

## Family Silhouettes

In 1968, my father shot off his big toe. That was three years before I was born. While he was recovering he invented the silhouette dog. Not actually in substance, but in idea, for it wasn't until five years later that he got around to borrowing Mr. Frank's jigsaw, buying some flat black paint and a sheet of half-inch ply and cutting it out. My father was a great idealist and would have been a wonderful abstractionist, but as a realist? His first attempt at the silhouette dog was, by all practical standards, a failure. Mom said it looked a lot like an evil goat-child. Mr. Frank demanded his jigsaw back after he saw it and told my father to buy his own, that he wasn't going to be part of such nastiness. Uncle Jack thought it had potential, but when he suggested that my father cut the tail jutting from the rear end instead of from the belly, my father told him to go to hell. (Temperamental artists never accept criticism.) Finally mom took the maul to the silhouette dog. I was six when it all happened. I thought it was funnier than Bert and Ernie.

My father had to go to the welfare office, some problem with SSI, so when he was gone, mom took a long hard look at Shadow, which or whom (depending on how one views silhouette things) my father had propped in the front yard with a concrete block behind him to keep him sitting there night and day. She stared and stared at the silhouette dog, and he stared and stared back until he could hold his excitement no longer and began wagging his belly tail and panting. When he got so excited that he dribbled on mom's foot, she stopped staring and went to the garage to get the maul.

Although Shadow had sat in the back yard for four years, only falling twice, once in a wind storm and once when the neighbor kids hurled rocks at him, it only took mom one swing with the maul to slam him down. It took several more full chops to finish him off — maul all the way over her head till it touched the small of her back and then, bam, all the way back over her head, shoulders rotating and smashing the iron wedge into Shadow's skull, then legs, then trunk. Then the belly tail came off, and

mom still kept on hacking and chopping until Shadow looked like a concrete block because that was the only thing mom couldn't chop into mulch. But she did stand there and drive the maul again and again against the block. I don't know what she was thinking, but after several blows, the head of the maul slipped off the handle, bounced up off the block, twirled in the air, and struck my mom in the face.

I don't have to tell you that my father was pretty upset when he got home and found Shadow minced up like he was the main course of some fancy dinner. He was already in a bad mood; his SSI income was being reduced twelve percent based on his ability to work with his hands. I told him I saw the whole thing. That three giant men in all black and wearing hoods busted into the garage, took the maul and started after Shadow. I told him how Shadow tried to fight them off, but that once the third blow pounded him, he was done for. I told my father how mom tried to save Shadow from this horrible attack but that she too bit it. My father went into the garage after that and came out with a spade. He dug a big hole and after wrapping Shadow's remains in plastic and putting them in an old cardboard box, he buried the mutilated silhouette. Then, although the hole needed to be much bigger, he did the same thing with Mom. Then, after washing his hands, he got in his car and left.

I figured he was gone for good, that Uncle Jack and Aunt Alice would have to invite me in with them for a while, that I'd be the orphan kid at school and all that stuff. But my father was only gone a half hour, and when he returned he had a brand new Black and Decker jigsaw on the seat beside him and four sheets of half-inch ply strapped to the roof of his rusty Nova. He pulled a sheet off the car and carried it into the garage. I heard the jigsaw ripping into the ply, and, after an hour or so, my father erected in our yard, right over Shadow's grave, still wet with black paint, the first ever silhouette tombstone. He used the same concrete block that Shadow had leaned against for four years (I thought it was a nice touch). Then, he pulled off another sheet from the car, and he made a second silhouette tombstone and positioned it over

Mom's grave. He had to steal a concrete block from behind Mr. Frank's shed, but like he told me, "It ain't stealing when it's for something important."

With the other two sheets of ply, he spent the next four days working. I had to put myself to bed and climb the counter tops to get at any food, but I knew my father was too busy with important matters of the heart to have time for my childish concerns. And when I walked home from school on the fourth day after Mom had been hammered, I saw her standing in the yard, and I ran and hugged her. She said she loved me, and I told her I loved her too. Then I noticed, right beside her, was Shadow. His tail was wagging, and he licked my face. I can still feel that dog tongue running across my cheek. My father said he had to use some more of Mr. Frank's concrete blocks but that that was the way it goes. And so I had my mom and my dog back, and they both watched me grow and mature and do all the things that boys with two loving parents and a dog do. Of course every year my father had to touch up Mom's paint, and as time went on, Shadow started looking weather-beaten and old from all the snow that usually covered him completely in the winter, but I loved them both and we were happy.

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My father always said that nothing lasts forever, and it turned out that he was right, for, as the years passed, Shadow grew old. He never complained, but the winters became harder and harder for him to endure and his front legs developed termite-infestation.

Eventually, my father and I had a long talk about love and loss and decided to have Shadow put down. My father said we could get another dog, but I didn't want another. No dog could replace Shadow. So in the spring of 1986 we cremated Shadow in the burn barrel and bowed our heads in prayer as his smoky remains rose to the clouds.

It took us several months to get over the loss. Mom took it the hardest. She and Shadow had stood together for seven years. She was lonely now that she was out in the yard all by herself. She never did like to read. So I took to sleeping out beside her to keep her company. My father dealt with the loss differently. He decided he wanted to go into farming, and the next day he pulled the Nova into the driveway with twenty sheets of half-inch ply strapped to her roof. The car made a grunting sound as it carried all those unborn silhouettes. Mom and I laughed.

My father said he wanted to start out small and maybe expand if he found he had an aptitude for farming and livestock. It took him almost a month to set up the five silhouette cows, twenty-four silhouette chickens and three silhouette horses in the backyard. Mr. Frank didn't have enough concrete block so my father chipped some from the foundation of our house. "Sacrifices have to be made if you want to go into farming," he said.

The next day, while searching the yard for eggs, my father was kicked in the head by one of the horses. He died instantly. I buried him in what was now becoming the family plot and mauled the horse that did the kicking until she was nothing but silhouette fertilizer. (A farmer can't have that kind of animal around.) I made a silhouette tombstone for my father's grave, and Mom said a few words as I set it up.

That night Mom and I did some talking about how my father had carried us this far, had kept the family together by the work of his two hands. I told Mom that I knew it was up to me to continue what he had started, to keep the dream alive. Farming our land wasn't easy though. It didn't rain enough for the crops to grow and the animals, no matter what I offered them, refused to eat, lost weight and died. Mom was lonely and unhappy, and I couldn't make a silhouette of my father that looked right. (My father was the true artist in the family.)

I used nearly all our money on fifty sheets of half-inch ply and instead of one good silhouette of my father, I ended up with fifty scary-looking silhouette thugs who

kicked me out of the garage and turned it into their hideout. When I told them how my father invented silhouette things, one of them punched me in the nose. "I ain't no thing, see." Then they each picked up a tool and pointed at me. The one that punched my nose told me to get lost, that they didn't want no piss-poor artist's son hanging around and ruining their plans. I saw the writing on the wall then. The farm was in shambles, my father was dead, the garage was full of ruffraff, it was time for a change, time to start fresh somewhere else. Mom agreed, and I packed her in the Nova, opened the fence so the few remaining animals could get away, and left.

Mom and I have been on the road ever since. Someday we'd like to go back to the homestead and try the farming thing again, but we both know we'll have to wait until the thugs clear out.