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Shadow People

BY LIBBY TUCKER

Many supernatural figures in ghost stories are friendly and kind. There are, however, certain supernatural beings that defy the usual categories and make observers' hair stand on end. Unlike familiar, easily recognizable spirits, these are the strange, elusive beings known as shadow people.

According to folk tradition, you are most likely to see shadow people from the corner of your eye. If you look straight ahead, you will never spot them. But if you pay attention to your peripheral vision, you may see something startling begin to appear. As you walk along, doing ordinary things, a shadow person may suddenly cross your path.

Some paranormal enthusiasts insist that shadow people get humans' attention while traveling between dimensions. Some think that shadow people feel drawn to humans who feel sad and are grieving the loss of a loved one; others believe that these travelers simply want to get where they are going. The first of these two possibilities does not seem to match what we find in oral tradition. In ghost stories, shadow people do not seem to be especially empathetic or kind; on the contrary, they tend to be enigmatic, silent, and even threatening.

A few years ago, a freshman in one of my folklore classes told me about a terrifying, middle-of-the-night encounter he had experienced in our campus's Nature Preserve. "I was climbing a hill," he told me, "when I bumped up against a really tall, dark shadow. I couldn't see who it was, but I could tell it was a man, and he was definitely dangerous. I just turned around and ran. I'm never going back to the Nature Preserve again!"

This freshman was not the only student of mine who was frightened by humanoid shadows. When I was researching my book *Haunted Halls*, a male Resident Assistant told me that a dark, shadowy man had appeared in a plate glass window during his late-night rounds. This man was his own size but wore different clothes that were all black. Horrified by the sight of this unexpected apparition, he changed his evening routine to avoid seeing more shadow people—and as far as I know, he never did.

Both of these stories suggest that shadow people are disruptive and dangerous. Their emphasis on negativity fits Carl Jung's shadow archetype, which represents the socially unacceptable impulses that people may feel while leading orderly, admirable lives. Jung argues that all of us have a shadow self, whether or not we choose to follow it. No matter how kindly and courteously we behave, our shadow selves may urge us to pull fire alarms in public buildings, tell inappropriate jokes at parties, and cut other people off on the highway. Like the four rowdy guys in the popular movie, *The Hangover* (2009), shadow selves are exciting, but troubling and unsafe companions.

While some stories about shadow people fit Jung's concept of the shadow self, others told in New York State do not emphasize negativity. In Potsdam, for example, some people have reported seeing a shadowy man who wears a top hat. His tall, imposing hat reminds us of the 19th and early 20th centuries, when upper class American men dressed quite formally. President Abraham Lincoln, for example, often wore a top hat. Why would a man wearing a hat of this kind suddenly appear and then disappear? There seems to be no compelling reason; however, like other ghost stories, this one tells us that the past can break into the present with very little warning.

A more specific reason for a shadow person to appear is to help visitors understand about painful past circumstances. Dramatic sightings of shadow people have taken place at Rolling Hills Asylum in East Bethany, New York. Known as the Genesee County Poor Farm when it was founded in 1827, this institution offered shelter to orphans and indigent adults, as well as elderly and disabled individuals. Now a part of New York's Haunted History Trail, this asylum has become well known as a site for shadow people's appearances. Because so many legend trippers have observed shadows in the East Wing, that part of the building has earned the nickname, "The Hall of Shadows." On YouTube, Pinterest, and other Internet sites, eager visitors post their latest videos, photos, and observations of the shadows' activities.

One YouTube video of the Rolling Hills Asylum begins with a view of a long, violet-hued corridor with peeling paint on its walls. "Is anybody here?" the videomaker's voice inquires. After a moment, there are two footsteps and then—so fast that you can hardly see it—a shadowy blur moves from the right to the left of the screen. This is one of the shadow people of the famous East Wing. Although one might ask whether the videomaker added this moving image, the image certainly looks eerie. I am not sure how comfortable it would feel to stand in that corridor, waiting for such a shadow to pass by.

Sometimes images of shadow people gain a wide audience through YouTube videos. In the summer of 2016, a video of a dozen or more shadow people in the clouds above New York City caused a brief uproar. What was this shadowy host of people in the sky? Could it be the coming of the last judgment, or could it be the spirits of people who died on September 11, 2001? Alternatively, could it just be an unusual assortment of clouds, enhanced by Photoshop? Anyone who enjoys both gazing at clouds and listening to stories about shadow people can have a good time watching this video, trying to discern faces in the shadowy crowd.

It is tempting to wonder whether we might become shadow people ourselves, stepping briefly into others' worlds through the entryway of a different dimension. Our universe holds many wonders that we are just beginning to discover. If a doorway to another dimension opens, let's go! ▼

Libby Tucker teaches folklore at Binghamton University. Her book *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) investigates college ghost stories. She also authored *Children's Folklore: A Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood, 2008). She co-edited, with Ellen McHale, *New York State Folklife Reader: Diverse Voices* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013).



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