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opening extract from

Shadows in the Twilight

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I

I have another story to tell.

The story of what happened next, when summer was over. When the mosquitoes had stopped singing and the nights turned cold.

Autumn set in, and Joel Gustafson had other things to think about. He hardly ever went to his rock by the river, to gaze up at the sky.

It was as if the dog that had headed for its star no longer existed.

Or perhaps it had never existed? Had it all been a dream?

Joel didn't know. But in the end he decided it was all to do with the fact that he'd soon be twelve. After his twelfth birthday he'd be too big to sit on a rock and dream about a strange dog that might never have existed in the real world.

Reaching the age of twelve was a great event. It would mean there were only three years to go before his fifteenth birthday. Then he'd be able to ride a moped and watch films in the Community Centre that children were not allowed to see. When you were fifteen you were more of a grown-up than a child.

These were the thoughts whirring around in Joel's head one afternoon in September, 1957. It was a Sunday, and he'd set out on an expedition into the vast forest that surrounded the little northern Swedish town he lived in.

Joel had decided to test if it was possible to get lost on purpose. At the same time he had two other important

questions to think through. One was whether it would have been an advantage to have been born a girl, and called Joella instead of Joel. The other was what he was going to do when he grew up.

Needless to say, he hadn't mentioned any of this to his dad, Samuel. He'd been curled up by the kitchen window, watching Samuel get shaved. As Samuel always cut himself while shaving, Joel had decided long ago that he would grow a beard when he grew up. Once, when he'd been alone in the house, he'd carefully drawn a black beard on his face, using the burnt end of a stick of wood from the stove. To find out what it felt like to have hair on his face, he'd also wrapped a fox fur round his cheeks. He'd decided that having a beard was better than repeatedly cutting his face with a razor. But he hoped his beard wouldn't smell like a fox.

When Samuel had finished shaving, he'd put on his best suit. Then Joel had knotted his tie for him.

Now Samuel was ready to pay a visit to Sara, who had a day off from her work as a waitress in the local bar.

Now he's going to say that he won't be late, Joel thought.

'I won't be late,' said Samuel. 'What are you going to do with yourself this afternoon?'

Joel had prepared an answer to that question in advance.

'I'm going to do a jigsaw puzzle,' he said. 'That big one with the Red Indian chief, Geronimo. The one with 954 pieces.'

Samuel eyed him up and down thoughtfully.

'Why don't you go out to play?' he asked. 'It's lovely weather.'

'I want to complete the puzzle against the clock,' said Joel. 'I'm going to try to set a new record. It took me four hours last time. Now I'm going to do it in three.'

Samuel nodded, and left. Joel waved to him through the window. Then he took out an old rucksack he kept under his bed and packed some sandwiches. He'd put the kettle on to boil while he was doing that, and when it was ready he made some tea and poured it into Samuel's red thermos flask.

Borrowing Samuel's thermos flask was a bit risky. If he broke it or lost it, Samuel would be angry. Joel would be forced to produce a lot of complicated explanations. But it was a risk he would have to take. You couldn't possibly set out on an expedition without a thermos flask.

Last of all he took his logbook from the case where the sailing ship *Celestine* was displayed, collecting dust. He closed his rucksack, pulled on his wellingtons and put on his jacket. He cleared the stairs in three jumps – it had taken him four only six months ago.

The sun was shining, but you could feel it was autumn. To get to the forest as quickly as possible, Joel decided that the Red Indian Chief Geronimo was lying in ambush with his warriors behind the Co-operative Society's warehouse. So he would have to proceed on horseback. He geed himself up, imagined that his boots were the newly-shod hooves of a dappled pony, and set off across the street. The reddish-brown goods wagons in the railway siding were rocks he could hide behind. Once he got that far, Geronimo and his braves would never be able to catch up with him. And just beyond there was the forest...

