

The Man Who Cast His Shadow at the Sun

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Asa had always found such places strangely invigorating, even *enlivening*, in a way that he could not quite bring himself to fully comprehend. There was a certain kinship to be found amongst the weathered, stone markers; each sticking out of the ground at its own odd angle, like bookmarks or placeholders shoved carelessly into a text someone had lost interest in before its end. These were his antecedents, his kin. The entire chain of human ancestry, from its slimy, protoplasmic tail, up to its current, anti-septic, carbon fiber encased, demi-mortal capitulum had striven, labored, and suffered just to produce him and his few fellows. And inevitably, in a fit of industriousness, nature would sweep away each successive generation in the hopes of producing something --- *better*.

"It's hard to believe that I'm *better*, isn't it PETR?" he remarked to the sullen gray shadow that was his personal guardian angel.

PETR --- who could only respond in definitives such as yes or no, 1 or 0, legal or illegal, allowed or forbidden --- did not answer. One either believed, or one did not believe. Neither was more or less difficult than the other. He was incapable of the fuzzy logic which is the unmistakable hallmark of a more advanced design (and of living creatures). What he could not parse, he ignored. Instead, he merely twirled the radar dish, which constantly floated above his head like a halo, in his ever vigilant search for possible hazards.

Asa appeared to be about sixty, that being as old as the director of the rejuvenation clinic thought it safe to allow him given his past history. In truth, the stream of consciousness which his mother had christened "Asa" had been unbroken for over two hundred and twenty-one years. On this particular day he felt the weight of every day, of every one of those years pressing down upon his gaunt and angular shoulders. It was his great misfortune to have been born a member of the last generation. But hopefully prospects would someday (perhaps soon) change for the better; if not for him, then for those who would come after. *After* being a concept very much out of favor currently.

Asa stepped around a stagnant pool that, in earlier times, might have been a perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes, were such vectors still allowed, and made his way carefully through the crumbling markers and over the unmaintained and uneven terrain with the help of PETR who was always there to restore his balance should he seem to be in danger of losing it --- which was often. Once, some years ago, on a day when he had been feeling particularly restless (or dare he say --- a little desperate) Asa had tried launching himself over a small hedge at a time when PETR was trailing along a little farther back than usual. But he had only succeeded in coming within a few inches of the ground before his guardian had somehow managed to grasp him firmly, but gently, in its tentacle like grasp and decelerate his fall. Asa couldn't even remember the last time he'd earned an honest bruise completely on his own. Somehow, he didn't think it was altogether healthy for a man to be able to walk about with absolute impunity to the consequences of his own

missteps.

But such thoughts would no doubt be considered quaint in the present way of looking at things. The whole purpose of having a Personal Emergency Trauma Robot was to prevent people from harming themselves unnecessarily. Surely a gentle tug from a teacher as persistent and vigilant as PETR could be just as instructive, at least in the long run, as landing on one's ass, and it was certainly much more congenial to one's longevity --- not to mention one's tailbone. Besides, when a lifespan is measured in centuries rather than years or decades, the consequences of a poor decision, or a careless moment, are several orders of magnitude greater than would otherwise be the case. Previous, less precious editions of the human genome could afford to fall down. His could not.

Another thing that his little episode with the hedge had reminded him of was the fact that when every possible sensation that human flesh is heir to has been experienced many times over, the only one which is consistently fresh is pain. The memory of pleasant sensations can linger forever --- nearly as vibrant and real as when they first occurred --- while the memory of an injury inevitably lessens in intensity with the passage of time, making each new occurrence that much more of a shock. Asa managed to wrench the soft tissue of his joints just enough to remind himself of this fact. He had taken a perverse and bitter pleasure in the sensation. *

What would you be willing to sacrifice to double your lifespan? Triple it?

Is time really our most precious commodity?

'The Man Who Cast His Shadow at the Sun' is a short story that explores these questions and others through the eyes of a man who was never allowed to arrive at the answers for himself.

Written in the early 1980's, it presages the arrival of the modern dystopia which seems to be fast approaching while at the same time echoing the concerns of the more prescient of our forefathers.

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