



**"BEHOLD I AM
OBLIVION"**

Terence Kuch

Things around Duck's Tavern had been pretty tense before, but not the catastrophe they later became. The tenseness came about because Duck's, which I owned, was exactly halfway between Gallery One and Gallery Two in the Arts District, and the catastrophe resulted from the undying hatred the owners of these venues had for each other.

Gallery One had been in business several years, selling art that some people considered just a little more up-market than what you might find in the nearest mall. Leonard Hatton, One's infrequently genial proprietor, made my place a regular stop on his daily route, had a drink or two. I supplied Leonard, not just with his daily cognac, but with wine for his openings, which was very good business for me. In the interest of maintaining relations, I was careful to have no opinions about art, where turns of fashion twist and fold like origami geese; but alcohol fuels the business of art forever.

Then, into Leonard's world and mine, came Jack Brooks (who pronounced his name 'Jacques Brooks' when customers were about). Jack started his own gallery, with higher ceilings than One's, whiter walls, fancier drop-lights, and a flair for publicity that Leonard couldn't match. Jack tended to show large, polite canvases of Riviera towns. These pieces were said to evince a certain lack of artistic seriousness. But remember that I have absolutely no opinion about that.

Just for spite, I think, Jack called his venue "Gallery Two." Leonard sued, but never did get Jack to back off about the name. So there was this simmering undercurrent between them. I was careful to cultivate Jack as well as Leonard as even-handedly as I could, because I catered openings at both galleries. I dealt with no more serious matters than whether or not to drape the wine bottles in linen to disguise their lowly provenance. A gracious lack of commitment, in this matter as well, suited me just fine.

Since Duck's lay between the two galleries, a block from each, by unspoken consent it became neutral ground. Leonard and the One crowd gathered in one side of Duck's, and the Two crowd on the other. They sipped alcohol of various pastel colors and cast baleful looks at each other, whispered in throaty voices about what they should do to the other side to preserve the holy canons of taste.

Any locals who happened to drop by were placed somewhere between them, forming a kind of living DMZ.

Now, I wouldn't be bending your ear or eye like this if it hadn't been for the strange events that began one day in June. I had stopped in at One to discuss arrangements for Leonard's next opening: how much he wanted to spend on wine; if he would need one or two people from Duck's to serve; how fancily they should be dressed considering the expected quality of the guests or lack thereof; and so on.

After we had done our business, I stood up to leave. Leonard said he'd come with me, since it was a nice sunny day, and have a drink at Duck's. I figured the sun had nothing to do with it: he wanted to scout out what Two was up to, since that was normally why he resorted to drink in the middle of the day. But hell, that's business.

We were halfway to Duck's when I saw an oddly shaped shadow on the sidewalk, but quickly looked up and went on. Leonard saw it too, but he stopped, looked down.

He walked all around the shadow, peering at it with his connoisseur's eye. "That's interesting," he said.

"It's just a shadow, Leonard."

"But the shape – it's human."

I glanced around. There was no one near us.

"Don't know," I said. "Reminds me of roadkill."

He ignored that. "It's really odd!" he said.

"Lots of things are really odd, Leonard; doesn't mean you have to take an interest."

"No, wait." Leonard walked a circle around the shadow, careful not to let his own shadow fall on it, glancing up at the sun to get the proper angle.

"What are you doing?" I asked impatiently. He didn't answer.

Leonard carefully spread his arms, angled his wrists, moved his legs and head until his own shadow was a pretty close imitation of the one on the sidewalk. He held the pose, moved his eyes to study the gesture his own limbs were making. "What does this look like?" he asked, trying not to move his mouth.

"A statue? A manikin at the mall?"

"No, no, I didn't mean that. What does this

gesture mean?"

"OK," I said, "looks to me like you're fending off something." I grinned. "Maybe the Holiday Inn over there. Now are you done with this?" I asked, although not too impatiently for, after all, he was a major customer.

"Apprehension," he said, "and chance. That's what the shadow is showing us."

And, sure enough, Leonard's right hand palm up, tilted face, and slightly bent knees did look something like apprehension. Now that he'd mentioned it, anyway, I guess. He shifted around, moved his own shadow. It took him a few seconds to set his limbs until his own shadow was overlaying the shadow point for point.

