



A Field,
A Shadow,
Indeed a Shadow

by Margaret Killjoy

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A Field, a Shadow, Indeed a Shadow Two teenagers discover what it means to wander the woods, the night, and to take action in all of the small ways that feel big to save their forest from destruction and to answer the call to adventure.

The thing about being the weird girls is everyone just kind of lets you get away with weird shit. Up to a point. Usually that point hovers somewhere around “felony.” Which meant that I was about to get us into trouble.

Someone had torn down our fort. Okay, they’d torn down the forest around it, too, and I suppose in a cosmic sense that was the bigger deal, but I hadn’t spent half my eighteen years laboriously building the fucking forest.

They’d clearcut the whole thing. Or at least several acres of it. I have no idea how big an acre is, really. I can’t picture it. They’d fucked up a lot of forest. Like a whole neighborhood’s worth of forest. All gone. Nothing left but dust and dirt and branches. And the ruins of our fort.

It hadn’t even been personal. They’d done it with bulldozers. No one had scaled the--admittedly precarious--flagpole and torn down our rainbow flag. No one had gone through the effort to graffiti some hate crime shit calling us queers. Hell, no one had even bothered to rob us. Nic had spent hours and

hours and broken not a small number of laws assembling the solar setup and no one had bothered to steal the panels she'd rightfully stolen in the first place. They were just smashed and scattered.

No one had come in like Goldilocks and eaten our porridge, either. Okay we hadn't had any porridge. But we'd had a pretty sizable stash of potato chips, those kettle-cooked ones. Every single bag of those things was "just right" but a bulldozer doesn't give a shit about that. They hadn't slept in our chairs or watched our TV or found Nic's stash of gay porn, or my stash of gay porn, or done anything that any reasonable intruder would have done.

They'd just fucking bulldozed it. All of it. Smoosh. Gone. Goodbye Fort Gaygay (which still needed a better name, if you asked me, but Nic thought it was funny and that girl never thought anything was funny so I let her have it).

Fort Gaygay would have gone to ruin soon regardless, of course. I was off to Evergreen in the Fall and Nic was... she wasn't sure what she was going to do. She'd gotten into every school she'd applied to and then turned them all down. She had a ticket to New Zealand and some money saved up and that was enough for her.

But that wasn't how the end of the Fort should have gone. It wasn't right.

"We gotta make them pay for this," I told Nic.

She tossed back her cloak, drew her sword, and held it aloft in the sun. "By this blade, hand-forged by an underpaid craftsman in India and purchased by me at the Oregon Renaissance Faire, I swear we will have our vengeance," she said.

She liked being dramatic.

"Yeah," I said, "we'll fuck them up." I liked being direct.

Neither of us much liked thinking about consequences. But who does?

Even still, can't trash a bunch of bulldozers in broad daylight. We slouched off in the trees, back from whence we'd come.

Nic's parents always let her out at night to see me, because they were afraid she'd wind up gay and figured it was good for her to hang out with girls. Which is to say, Nic is trans, but her parents don't know it yet, they still think she's their son. Nic definitely is very straight because oh my lord all she ever

talks about is boys she won't shut up, but I guess that's also kind of gay, even though she's a woman. I don't know. Sometimes she calls herself gay and sometimes she calls herself straight. I just know she only likes boys, which of course doesn't do me any good but I got over that a long time ago. And around her parents she calls herself a boy and at school she doesn't call herself anything she just scowls at everyone and they leave her alone. You think the trench coat kids are good at scaring the normie kids? Wait till you see the cloak kids. Just the one. Wait till you see Nic.

People take one look at her and assume she has vials of poison under her cloak (she doesn't) or a stash of bizarre homemade weapons in the woods near her house (she does). Mainly though, no one messes with her because even some of the popular kids kind of like her even though they're scared of her. It ain't the 90s anymore. Also she helps everyone with their homework.

Nic is so complicated!

Not me, I'm a simple girl, born a girl, likes other girls--not Nic, I swear I'm over that. I like chewing bubblegum and I like listening to bubblegum and I like Lisa Frank dolphins and shit, ironically but also unironically, and

I like vengeance. Like any girl. I call myself James, too, but only around Nic. Everyone else can call me Jamie. I don't think I'm trans, or even really butch or anything. I just like the name James. Who says a femme lesbian can't be a tomboy. Or something.