When he'd reached the trees he closed down the

game. Nowadays he thought that his imagination was something he could turn on or off like a water tap. He went into the forest.

As the sun was already low in the sky, it seemed to be twilight in among the trees. The shadows were growing longer and longer among the thick trunks.

Then the path petered out. There was nothing but forest all around him.

Just one more step, Joel thought. If I take one more step the whole world will disappear.

He listened to the sighing of the wind.

Now he would practise getting lost. He would do something nobody had ever done before. He would prove that it wasn't only people who took a wrong turning that could get lost.

A crow suddenly flew up from a high branch. It made Joel jump, as if it had been perched just beside him. Then silence fell once more.

The crow had scared him. He took a quick pace backwards and made sure that the world was still there. He hung his rucksack on a projecting branch then took ten paces in a straight line in front of him, in among the trees. Then ten more. When he turned round he could no longer see his rucksack. He closed his eyes and spun round and round to make himself dizzy and lose his sense of direction. When he opened his eyes, he had no idea which direction he ought to take. Now he was lost.

There wasn't a sound all around him. Only the sighing of the wind.

He suddenly wanted to pack it all in.

Pretending you could get lost on purpose was an impossible game. It was being childish, and somebody

who would soon be twelve years old couldn't allow himself to indulge in such silliness.

It struck Joel that this might be the big difference. That he would no longer be able to make believe.

He located his rucksack and returned to the road. He thought more about whether it would have been better if he'd been born a girl instead of a boy. What would be best, a Joel or a Joella?

Boys were stronger. And the games they played were more fun than those played by girls. When they grew up they had more exciting jobs. Even so, he wasn't sure. What was really best? Having a beard that smelled like a fox fur? Or having breasts that bounced up and down inside your jumper? Giving birth to children, or making children? Tickling or being tickled?

He trudged home without being able to make up his mind. He kicked hard at a stone. It had not been a good Sunday. When he got home he would write in his logbook that it had been a very bad day. He had no desire to do the Geronimo puzzle either. He had no desire to do anything at all. And tomorrow he would have to go back to school.

He bit his tongue as hard as he could, to make the day even worse. There was nothing he hated more than not knowing what to do next.

Life was a long series of Nexts. He had worked that out already. The trick was to make sure that the next Next was better than the previous one. But everything had gone wrong today.

He opened the gate into the overgrown garden of the house where he lived.

There were lots of red berries on the rowan tree.

The sun was just setting behind the horizon on the other side of the river.

Nothing happens, Joel thought.

Nothing ever happens in this dump.

But he was wrong.

The next day, which was a Monday with fog and drizzle, something happened that Joel could never have imagined in his wildest dreams.

He would experience a Miracle.

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The day couldn't have begun any better for Joel.

When his dad, Samuel, shook him by the shoulder shortly after seven o'clock, he'd been having a nightmare. He'd dreamt that he was on fire. Sizzling flames had been shooting out of his nostrils, just like a fire-spitting dragon. His fingers were blue, a bit like the welding flames he'd seen at the Highways Department workshops, where he used to have his skates sharpened in the winter. Being on fire didn't hurt. Even so, he had felt terrified and wanted nothing more than to wake up. It wasn't until Samuel touched his shoulder that the flames were extinguished. He gave a start and sat up in bed.

'What's the matter?' asked Samuel.

'I don't know,' said Joel. 'I was dreaming that I was on fire.'

Samuel frowned. Joel knew his father didn't like him having nightmares. Perhaps it was because Samuel himself sometimes had bad dreams? Joel had often been woken up in the middle of the night by Samuel shouting and screaming in his sleep.

One of these days Joel would ask his father about his dreams. He'd noted that down on the last page of his logbook, where he had listed all the questions he didn't yet have an answer to.

