

# INTO THE SHADOW

*by*

*Mark Walker*

***June 21st 2070, New Prague.***

It was a long time ago since he gave up his name, he felt as if he was of no worth to have a human name, he's but a Shadow now. One could object that things he's done are normal. That everyone is doing them and it's completely accepted by society. He doesn't care. He doesn't care about society, about what is considered normal and what is not. All he cares about is him, his own self-image which won't let him indulge anymore. That's why he fights.

He lies on a mattress in the corner of his humble cubicle, staring into the darkness. His quiet surrounding sets the perfect contrary to the battle unfolding inside his head. The battle of lust and compulsion. The battle between the primitive unconscious Monkey mind trying to connect to the Hub for the '*one last time*', and the remainder of his humane and conscious side that knows there's nothing good waiting on him here. This battle is not the first, and won't be the last. Only one thing is certain, both sides are evolving. From primitive screams and demands battling the childish attempts to ignore them, they came into mental clashes of reasoning and even bargaining sometimes. It's no longer simply about the physicalities of an urge. The need for stimulation, for dopamine, and the ability to not indulge so easily, to control oneself. Both sides realized there is a strong player they need to convince to join their cause at all costs. Shadow's ego, that's what makes the difference. Whether it listens to his consciousness and takes part with intelligence and wakeful decision, or falls for false—yet at times of an urge—very convincing arguments of the Monkey mind. The side which controls the ego wins. And today, it seems that Monkey mind had struck a fatal blow. A simple argument yet too logical for the ego to deny. *Just hop on for a while, look around at all the losers, addicted, hooked, out of control. Hop on but only for a minute, one quick peek at the world you left, so you can confirm how great your decision was, how better off you're now, how... different you're now.*

Shadow's consciousness knows well it won't be just a peek. Just a minute. It knows well that once he steps inside this digital world it

will catch him tight and won't let go until all his life essence dries out. But it's not enough for consciousness to know. It's his ego that has all the powers and right now, it wants only one thing. A confirmation that the things he does are right. That his decision was right and reasonable. That he's better than all those addicted chumps. That's he's not like them. That he's different. And yet, in the act of affirming that, he becomes but the opposite, once again, hooked on the Hub, like everyone else.

Moments before humiliation, seconds before a point of no return an outside stimulus stops the fight. It's the doorbell ringing. The Monkey mind gets distracted only for a second but that is all that consciousness needed, Shadow finally stands up—turns on the lights—and reality is once again all that's on his mind. In a second, urge is gone. Monkey mind retreated back into the depths to plan out a new attack. He gets to the doors and behind, a small humanoid drone named SB-022 appears.

An artificial voice starts talking—“Hello sir, I've got the groceries you've ordered for you.”

“Hi, and thank you.”

“It's my pleasure to help you, sir.”

“How are you doing anyway?”—asked the Shadow with despair in his voice.

“Sir, I'm sorry but as a serving drone developed for the purpose of parcel delivery I am unable to answer this question.”

“Of course you are.”

“Sir, before I leave, I have to point out the fact that I've pinged you multiple notifications about my arrival and you reacted to none of them. So I had to manually ring your doorbell. You should check that your Neuralink is working properly.”

“As always, It's working alright. I turned off all the notifications. Hearing that stupid pinging sound inside my head makes me want to blow my brains out.”

“Well, then I have nothing more to tell you, sir. Thank you for using our services and please, have a nice day.”

“Bye.”

Closing the door, reality hit him more than is healthy. The thing about defeating urges this way is that it’s not satisfying at all. He still feels like shit after them because he has lost, and only a stroke of luck saved him. And now, as he’s conscious he has nothing to cope with his sadness, he has to get through it. This quick conversation with SB-022 was his first interaction in a week. And the last one? It was also with SB-022, and the one before and before, and so on... A blue cloud formed over his head. Since the day he limited the Hub visits to only shopping—and occasional fights over his own sanity, and inevitable relapses—he didn’t speak to a single person. He tries to cope with the fact that the majority of people he spoke to on the Hub were artificial chatbots anyway and yet, isn’t it better to live in an illusion of human interaction than to lack it completely? “No”—he tells himself—“I can’t have these thoughts. That’s the Monkey mind again.”

Looking around his room, the claustrophobics nightmare. He can see the entirety of his possessions. A grey musty carpet, fridge, small wardrobe, electric stove, a shithole with water pipe over it, and a small mattress he lay on—everything fitted in a room without windows, not bigger than 7 square meters. He knows he has to get out. This place is reminding him too much of how big of a loser in life he truly is. Utilizing the little will he has left after fighting his urges, he steps out of the door into a hallway.

Getting out of the building he lives in is like going through a maze. Every hallway, every turn, every stair, everything is the same. Yellowish walls, gray carpet, and thousands of thin dark doors—each of them hiding behind a cubicle like his. And in each of those cubicles, something you may’ve once called a human being. Lying here, probably masturbating, eating, or in other ways escaping this cruel reality. None of them is battling, instead, they’re indulging completely. They’re in-

dulging in everything that Shadow fought but a minutes ago. The creature's laying in the dark, and its only world is the digital world. 6 months ago, he was one of those creatures. Then, he woke up, and now he has to live with the consequences of that.