My moms have the opposite feeling about Nic than her parents have about me. See, thing is my moms are afraid I'll turn out straight, but I'm afraid that they're the kind of idiots who call themselves feminists who don't like trans girls. Which isn't fair of me to assume because they've never said anything about it. Maybe they'd be open-minded. Either way. Nic and I haven't told them yet that she's a girl.

They're grateful Nic kept me from failing 12th grade, and 11th grade, and 10th grade, and actually I did okay in 9th grade, but also Nic kept me from failing 8th grade. They just wish I wouldn't spend so much time with her, because they don't trust boys.

The important thing is that Nic is able to get permission to meet up with me, but sometimes I have to lie to get out of the house to see her. Especially

when my plan was to go see her and then commit an unknown number of felonies that are probably technically eco-terrorism.

So I told my parents I was off to astronomy club and I went out the door and then around the block, where Nic met me with her dad's beat-up Focus, and we were off to the forest. To what used to be the forest. The clearcut. We were off to the clearcut.

When we were younger, we walked there. Walking is for chumps. We had a car now. Sometimes.

"You have tools?" I asked.

She put her finger to her lips and handed me a purse. Shoplifting bag, lined with lots of foil between the fabric to keep alarm tags from going off. I opened it, her phone was in it. I put mine inside too.

"Faraday works for cell phones too," she said. "Can't have anyone listening in."

"You gonna line your cloak with tinfoil too?"

"I thought about it," she said, not catching the joke. "But I don't wear it when I go stealing anyway. Too conspicuous."

There was no version of Nic that wasn't conspicuous, with or without a cloak.

"You have tools?" I asked again, once the purse was closed and safely in the glove box.

"I have tools," she said.

She didn't elaborate.

All I had was a telescope and some breath mints, so I figured whatever she had was better than that.

"What do you think they're building?" Nic asked.

"Anytime anyone is pointlessly destructive, they're building a golf course," I said. Last year in Social Justice Club, we'd watched a film about the Oka crisis in Canada when Mohawks had stood down the Canadian army, defending their land against a fucking golf course. That image had stuck with me longer than Social Justice Club stuck around. A couple of seniors had tried to change our name to the Young Anarchists of America, or YAA!, but the school had vetoed that, and this kid named Beth threw a brick through the principle's office while he was inside of it and she got expelled and there went the club.

There was some kind of lesson in that story, about the nature of power and the efficacy of various methods of challenging it, but mostly my takeaway was “don’t get caught.”

Which was why we were going to fuck up this golf course at night. With masks on. Like smart girls.

“I bet it’s a housing development,” Nic said.

“Ooh, maybe a wild horse slaughterhouse.”

“You just want to burn down a wild horse slaughterhouse.”

“What teenaged girl obsessed with Lisa Frank and ponies doesn’t want to burn down a wild horse slaughterhouse?”

“Anyway they made horse meat illegal to sell in the US.”

“They still ship it to Canada.”

There was no music behind our bantering. We called it the Diamond Truce. When we were 14, we always fought over control of the YouTube and I played Marina and the Diamonds and Nic played King Diamond and we both hated each other’s taste and we finally decided if we were going to be friends we couldn’t listen to music together.

We parked on a logging road about a quarter mile away from the edge of the clearcut. Nic pulled out two pairs of thick woolen socks and we put them on over our shoes, to conceal our prints. And we put on ski masks. Which let me tell you always makes you feel important. Nic grabbed a duffle bag and threw it over her shoulder, grunting with the effort. I left my telescope on the passenger seat.

Crime always makes you feel like a badass. It's pretty cool. As long as you commit crimes that are okay. Like stealing from chain stores, or from your place of employment. My moms got married before it was legal so they should understand that law and ethics are completely separate topics but they weren't happy when I tried to explain that to them after I'd gotten caught with a couple hundred dollars in underwear when I was fifteen. Whatever.

Ski masks make you feel badass but they're also kind of annoying to breath through. I forgot about that. I hadn't had much cause to wear them in my life.

In the distance, I heard deer barking.

I love the sound of barking deer. I hope I'll never get used to it.