But everything had been fine this morning. Joel felt very relieved when he realised he'd only been dreaming. The fire had never actually existed. He was usually in a

bad mood when he woke up and had to get out of bed. The cork tiles on the floor were far too cold for his bare feet. And then he could never find his clothes. His socks were always inside out and his shirt buttons wouldn't fit into their holes. In Joel's opinion the people who made clothes for children were wicked. How else could you explain the fact that nothing went right when you were in a hurry to get dressed and it was freezing cold in the room?

But this morning everything went much more smoothly. And when he went to the kitchen he found two little boxes of pastilles by the side of his cup of hot chocolate.

'They're from Sara,' said Samuel, who was busy combing his tousled hair in front of the cracked shaving mirror.

Two packs of pastilles when you've narrowly escaped burning to death? And on a Monday morning?

It seemed to Joel that he was in for a good day. And it became even better when he opened the little boxes and took out the enclosed picture cards: they were of two footballers he didn't have in his collection. Joel collected footballers. Nothing else. He sometimes hit the roof when he opened a pack of pastilles and found a picture of a wrestler. That was the worst thing that could happen to him. Flabby wrestlers who were always called Svensson. And their first name was nearly always Rune.

But this morning he had found two footballers at the same time.

'Call in at the bar on the way home from school,' said Samuel as he put on his jacket. 'Sara will be pleased to see you.'

'Why has she given me them?' Joel wondered.

'She likes you,' said Samuel. 'Surely you know that?'

He paused in the doorway and turned round.

'Don't forget to buy some potatoes,' he said. 'And milk.'

'I won't,' said Joel.

It was good to hear that Sara liked him. Even though she wasn't his mum, and her breasts were too big and she smelled of sweat. Of course, it wasn't as good as hearing his mother Jenny saying it. But Jenny didn't exist. She had disappeared. And as long as she didn't exist, until Samuel and Joel had found her, Sara was welcome to say that she liked him.

As usual, he dawdled for so long over his cup of hot chocolate that he would be forced to run in order to get to school on time. Miss Nederström didn't like pupils arriving late. If she was really angry, or if you had been late over and over again, she sometimes twisted your ear and it hurt so much that you had to struggle to hold back the tears. But she only did that to boys. She didn't bother about girls turning up late. That was why Joel sometimes asked himself if it would have been better to be a girl called Joella Gustafson.

He put on his outdoor clothes, slung his satchel over his shoulder, locked the door and hid the key under Samuel's boots on the landing. He almost cleared the stairs in two-and-a-half jumps and sped off in the direction of school. He had three possible routes to choose from. Today he chose the one along Blixtens gata. He only went that way when he was very late. It was straight and dull, and only involved one short cut, over the courtyard behind the chemist's. But it was the shortest route.

He ran as fast as he could, and arrived dead on time. Miss Nederström was just about to close the door when he came racing up.

'Good for you, Joel,' she said. 'I'm glad to see that you are making an effort to arrive on time.'

School finished at two o'clock. Joel felt pleased with himself. He hadn't been asked any questions that he couldn't answer. And moreover, they'd had Geography, which was the subject he liked best. He liked it just as much as he hated maths. He hadn't a clue about numbers.

It was the same story as with children's clothes. Whoever invented numbers must have been a wicked person.

But the best part of the day was when Miss Nederström was angry with Otto because he hadn't been attending during a class. Joel didn't like Otto. Otto was his sworn enemy. He was at the very top of the list of people Joel hoped would always be in trouble. Otto was having to repeat a year, and never missed an opportunity of annoying people. To make matters worse, he was so strong that Joel couldn't get the better of him in the winter snowball fights.

Joel had suddenly had an idea during the geography lesson.

He would invent a geography game. He wasn't quite sure how it would work, but it would involve dice and a race to see who could travel round the world fastest. He was in a hurry to get home and start working on the game. He had a collection of old maps that he could cut up or draw on.

He very nearly forgot that he had to buy some potatoes and milk. But he was in luck again when he got to Ljunggren's Grocery Store: he was the only customer in the shop and didn't need to wait. Then he forgot that he'd promised to call in at the bar and thank Sara for the pastilles. He was almost home before he remembered.