A few people on the other side of the street were staring at us. A boy pointed at Leonard and laughed. Someone said, "He's a mime!"

Leonard came out of his reverie, lowered his arms, reddened. "OK," he said, "let's go." He took one step and jumped like he'd touched a live wire.

"What?" I asked.

"I felt something - odd. A kind of - click. - Never mind." He moved away. The shadow wasn't there any more, just his own. We both remarked on that, but continued on toward Duck's. Leonard walked slowly, like a soldier trudging through sand. Just about the time we got to the tavern door, he stopped.

"I feel - something's dragging at me."

"Seen a doctor lately?"

"No - it - it's the shadow."

"The one on the sidewalk? The one that isn't there any more?"

"Yes. I think - it's - with me now."

"That's your own shadow, Leonard."

"No - I think - never mind."

With these words he walked into the tavern, glanced sideways with slitted eyes to see if anyone from Two was present, sat down at a table on the One side. I moved behind the bar, nodded to Jimmy who was serving at this quiet hour, asked Leonard what he'd like to drink. He didn't even hear me.

After a while, Leonard left. It was getting toward noon, and people were coming in from offices and shops for the sandwich-and-suds special. Jimmy and I served. I made a few mistakes on the orders because I was preoccupied trying to

figure out just what that shadow was – perhaps some kind of performance art or laser projection – and why it had disappeared. But about half past twelve there was enough trade that I forced myself to concentrate on beer.

By two o'clock I'd forgotten the whole thing, and it stayed forgotten for a week. I saw Leonard occasionally during that time. He told me he'd heard that that Two was planning a big exhibition of young German painters, and that Jack had, supposedly, told his staff, "That'll be the end of Gallery One!" Leonard looked distracted as he told me this, as if it were just casual news rather than a major doom event for him. And during the week he never mentioned the shadow. Not once.

The next Tuesday, however, Leonard walked into Duck's just before happy hour, motioned me to come outside, looked around conspiratorially.

"I'm having an opening on the thirtieth," he said. "A big one. My biggest ever. An installation. Same time as those Germans at Two. Show 'em who I am. I'll need a big order of wine. Good stuff this time, not that Croatian moose-pee."

"Haven't seen any announcements."

"Tomorrow, in the papers. Big ads. Getting interviews, too."

"Who's the artist?"

"Me."

"What?"

"Well, not really me. Shadow, you know." The way he said "Shadow," I could hear the capital 'S.' I figured the gallery competition had gotten to him, and he was well over the edge.

"Come on in, Leonard, have a drink," I said.

"On the house. Single malt."

"No time for that. Can you have enough really good wine for two hundred people by the thirtieth? And enough servers?"

I considered. "Sure."

"Dressed up, you know. No T-shirts and jeans this time."

"OK, but the wine will cost you –."

"Whatever," he interrupted. "I'll be rich and famous after this."

I insisted on a deposit large enough to cover my cost, because I was sure he'd have a fiasco and that would be the end of Leonard, and One, and their joint and several bank accounts.

The thirtieth approached too fast for my comfort, because Jack had also asked me to cater his opening at Two, which was going to be equally large and elaborate. I rounded up all my acquaintances who enjoyed gallery openings, which turned out to be no one. Expanding my search to "those who liked free wine" roped in several. But in the end, I had to pay out of pocket to corral the last few servers I needed.

Came the afternoon of the great day. Jimmy and I took wine, glasses, and napkins to both galleries. Two was resplendent with freshly painted ceilings and newly shined fixtures. On the walls hung the proudest works of Stümper, Beschmutzer, und Kleckser, the Germans. The young men themselves, whom Jack had imported for the occasion, stood around nervously touching their straw-colored hair. It looked like Jack might have a smashing event, hopefully not including my wine glasses; he had insisted on real glass.

Gallery One, however, was another story. As I walked in, I saw that nothing had been done to disturb the dust or brighten the walls. A few light bulbs were out. The abstract pastels of Gladys Oglethrop, none of which had sold, hung forlornly.

Leonard gestured me toward the back of the gallery, and now I saw what he'd been up to: Leonard had cleared out his entire stockroom / kitchen / office and transformed it into an installation space. It was painted light grey top to bottom, except for a section of floor in brilliant white behind a crimson velvet rope. New lighting had been installed. But if this was an installation space, where was the installation?