We cut through the woods, avoiding the road, each of us taking a slightly different path so we didn't leave a trail.

I hadn't liked the look of the clearcut during the day, but at night I liked it less.

During the day, it was this... field of sticks and stumps, punctuated with huge mounds of even more sticks and presumably some stumps. Like a giant's field of hay. Not pretty. But growing up in Oregon you get kind of used to them, you can see them just on the edge of the "beauty strips" they leave along the side of the road to try to cover up the damage.

At night, it was...

The gibbous moon was almost full (hey I really was in astronomy club, but mostly we talked about astrology and annoyed the faculty advisor) and cast pale light on everything. Deep moonshadows made the whole thing high contrast. Honestly kind of pretty, in a macabre dead-forest-everything-dead-let's-build-a-golf-course way.

The field of death and ruin, I'd expected that. There was something else, though.

Nic could sense it too. Her posture changed. She was upright, not crouched in on herself trying to make herself smaller. She was alert.

It was movement, and it wasn't movement. Corner of your eyes only. Some of that might have been the moonlight interrupted by the swaying trees. Some of it might have been nightbirds, or animals. Those deer I'd heard earlier. But some of it? Some of it wasn't.

Walking through that field felt like walking in a dream. The sticks beneath us made our footing treacherous. We weren't using flashlights, for obvious crime-related reasons. Fog sat on the treeline, but everything where we were was clear and pale almost shimmering, almost glittering.

"A moonshadowed field," Nic said, "never to cross you, never to know you, for everything you see is not as it should be and everything you see is as it is."

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's uh... goblin poetry from the *Elsegone Fields* trilogy. The heroes find it in a book right before they're ambushed by talking wolves."

"Cool," I said. "Cool cool cool. Glad I don't believe in that stuff."

Our ruined home--okay, our vacation home--sat at the far edge of the field, as did all the heavy equipment. When we made it to the middle of the field, I stopped for a moment to look at the sky.

“The stars are wrong,” I told Nic.

“What?” she asked. She looked up, but only for a moment.

“They’re all wrong. We should be able to see Ursa Major, at the very least. And the north star.”

“Well there’s Cygnus,” Nic said, pointing to a spot behind us.

“That’s not where...” I started. But she was right. There it was. The swan. The northern cross. Just... not. It was actually too bright, too clear, each star standing out like I was looking at a map that highlighted the constellation.

“It’s not right either,” I said.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Nic said. She didn’t like telling me I was wrong, and to be fair I didn’t blame her for that. I don’t always respond the best. Nic kept walking.

I didn't really know a ton about astronomy. I was mostly in the club because Anika was the president and I liked her smile. I must have gotten something wrong.

But... who can't find the Big Dipper?

Maybe it was behind the trees.

I didn't like having Cygnus looking down on me, I'll admit. If I'd brought my telescope I could confirm it really was the Swan by looking for the double star in Albireo at its beak. Even my dinky telescope could do that.

Of course it was the Swan.

Everything looks wrong by moonlight.

Besides, I had crimes to commit.

I hurried after Nic.

No time to be nervous. Not about the stars, not about consequences.

There were a handful of bulldozers and then some... I don't know what you call them. *Fern Gully*-style tree murder machines. And some other machines. They didn't look the same in the moonlight either, though to be fair

we hadn't gotten a close look during the day. They were massive. Some were on tank tread, which honestly felt right, like they were machines of war.

We walked past the largest machines and stopped by the bulldozer closer to the remains of Fort Gaygay.

"Alright," Nic said, dropping her tool bag with a heavy clunk. "Let's see what we can do to these things." She pulled out a length of clear hose, I guess to siphon gas.

"No fire," I said, looking over my shoulder, thinking I saw motion.

"Huh?"

"Whatever we do, no fire."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm scared," I said. I didn't say those words very often. "It's too much. What if we catch the whole field or the whole forest? And... I think they'll investigate harder for arson." And, what I didn't say, is that I was afraid someone would see. I was afraid someone was already watching us. Because it felt like someone was.

“Okay,” Nic said, hiding her disappointment well, “no fire.” She pulled out a large monkey wrench next, and a box of sugar.

