Billy! Time for school”.

Billy had been awake for ages already. He threw back the covers and raced to the bathroom to scrub his teeth and splash water on his face.

“Ears!” his mother yelled from somewhere down stairs. He ignored her, raced back to his room and rescued his school uniform from the floor. Minutes later he was downstairs waiting for breakfast and help with his tie.

“Simon is ill” his mother informed him. She was wearing her work clothes, a grey trouser suite that Billy hated because it made her look like a teacher. She had the telephone clamped between her shoulder and ear and an unlit cigarette in the corner of her mouth. Observing this Billy made a mental note to keep a very low profile. If she lit it up, he would become practically invisible.

A muffled voice issued from the phone. He could not make out the words but he guessed it was the doctor. “Yes . . . As early as possible please . . . Yes, I'm guessing its chicken pox. . . Yes . . . Eight forty five, excellent, thank you”

She put the phone down and hurriedly placed cereal and milk on the table for him. “You know you always say you are old enough to get to school by yourself and I say you aren't? Well today is your chance to prove me wrong. Your brother is ill, probably chicken pox. I have to take him to the doctor so you will have to get yourself to school this morning. Think you can manage that?”

Billy nodded. Surprised by the turn of events. He was on the verge of pointing out that he always argued he

could get home from school by himself, not get there. There was no dreaded Shadow man to deal with on the way home, but then it hit him. If Simon was ill, if he was unaccompanied on his way to school he could visit the newsagent. He swallowed hard, unable to believe his luck.

“Do not be late” his mother told him. He nodded again, attempting to imbue the gesture with as much conviction as he possibly could. His mother bustled about the kitchen, the telephone back at her ear, calling the office, telling them she would not be in due to a sick child. Billy finished his breakfast, watching her closely, planning his visit to the newsagent, trying not to think of the shadow man. Her cigarette remained unlit. He took this as a good sign.

It was not as if Billy had never been out by himself. Come the weekend he would race through the streets to a friend’s house, play football in the park and spend his pocket money on junk food at the nearest McDonalds. True there were always stern warnings about how far from home he was allowed to go and he had to be back by a certain hour, but by and large he could do as he pleased. Possibly he was allowed to make these weekend forays because the streets were less crowded, possibly because he was always in the company of others, possibly because the park was only two minutes from his house and his mother could find him easily enough if she wanted to.

As Billy pulled his bag onto his shoulder and left the house he could not have cared less about these things. His mind turned over exactly two items. One, he could easily get to the newsagent to buy his magazine, two; he had to get past the Shadow Man. As his mother fussed over Simon he casually said good bye and slipped off up the street. He turned left onto Seven Sisters Road and within the space of a minute was inside the newsagents shop. It was the sort of shop that abounded in the suburbs of London. Slightly scruffy, underlit, stocked with a seemingly random assortment of comics, newspapers and stationary and grocery. This newsagent, as Jonathon had mentioned, was larger than most. Instead of the usual small rack of newspapers and fashion magazines, this shop had one entire wall lined with shelves. From floor to ceiling magazine stacked on top of magazine. Billy realised he was going to have to hunt quite hard to find what he was looking for. He did not dare ask for help. Most newsagents would eject a school boy from the shop on sight as many of the older boys like to steal things.

He ran his finger along the shelf. The faces of celebrities looked out at him from glossy pages; he ignored the comics and kept hunting. Gradually the celebrity magazines gave way to magazines reviewing cameras, hi-fi’s, computers. Growing frustrated he moved up a shelf, knowing he would have to go soon. The shop keeper was starting to look suspiciously in his direction and if he was late for school, well, that was a trouble he could certainly do without.

Car magazines, golf magazines, football magazines, pop music magazines. How long had he been here? Magazines about dogs! Magazines about knitting! Who could possibly want a magazine about knitting?! He bit his lip, a tight unpleasant knot of anxiety building in his stomach. Magazines about trains, magazines about boats. His eyes went wide with excitement. This was it! Suddenly his gaze went waltzing across a silvery dart shaped fuselage back dropped by acres of clear blue sky. In bold type beneath were the words, “Storm warning, The F23 Lightning takes to the skies”. Billy had to suppress a giggle of excitement. Jonathon had been right; there were dozens of magazines to choose from. Billy drank in the images, the tag lines blending together in his head making a weird kind of music. “Airbus unveils its super heavy weight”, “Speed Demons, the Mach 3 super fighters”, “Science Fiction? Is a stealth helicopter impossible?”