Leonard inspected the wine, but didn't enlighten me. "Come by later," he said. "You'll see." I told him I had to be at Two early in the evening (he didn't look pleased at that) but would show up at One about nine o'clock to give my servers a hand.

At six-thirty, I and three members of my pickup-labor force were at Gallery Two finishing the setup. Per Jack's instructions, we hadn't allowed the Germans to begin drinking before anyone else, although they badly wanted to. At seven, when the first few guests walked in the door, everything was ready and the bar was open. The Germans hurried over and had several glasses of wine, spilling a few in their nervousness. By eight o'clock, the Germans were volubly explaining the deep soulful significance of their oils while listing slightly left or right, or supporting themselves with surreptitious hands to the wall behind them.

Jimmy showed up at eight forty-five, as promised, to relieve me. "How's it going at One?" I asked. "Big turnout?"

He gave me a strange look. "It's pretty good, but - well, you'll see."

Leaving him in charge of the wine service at Two, I hurried over to One. Opening the door, I saw no one but my serving crew. Carlos, the crew chief, nodded toward the back room. I entered the installation-space, and stopped cold.

There, on the floor behind the rope, was the Shadow, slowly forming gestures by turns controlled, graceful, awkward. Dozens of people stood in front of the rope, each imitating the Shadow's gestures, puzzling out what each could mean, understanding, with sudden gasps of breath, the secret each gesture held. I was immediately caught up in this, couldn't help myself. As I rather ineptly copied the Shadow's figures with my body, I felt, with a wave of emotion, that I understood, wordlessly, what each of the Shadow's forms conveyed. Joy, then daring; embarrassment; yearning; hatred; desperation; love. Resignation, forlornness.

All this time an uncanny silence had reigned; all of us held our breath. But then Shadow turned its head sideways and we saw its mouth move as if crying, shouting. As one, we cried out, shouted. Shadow's face down cast; as one, we wept. Its face upturned; as one, we grasped the feeling of a crude, terrible power. It became a dance of arousal, exhilaration, frenzy. At the climax, I felt the Shadow show me – a self I barely knew beneath my studied jokiness, my distance, my customary neutrality about so many things.

Just then, the Shadow slipped through the rope, eluded our reaching hands, crossed the outer room of the gallery, glided through the door, its shape forming gestures of running, leaping. It waved its arms for us to follow. The guests left, Leonard in the lead; but I, I held back, reverted to observance. Through the gallery's windows I saw the crazed dance began anew on the sidewalk, spilling into the street. I left, embarrassed, avoiding the others' gaze. From a distance I looked back, saw the Shadow elude the rest, slip off into a side street, making a disjointed, jolly dance the while.

Next morning, the Post's reviewer dismissed Leonard's opening in delicate and reserved terms as "lackluster" and "wearisome," but I had seen this man, mouth open, tears flowing, knees shaking, the night before. The reviewer who covered the Germans at Two was scathing, calling their work "daubs," "smears," and "fakes," perhaps because (as Jimmy related to me), Herr Beschmutzer had spilled wine on what the reviewer claimed was his only good suit, and then tried to wipe it off, spilling even more. Neither gallery lasted much longer after that, and Duck's suffered a major loss of patronage from which it never fully recovered.

Summer turned into an autumn quickly spent. Leaves hurried down into the gutters as if just getting it over with. The Shadow was still in the neighborhood, on a sidewalk not far away. It was a little fainter, less distinct than before, slowly fading into the concrete. No one paid attention to it but me. No one, perhaps, even saw the Shadow, then, but me.

I took to visiting it every few days, standing beside it, watching the human shapes it made. It seemed to be glad to see me. Then it was winter, and cold, and rainy, and I stopped coming.

Long after the year had turned, I remembered that once, just once, the Shadow had made what I thought might be 'regret': lowered arms, palms up, head bent forward and to one side. I began to think that its advent was not what it had intended, that the Shadow had come for me, had never meant for Leonard to find it. There had been some mistake. I had missed something – that I might have been. Should have been. Perhaps.

*O I am nothing & to nothing must return again
If thou withdraw thy breath, behold I am oblivion*

They wept to see their shadows

– Blake