“Sugar doesn’t work,” I said. “I read that somewhere. Dirt. Just dirt in the gas tank and the... oil tank. I don’t know. Add dirt to its insides, any way we can.”

“Sounds good,” Nic said, replacing the sugar. I saw into the bag just then. Another huge wrench. Bolt cutters. A hunting rifle. A medieval mace. Goddam Nic was weird. “M’lady, will you do the honors?”

I was going to complain about her calling me m’lady, but then she dropped to her knees and held out the wrench like offering her sovereign a sword, and I forgave her.

Somewhere at the treeline, close by, something moved. Something big. A deer, probably. A really big deer. That sort of looked human.

I was seeing things.

I took the wrench. It may or may not have been necessary to use the wrench to get the gas cap off the bulldozer, but it was a satisfying way to do it nonetheless. Air hissed as the cap came off.

Nic had a mound of dirt held in her cupped hands and was walking towards the tank when we heard a voice.

“Help me!”

It was a scream, a guttural cry. A child’s cry. Distant and thin. And echoey. Like through a tin can telephone. Like from inside the...

“Did that just come from the gas tank?” I think Nic said it. Maybe I said it

“Help me!”

I put my ear to the tank and heard it clearer.

“How the fuck,” I said.

“Who the fuck,” Nic said.

“What the fuck,” I said.

“Help me,” the gas tank said.

I looked at Nic and she dropped the dirt.

“How do we...” Nic started to ask.

The shadow came out from the treeline, then, and it wasn’t a deer. It got bigger, and it walked like a man but it was taller than a man, and its silhouette was broken and odd like light was coming through, like it was pierced

with pins of light, and Nic saw it too, and we met eyes and hers were as full of fear as mine, I'm pretty sure.

"We'll come back for you," I shouted into the gas tank. "I promise."

We ran.

Nic stumbled; I helped her up.

More figures, more giants of starlight, came lumbering from the dark. When they passed into moonlight they were invisible, then they'd step into shadows and reappear.

We ran and we ran and we didn't stop running until we were at the car and Nic drove like a madwoman, fueled with fear, blowing through yields and stop signs and red lights and didn't stop even when we almost T-boned a Subaru and she didn't stop until we were around the corner from my house, and then she stopped.

She started crying.

She never let me hold her, usually. I put my arm around her and she unbuckled her seatbelt and collapsed against me and I held her and she cried and cried.

It was good that she was crying, because otherwise I would have had to do it. She was crying for both of us.

“I failed,” she said, after awhile.

“What?”

“I had a rifle. I had a mace. I promised myself... I promised myself a long time ago that I’d be noble. That if the world called on me, that I’d answer. Whatever the cost. And I failed.”

“You ran from star giants,” I said. “That... doesn’t speak poorly of your character.”

“I failed,” she said again, but softer this time. “There’s a kid inside that machine. Right now.”

“We’ll get them out,” I said. “All of them. Being noble doesn’t mean being dumb. One rifle versus a dozen creatures that shouldn’t exist?”

“Cyngus watch over us,” she whispered. “This realm and another, Cyngus watch over us. The cross, the swan, she rules every summer sky.”

“Is that more goblin poetry?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “It’s something I saw carved into one of the old science desks at school last year. It’s why I know the constellation.”

“Well that’s fucking creepy,” I said.

“We saw star giants tonight,” she offered as a counterpoint. She wasn’t crying anymore, but she was still nestled with her head up against my collar. It felt right, having her there. Not that I had a crush on her or anything.

“Fair enough,” I said.

“You promised you’d get them out,” she said. “Did you mean it?”

“Shit,” I said, “I guess I did say that. I guess I have to mean it now.”

“Maybe it’s safe during the day. They seem like nocturnal things. Tomorrow’s Sunday. Maybe no workers either.”

“We try again in the morning? Different tools, probably. Hacksaw? How the hell do you cut open a gas tank with a kid inside? Can’t use an angle grinder.”

“I forgot the tools,” Nic said. “I forgot my dad’s rifle. He’s going to kill me when he finds out I took it.”

“We’ll go first thing in the morning,” I said. “Hacksaws. Chisels. Hammers. My mom’s got that stuff. We’ll figure it out.”

