



Job  
Shadow-  
ing

a novel

Malcolm  
Sutton

FIRST EDITION

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There is no parting from your own shadow. To experience this faith is to know that in being ourselves we are more than ourselves.

—Bernard Lovell

## Classplaza

**The teens** will eventually break away from Etti, though in the minutes I stand watching them no one wants to take the first step. They are lingering, giving hugs to each other, recording goodbyes on their phones, their parents waiting at a thoughtful distance with their car doors open. In the hazy evening light that softens everyone to orange and brown, I can see that Etti has a glow about her as she always does on these occasions.

I used to participate in Etti's projects when I was between contracts, being helpful in the background, sort of there and not there, but now I stay clear. This time I left for a few days because Etti said she and the teenagers would be doing something constructive in the space - like building an as-yet undetermined structure. Together they would decide what to make.

Over the years she has sought out places that are more and

more like voids, as though she needs to challenge herself more, push her practice, intensify the experience for the students. Her most recent proposal led us to this unit that she has named Classplaza. We inhabit the space, and she works from it - a long narrow room beside a number of similar industrial park units, still clad in the dark wood panelling and drop ceilings of its original days. The front is a massive pane of glass beside a heavy glass door, all framed in aluminum. We have it for a month while she brings in suburban high school groups to do open-ended projects. She is attracted to these cold and inhuman environments, she thrives on them, even finds aesthetic pleasure in them. To her they open a window onto something new. At least she forces herself to believe they do, and I think she actually does believe there is more possibility in them than spaces already won over by life. Like others who see potential in the bleak abandonments of past decades, she is able to revive them, at least for a time. She wants people to experience each other in a form unrecognizable to themselves. Some over-educated part of me can't help but admire what she does.

At the same time, I've noticed there is something about Classplaza that prevents me from seeing anything beyond its glass door. Though she has a horizon in Classplaza, an undefined paradigm, I can see nothing but the desert we are occupying. Maybe because she thrives on them I begin to see these deserts as an extension of Etti. I am less and less able to see her without her necessary deserts.

I slip away from the goodbye scene of Classplaza, the sky steadily darkening, and when I return in the total dark the students have left and Classplaza is lit up inside. From the parking lot I

can see that our temporary home is filled with a sprawling construction made of pegboard, cardboard and string, surrounded by metal-framed office chairs from the '70s or '80s. Stepping inside, I see large sheets of paper taped together and covered in notes and doodles and diagrams. The composition fills the main space of the unit, and I imagine Etti must be somewhere behind it, near the kitchen area, back at her computer.

When Etti hears me she says, We didn't have time to disassemble it before they left. They were a great group. I'm always surprised by what they come up with. It always amazes me.

I can hear, even in her enthusiasm, that she is beginning to crash. Physically and emotionally she is exhausted. She throws herself entirely into her work and then is spent.

I don't ask Etti about the week with her teens. I know what kinds of things would have been discussed, where Etti would have encouraged them to go and what she would have steered them away from. She once said to me that no one is ever taught how to work together, and in this realization a world of possibility opened for her.

At the back of the office I find our futon and pull it into the front area, dragging it upright past the student construction. I lie down, and among the sketches that adorn the cardboard see strings pinned from one thought to another, triangulating into webs. I get up and pull away a folded sheet of cardboard from the main construction, and Etti hears me and tells me to wait. I might want to take some pictures still, in the morning, she says.

I recognize Etti's handwriting in one of the clusters of notes: *How might we work together: as two, as three, as four, as five, as six, as seven, as eight, as nine, as ten . . .* Alongside 'as two' is a drawing of two figures holding each other hand to ankle in a tumbling pose, rolling forward. Below that is a drawing of people leapfrogging each other toward the mouth of a chasm. Written vertically up one wall of the chasm is, *What is this place?* It all looks very searching, tentative, a step toward something else. Without thinking I begin to take apart the construction again, then catch myself.

Etti comes over to a tripod set up a few feet away from me and removes the DSLR, taking it back to her computer where she will upload the images from the week, documentation of the project with all the scenes of teens working together and talking and building, and images of Classplaza from the outside, its white vinyl title, *When We Work in 3 and 4 Dimensions*, adhered to the glass front.

I'm ready to settle into a book when she picks up from a conversation begun a few days ago. She says, Sometimes you have to do things that you don't want to do. She is speaking about how I spend my days. Sometimes any movement is good movement, she says. And I think, it is because I don't understand how my life fits into the working world. But I say to her, I've often done things I don't like to do. And I leave it at that. I think of those things that I've done, which appear as fragments floating into the past, each fragment populated by incidental people who paid me or worked alongside me. There is no thread connecting the fragments together. I would like to say something more

to Etti, something optimistic or even enterprising, but I can no longer picture a future self going about life in a fully formed world.

In another era not long ago, we might have planted ourselves in a commune and home-schooled long-haired children. What an image, I think. But pictures like these have come to me increasingly over the months and years. My parents were not involved in communes, intentional communities, back-to-lander farms, marches on capitals, underground plans. Most of their generation were not involved. But it seems as though that was their story. I see childhood memory-images of my father's colleagues at the university. I smell the old university offices and chemistry labs. Somehow this is where my mind inevitably goes: the labs of universities, the farmland of communes, even though they seem to have no place whatsoever in this industrial park and in this life that Etti and I share.

Soon we will have to leave this place that she has named Class-plaza, but this time, unlike most times, it is not clear where we will go. Despite her clamouring, nothing has come through for Etti, no funding and no spaces. It's clear that she needs a break from her work, but a break is impossible. We have nothing to fall back on. And there is another feeling too: that we have faulty trajectories. At this moment when life and work have solidified into one and the same action for Etti, I am farther than ever from any sustained employment. I am so far adrift from all my adult milestones.

Before we go to sleep that night, as we lay on the futon amid

the cardboard and strings, she finally looks me in the face and says: There was a time when I felt really equal to you, but now I don't. Now I can't place you. I can't see where you're going, what your story is, how it is part of mine. She rolls over and turns off her light, and I leave mine on and pick up my book, which keeps me up well into the night.