His first reaction was not to bother – he could just as well thank her tomorrow.

But then he changed his mind. She had given him not just one box of pastilles, but two, after all. He turned round and retraced his steps.

And that was when The Miracle happened.

He didn't look both ways before running across the street. There was a cement mixer roaring and rattling away outside the ironmonger's, and a lorry was sounding its horn over by the bookshop.

He suddenly found himself bang in front of a big bus. Perhaps he heard the driver's frantic braking? Perhaps he didn't hear anything? But just as he was about to be crushed by one of the enormous wheels he slipped and fell over backwards. The bus drove over the top of him and crashed into a lamppost outside the bar.

Joel lay perfectly still. He could smell the oil and feel the heat from the bus's exhaust pipe that was coiled like a dirty steel snake a few centimetres away from his face.

It had all happened so quickly that he hadn't even had time to feel frightened.

As he lay there under the bus, he didn't understand what had happened.

Why was he lying there? And what was this thing above his face?

He turned his head to one side and saw feet moving backwards and forwards. A drop of oil hit him just below one eye. Somewhere out there he could hear voices shouting and screaming.

He heard somebody shouting that a child had been run over by the bus.

Was it him?

If it was him, why wasn't he dead?

He wasn't dead, surely? Everything was as usual, except that he was lying on his back on the wet street, and oil was dripping onto his face.

There must surely be a difference between being alive and being dead?

Then he felt somebody taking hold of his arm. A face edged its way closer to him. He recognised it. It was Nyberg's face. Nyberg was the bouncer in the bar where Sara worked.

'Are you all right, milad?' said the face. 'For Christ's sake, I do believe you're alive.'

'Yes,' said Joel. 'I think so.'

That was the moment he started to feel frightened, and it slowly dawned on him that he had experienced a Miracle.

A bus had run him over. But at precisely the right moment he'd slipped and landed between the wheels. In addition the satchel with his school things and the milk and the potatoes had slid down by his side. If it had stayed on his back, his face would have been hit by the bus's chassis.

The Ljusdal bus, he thought. It has to be the bus to Ljusdal.

The Ljusdal bus had presented him with his Miracle.

He closed his eyes. Hands began to take hold of him, carefully, as if he were dead after all. Voices were whispering and shouting on all sides. He felt himself being dragged over the wet asphalt. Then somebody lifted him up onto a bed that was swaying back and forth. Metal doors closed and an engine started turning.

Somebody was sitting beside him, holding his hand.

He looked cautiously, hardly opening his eyes. He'd often practised that in front of Samuel's shaving mirror. Looking in such a way that nobody could see he was looking.

The woman holding his hand was Eulalia Mörker, who ran a hairdressing business next to the ironmonger's. Eulalia spoke with a foreign accent and chased away children when they were too noisy outside her shop door. She would come running out brandishing a pair of curling tongs, shouting and threatening, and everybody was a bit scared of her, because you could never be sure what she was saying in her peculiar language.

Now she was sitting beside Joel, holding his hand.

Joel looked again, to make certain his eyes hadn't deceived him.

He turned his head slowly to see what sort of a car it was he was travelling in.

An ambulance. The only vehicle with a bed.

When he was transferred onto another stretcher at the hospital, he thought it would be best if he groaned. Not a lot, just a little one. Perhaps it wasn't a good idea to let people know too quickly that he'd experienced a Miracle.

He was examined by Dr Stenström. Joel didn't like it when the nurses took off all his clothes. He was especially worried about them discovering that he had a large hole in his underpants. And he wasn't sure that his feet were properly clean. Somebody who had just experienced a Miracle maybe ought to have just got out of the bath?

Then he heard Stenström's authoritative voice.

'This young boy has been incredibly lucky,' he said. 'He's fallen under a bus but hasn't got a single scratch. It can only be described as a miracle.'