“Okay,” Nic said. She sat back upright, put her hands on the wheel, and took a deep breath. “Okay. It’s gonna be okay.” She was talking to herself as much as she was talking to me.

“I wish you could spend the night, to be honest,” I said. “I hope that comes across how I mean it.” I didn’t know how I meant it.

“Yeah,” she said. “Me too.”

“What a fucking night,” I said.

“What a fucking night.”

I got out of the car and took my telescope. I was around the corner and almost home before I heard her drive off.

I looked up, and the stars were in the right place. There was the big dipper. There was the north star. There was Cygnus.

I didn’t sleep well, which was reasonably predictable. A couple hours maybe. The best (not best) part was the sleep paralysis dream where a swan (okay more like a goose) sat on my chest and stared at me for a brief eternity.

I got up as soon as the first glint of daylight crept through the window. I didn't want to get up. I didn't want to start my day. I didn't want to get dressed, eat breakfast, and walk the couple miles out to the field. I didn't want to face down angry demons or even angry loggers. I didn't want to explain what the rifle in the bag was doing there next to the pipe wrench to anyone who might be there. I didn't want to hear that voice again. I didn't want to keep my promise.

So I just didn't let myself have a choice in the matter, and I got up, and I got dressed. I grabbed some pop tarts: two packs for me, two packs for Nic. I grabbed a bunch of my mom's tools and threw them into my backpack. I went out the door before my parents were even awake. I left a note on the whiteboard. "Off to the woods with Nic be back by dinner."

The "be back" part was really the only potential lie.

Arrested girls aren't home by dinner. Dead girls don't come back at all.

Nic was arguing with her mom about something when I walked up, and when she saw me she turned her back on the conversation and hurried over. "Bye mom!" she shouted, and we walked down to the cul-de-sac where the

trail started that cut along the creek and then the ravine and then the logging road and then Fort Gaygay or I guess a field that somehow both is and isn't in this world.

We tried small talk for a moment, but Nic and I we've always been more Big Subject kinds of talkers together. That morning neither of us was trying to broach any Big Subjects. We dropped the thread soon enough and walked in silence.

We got lucky, if anything could feel like luck just then, and either we beat the crew to work or no one was there. Who drove those things? Regular humans? Star giants?

We didn't dare walk across the barren field. The sun was out and hot and it was just too exposed. We circled around, instead, through the edge of the forest.

An edge forest is supposed to be dense with undergrowth and brambles and shit. It's like a skin, around the muscle of the woods. Walking the edge of a clearcut is gross and weird because it's like walking through the middle

of a forest instead and it shouldn't be. I couldn't wait for the whole thing to scab over.

There was no sign of celestial beings anywhere.

"We really did see those things, didn't we?" I asked when we were almost to the bulldozers. "The creatures."

"I don't know," Nic said. "You know me, I want to believe, like the poster my mom has in her office. But I keep running over it in my head, and joint hallucination, mutually reinforced, seems a lot more plausible than... than whatever that was."

"But the voice in the bulldozer," I said. "It was so clear."

"I didn't get as good of a listen," Nic said. "I believe you, though. Like... I believe you as much as I believe myself, or whatever."

"Guess we'll find out either way," I said, stepping out from the forest. The sun felt good on my face, like it always does before it starts feeling not so good. Everything good is like that.

"Guess we will." Nic didn't let the sun touch her face, not if she could help it. Since it was too hot out for a cloak, she had on a wide-brimmed black hat.

She thought it made her look like Lydia from Beetlejuice and who was I to tell her she was wrong.

In the daytime, the machines were just bulldozers. And Fern Gully forest murder machines. Just machines. That was obvious. The sun burns up magic like it burns skin, like it fades clothes, like it kills germs.

Nic grabbed the duffelbag and I went up to the gas tank, which was still open.

“Help me!”

I guess the sun didn’t get inside the gas tank to kill that magic.

“Heard it that time,” Nic said.

“You keep watch?” I asked. Nic always wanted to keep watch. She’s good at posing dramatically and you need that in someone keeping watch.

“I’ll keep watch.”

I put a chisel up against the plate steel of the gas tank and swung a hammer.

It takes a really, really long time to disassemble a bulldozer with a chisel.