Billy could happily have stood for hours, slowly whittling a short list of magazines down to the one perfect choice. He did not have hours though. Again he caught the shop keeper looking in his direction and he flinched under the man’s steely gaze. He had been here too long now, he had to make a choice and get moving. But how could he possibly choose? He took a deep breath closed his eyes and stretched out a hand. His fingers closed on paper and he had a magazine filled with images of aircraft in his hand. Trying to act casual he walked to counter and handed his choice to the shop keeper.

The shopkeeper, a tired looking man, somewhat overweight and possessing very little hair took the magazine from Billy and tapped at his till. The price £4.00 flashed on the display. Billy’s heart lurched. It was

much more than he was expecting. All the same he had to have it. He fished in his pocket and brought out a pile of coins. The shopkeeper grunted, now looking very annoyed and laboriously began counting. As he waited Billy's eyes went to the clock hanging behind the counter. The red digital display declared the time to be 8.45am. Again Billy's heart lurched. He would have to move very fast to get to school on time.

Chapter 3

Racing up the street towards the tube station Billy immediately noticed how much more crowded the streets were at this time. The traffic was gridlocked and as he dived between the grey suited business people he was swatted with newspapers and buffeted by contact with briefcases. He pulled up sharply at the pedestrian crossing and waited anxiously for the lights to stop the traffic. A woman stood at the curb next to him glanced down at him. He could hear a sibilant sts sts sts sts emanating from her headphones as she looked at him. Going to be late for school her gaze seemed to say.

The lights changed. Billy darted across the road, weaving between the people as best he could, his magazine clutched to his chest. He was in the territory of the Shadow Man now and he was very frightened. All that morning he had fretted about how he would get past him. He had entertained numerous far fetched plans, take the bus to Turnpike Lane and walk back to the school from there, walk up Stroud Green Road and loop back onto Wells Terrace to come into the station via the back entrance, however, any scenario he examined he new would make him late for school. His only real option, as he was now doing, was to race toward the front entrance and hope he would simply be moving too fast for the Shadow Man to target.

He dodged left, shooting passed a blond haired woman carrying a laptop computer. He dodged right, narrowly avoiding a spectacled man armed with an umbrella coming toward him. Then the crowd parted and he saw the entrance directly before him. The Shadow Man was no where in sight. He did not hesitate, did to pause to revel in this moment of good fortune. He put his head down and ran with all the speed he could muster knowing that if he did not he would be guaranteed to be late. He only slowed when he reached the ticket barrier, stopping just long enough to slam his monthly pass against the electronic reader, then it was down the stairs to the platform. Only when he was here, sweaty and out of breath did he allow himself a glimmer of hope. If he continued to move at this pace, if his luck held, he might just get to school on time.

He looked up, straining to see through the crowd, eyes focused on the screen giving the arrival time of the train. Two minutes. Only two minutes. He could still make it. Then his world imploded. Standing next to him on the platform was the Shadow Man.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the Shadow Man looked down, examining Billy in minute detail. With all the blood in his body draining into his feet Billy starred back. He could see the Shadow Man's pockmarked skin in horrible detail, the grime, black and gritty in his ears and the sickly yellow cast of his eyes. He could taste the stench of his heavy unwashed coat, an acrid putrid taste, in the back of his throat. The Shadow Man hesitantly raised his megaphone to lips as if unsure what he was going to say. For the first time Billy noticed that the knuckles of his hands were covered in tattoos.

Why was here? Why was he down inside the station? Why was he not at his usual position barking at the passers by? Billy felt his eyes prick with tears. As he and the Shadow Man stood, gazes locked, he realised that he must have a routine. At the start of the rush hour he stood outside the station, and then at the peak time he moved inside. Down on the platform there was no escape for commuters. They had to wait for their trains and the Shadow man could bellow through his megaphone, telling them to repent, warning them that any lie, any transgression would result in them being seared from the face of the earth leaving nothing more substantial than a shadow behind them. No doubt at the end of the rush hour he moved on to some other haunt. This was why Billy never saw him on his way home.