A Miracle!

It was true. Dr Stenström had realised.

Joel opened his eyes.

A bright light was shining down on him. There was something smelly stuck up his nose. The lamp was as hot as the sun. He could make out faces gathered round him, looking like white shadows, staring at him.

He suddenly thought about Jesus walking on water. That was Miss Nederström's favourite Bible story. He had no idea how many times she'd read it for them, but often enough for him to recall it almost by heart.

What had the people on the shore shouted when Jesus walked over the waves?

What was that long, difficult, incomprehensible word?

'Hallelujah!' he shouted when he remembered what it was.

'You can say that again,' said Dr Stenström. 'Let's see if you can stand up.'

A nurse helped him up. He sat on the examination table, dangling his legs. He could see his underpants on a chair, with the big hole in them.

Then he jumped down onto the floor.

'Not a scratch,' said Dr Stenström. 'Guess who's going to be overjoyed.'

'My dad Samuel,' said Joel, who thought he'd been asked a question.

'I'm sure he will be,' said Dr Stenström, 'but I bet the bus driver is at least as glad.'

Joel made as if to start getting dressed.

'We'll keep you in overnight,' said Dr Stenström. 'Just to be on the safe side.'

'I have to go home and prepare some potatoes,' said

Joel. 'My dad will wonder what's going on if I don't.'

'He's on his way here,' said one of the nurses. Joel suddenly recognised her voice. She was the mother of one of his classmates. Eva-Lisa, who could run faster than anybody else in the class. She was like a greyhound.

Joel lay down on the examination table again.

All he wanted just now was to be left in peace. He still wasn't quite sure what had happened.

As if everybody in the room had read his mind, they all left. He quickly jumped down and hid his underpants beneath his shirt, so that the hole couldn't be seen. Then he checked to see if his feet were clean.

They weren't. He took some balls of cotton wool from a glass dish and poured onto them some liquid with a strong smell from out of a brown bottle. Then he rubbed his feet until they were clean. He had only just crept back under the blanket on the examination table when the door opened.

It was the bus driver.

Joel recognised him. His name was Eklund and a year or two ago he had shot a bear. He was always the one who drove the Ljusdal bus.

'Well, milad,' he said. 'If only you knew. If only you knew how pleased I am.'

'I wasn't looking where I was going,' said Joel. 'I hope the bus isn't broken.'

'Who cares about the bus,' said Eklund, wiping his runny nose with the back of his big, red hand.

Joel could see that his eyes were red.

'I didn't have time to brake,' Eklund said. 'All of a sudden, there you were in front of the bus. I never thought you would survive. Never.'

'I think it was a miracle,' said Joel.

Eklund nodded.

'I'll have to start going to church again,' he said. 'Hell's bells, I'll have to start going to church again.'

The door opened once more. It was the Greyhound's mum who had come back again.

'The boy's father has just arrived,' she said. 'You'll have to go now. As you can see, there's nothing wrong with the lad.'

'Thank God for that,' said Eklund.

'Make sure you keep a better lookout in future,' said the Greyhound's mum. 'You bus drivers think you can drive as if you had the roads to yourselves!'

'I never drive too fast,' said Eklund.

Joel could tell that Eklund was angry.

'We all have our own ideas about that,' said the Greyhound's mum, shooing him out as if he'd been a cat intruding where he'd no business to be.

Then Samuel came into the room.

Joel thought it was best to give the appearance of being as wretched as possible.

Samuel's face was as white as a sheet. He was breathing heavily, as if he'd run all the way from the forest to the hospital.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, and looked at Joel.

Joel kept his eyes closed.

There wasn't a sound in the room.

Another kind of silence, Joel thought. Not the same as in the forest yesterday. Not like it is when I wake up in the middle of the night. Or when we're intent on putting Miss Nederström on the spot.

An entirely new kind of silence.