The sun was high overhead and Nic was out of water and I hadn't bothered to bring any, and I was sweating like a madwoman, swinging that hammer like John Henry, and I was pretty sure like John Henry that: one, I was going to beat the machine; and two, it was going to be the death of me.

Nic took her turn too, but didn't have the endurance for it like I did, so I was the one with chisel and hammer in hand when the gas tank finally fell off, and I was the one with chisel and hammer in hand who finally got a hole in the damn thing.

As soon as I cracked the tank the tiniest bit, two hands broke out from inside like a lizard breaking out of its shell. Those hands ripped the tank open. Having spent the past six hours beating at that thing with a hammer, I had a pretty good idea how tough it was.

A kid climbed out.

Like, a middle-schooler.

Wearing a tanktop and shorts.

Like any kid in the neighborhood.

Covered in... I guessed motor oil by the smell. Not diesel or gas. Motor oil.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, looking at his feet. He was shy.

“What the fuck is happening?” I asked Nic.

“A kid just hatched out of the gas tank as a fully formed normie,” Nic answered.

“Just checking.”

“Hi,” I said, to the kid, who apparently wasn’t a figment of my imagination after all. “I’m James. This is Nic.”

The kid whirled around, taking in the scene. “Ohmgosh!” the kid yelled.

He ran over to the closest machine, a... I don’t know what the fuck to call it. Tractor? It had like a scoop on it and wheels. Well, it did at first. This kid ripped through the machine with his bare hands until he reached the gas tank. The tank hit the ground and another kid ripped it open from the inside.

They each went off to another machine, and you know that whole thing about grains of rice and chessboards, well not five minutes after I poked a hole in the first tank, every machine in the field was shredded. Twenty-seven children--I counted, twice--ran up to us, singing and smiling and happy and soaked in motor oil.

“Who... what...”

Before I could formulate my thoughts into a coherent sentence, the sun went out.

I looked up at it. Full eclipse. No corona.

The birds went silent, the bugs went silent, the world went silent. The stars came out.

“Thank you,” the first kid said, visibly worried, “but we’ve got to go. You should too.”

They looked thoughtful for a half a moment.

“You could come with, if you want,” they said to us.

“What?” I asked, struggling to find words. Frankly, I was pretty disassociated. It had taken me awhile but I was getting pretty good at figuring out when I was disassociated. “Where?”

“Into the forest, always the forest,” another kid sad, their voice low and sorrowful. “Into the forest to feed on berries, into the forest to fight the machines. Into the forest to flee the giants, into the forest to find the swan.”

“First we’ll replant here,” the first kid elaborated. “Close the way between these worlds. Keep you safe. All of you safe.”

A figure, a silhouette, a star giant, crept into the far edge of the field. It hadn’t seen us, not yet. It was walking slow and lazy, confused. Maybe drowsy.

“Just now we have to be gone,” a kid said. “You have to be gone.”

Now that the light was gone, the children looked different. Straight on, they looked like middle schoolers. From the corner of my eye, they looked like beetles. I mean... they were upright. But their skin was glossy and mottled and their faces went in and out between human features and insectoid. Most notable, though, antenna, like horns, sprouted from their heads. Like every devil I’d ever seen in mythology. Worse than any devil I’d ever seen. Like Black Phillip’s pet bugs.

“Gone, now,” the kid said. “Decide. Our home or yours.”

“My home,” I said.

“Yours,” Nic said. She reached out a hand, and a child took it, and they fled towards the woods.

They were gone.

The sun returned.

The giant disappeared.

Nic was gone.

The machines were mangled beyond repair, nearly beyond recognition.

We'd had our revenge.

Nic was gone.

“Where’s Nick?” my mom asked when I walked in the door. “I thought you were hanging out with him today.”

“She left for her trip early.”

“She?”

“She’s trans, mom.”

“Oh,” my mom said. She thought for a moment. “Well I hope she has a good trip. I hope she finds what she’s looking for.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Me too.”

I had no idea what I'd tell her parents. Or cops, if they ever came around. I'd figure that out later. First, though, I had a lot of reading to do. Astronomy. Local legend. Cyngus. Cyngus. That fucking swan. Maybe if I found it.

“Can I borrow your car tonight mom?” I asked.

“What for?”

“I want to go look at the stars.”

About the Author

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