With the same curious uncertainly the Shadow Man lowered the megaphone. Evidently it was not required for a one on one confrontation. Without its harsh distortions Billy discovered the man's accent was from Liverpool.

“Tell me boy”, he croaked, “do you ever tell lies?”

Billy wanted to run. Unfortunately the platform was so crowded he could barely move. He just clutched his bag to his chest, creasing the cover of his precious magazine in the process. The Shadow man continued to stare at him, waiting patiently for his answer. As the tears began to roll down his cheeks he croaked a single word of his own.

“Yes”

The Shadow man’s face rippled in surprise. “That’s a commendably honest answer” he said, his voice taking on an unexpected clarity. “Well done”. Abruptly he turned his back on Billy and raised the megaphone to lips. He took a deep breath ready to start preaching then just as quickly turned back to where Billy was still rooted to the spot. “Make sure you do all your home work” he said. The Liverpool accent was so thick it could have been used to butter bread.

From the left end of the platform came a sudden inrushing of damp fetid air. Spat from the darkness of the tunnel the train rushed into the station and groaned to a halt at the platform. His mind reeling Billy was swept on board by the crowds. Inside, crushed like a sardine in a can his mind pin balled from one thing to another. He had survived the Shadow man. Was he in time for school or late? He had forgotten his home work! This last thought was so terrible it overwhelmed everything else. He had survived The Shadow man only to arrive at school with out anything to show the teacher from the 1950s! How had he done this? How had he been so astonishingly stupid?

He knew the answer of course. He had been focused on one thing only. The magazine. That seductive glossy paged magazine, filled with images of airliners, gliders, bombers and helicopters. That wonderful cool thing that he had craved so much. If he had not been pinned between all these bodies he would have ripped the magazine apart page by page. Unable to do this he allowed the tears to flood unhindered down his cheeks.

Manor house station rolled by, then they were pulling into Turnpike Lane. The doors whooshed open and Billy, swept along in the crush of people was spewed onto the platform. For a moment he seriously considered not going to school at all, then he concluded that he was in enough trouble as it was. Better to get here and face the music and than hide and make things a hundred times worse. Leaving the platform he glanced at the screen. The next train was due in two minutes time, information that was of no value or use to him. What was of vital importance though was the time. 8.57am. If he ran, if he really really ran, he might just make it to school on time. Then at least he would only have one crime to pay for.

He hoisted his bag higher on to his shoulder adjusted his grip on the now slightly dog eared magazine and sprinted from the station. At 8.58 he was at the end of the road waiting for a break in traffic so he could cross the street. At 8.59 he was running again. At 9.00 exactly was only a street away and at 9.01 he was at the school gates.

Red faced he raced through the silent deserted corridors. Everyone was in class already, giving their yes in response to their names being read aloud from the register. Exhausted, shaking, thoroughly unkempt Billy finally arrived at his class room. He shouldered the door and dived inside. Everyone was sitting quietly at their desk. Mr. Cartwright, their teacher, was poised with the register open before him, ticking off their names. The clock on the classroom wall read 9.03am

“Hi Billy. Your mother called, said you were having to come to school by yourself today because your brother is ill. Didn’t have too much trouble I hope?”

Billy, his hands utterly limp let the magazine slide to the floor. His lip began to tremble and he felt the hot rush of tears beginning again.

Looking concerned Mr. Cartwright came toward him. "Are you ok"? He asked gently. Not wishing to attract any further attention to himself Billy nodded. It seemed Mr. Cartwright did not believe him. He stooped down next to Billy the look of concern deepening. Billy rubbed at his tears with his shirt cuff and looked at the ground. Mr Cartwright followed his downward glance and found the magazine.

"What's this?" he asked picking it up. He examined the cover. "Ah, the Dehavilland Comet. The first jet airliner, first flew in 1949 I believe, then became the first jet aircraft to fly passengers in 1951. It was one of the best known aircraft the 1950's. Well done"

He stood upright, holding the magazine up for the class to see.

"Do you all see this? He asked the class. This is Billy's piece for the history assignment. The first jet airliner. It flew all through the 1950's. I hope the rest of you have something this good".

The class shuffled in their seats, one or two faces looking suddenly dejected.

"Sit down please Billy. We should be getting on with the day" said Mr. Cartwright.

Billy quietly did as he was told.