It took him 5 minutes to get from his cubicle to the central elevator, the journey was quiet, as all the action around him was happening inside the Hub. The elevator is rarely used by anything else than the delivery drones—fortunately—they still didn't remove the controls for humans so he can use it. Once outside on a slim blank street, massive, 85 floors tall, gray buildings of the Northern District are dominating the surrounding. They completely cover the sun and most of the sky as well. Artificial lights are running all day and night here which only exaggerates the blankness of the world. Gray color, the smell of chlorine, and unnatural—even hospital-like cleanliness—is the sign of this district as well as others that are primarily occupied by UBIs (people living solely on Universal Basic Income). This place doesn't feel real, or at least less real than anything you can find inside the Hub.

It takes another 15 minutes to Shadow to walk toward the edge of the city, he still hasn't seen anything but gray tall walls, not even drones this time. The streets are all the same and very tight, not even two persons would fit abreast. Without a map or a deep knowledge of a place as Shadow has, you'd get lost here, forever. But after all, there's no real reason to make the streets wider, prettier, or easier to navigate in. We're in a UBIs District, after all, no one is using them anyway, or that's at least what They think. Despite the lack of outside stimulus, Shadow still manages to keep his mind concentrated enough to not connect to the Hub. The physicality of walking helps a lot, it's the thing that makes him stay in this world despite the fact he has a way to get inside the Hub within him, always. It's his Neuralink. The cruel thing about it is that you cannot turn it off. Never. You can limit its functionalities, disable notifications, and uninstall third-party apps, but you can never get completely rid of it. Since the day they put it inside your head. You're sentenced to either become its slave or be

at constant war with it. Nowadays you can't even buy food without going to the Hub. All the physical shops in the UBIs Districts were closed many years ago.

And because of that, shopping is usually the most dangerous part of Shadow's week. The moment he needs to step inside the Hub's lobby and get to order the food and beverages he needs to stay alive. If he's not careful enough, the Monkey mind grabs the wheel and jumps straight into the depths of the Hub. In a matter of thought his filthiest dreams and fantasies unfold in front of him, in a matter of thought he can talk to the prettiest girl he's ever seen, watch his favorite game, or cut people in half with his longsword on a medieval battlefield. It's too easy to get lost and never return back. The only way to avoid it is concentrated ignorance, a narrowed point of view, only seeing the goal in front of him, which is the groceries shop. Otherwise, all the shiny ads and pop-ups will get the better of him.

Arriving on a border of the Northern District and by that the border of the entire New Prague as well, the street gets at least a little wider. Between the concrete wall bounding the city and the buildings, is around 3 meters of asphalt road. But still, both the buildings and wall are too high to invite at least a glimpse of the natural light on Shadow's face. The good thing is that the goal of this journey is slowly coming to an end, it's a hole in the wall that can get him out of this concrete jungle. And on the other side? Real life awaits.

Getting closer to a hole, sudden distress paralyzes him at the place. He sees something so out of this world that he has to check if he, by chance, didn't actually connect to the Hub and started simulating all of this without realizing it, but he did not. There's really another human being trotting towards him. Getting closer, Shadow realizes it's a male of around 20 years, chubby, sweaty, and dirty with an ungroomed neckbeard and long curly hair. Exactly how he was 6 months ago. He imagines that is how most UBI men look. But he has to be different. There must be something more to him. He's outside of his cubicle. Finally, not even meters apart, the chubby guy realizes

he has company. He stops and looks at the Shadow, still breathing heavily, eyes wide open, pale. Nobody ever prepared Shadow for this moment. He wanted it to happen, but never thought it will. Shaddow's chubby companion seems quicker to grasp the reality of this situation, calms his breath, and with a rather excited voice starts talking.

"I didn't expect to meet another person. What a surprise."

How could somebody who is awake, in this cruel blank world sound so excited? He doesn't seem real. Shadow, still in quite a shock at the way he acts and simply for meeting him, isn't able to say a word, so the chubby guy continues, now with a more serious tone in his voice.

"There was a signal outage in my building, something must've messed with the receptors. It was scary, to be forced out of the Hub. I ran outside hoping to get a signal here, which I did, fortunately. But as I was running through the hallways I felt like I'm inside a horror game. Behind every door, I could hear the cries of fear and hopelessness. As we were unable to connect to the Hub, everyone started panicking, screaming, not knowing what to do. I'm worried some may have even taken their lives at that moment. It's weird that I was the only one who had an idea to get outside. Everyone else just... gave up. What brought you outside?"

Finally ready to speak, Shadow said so silently the second barely heard him—"Fear."

"Fear of what?"

"Losing control."

"Oh. So you had an outage in your building as well? I'm glad you made it out alive. Anyway my name's Carlo, it's exciting to meet another human in the real world. What's your name?"

"You can call me Shadow."

"Alright! Do you think I can touch you? Like... Shake your hand?"

"I would rather not."—Carlo seemed disgusting to Shadow because he reminded him of who he was. And yet, some inexplicable force

pulled him towards him. There was something so humane about meeting him, for real in person, but also, it was so unnatural and alien to him.

Carlo continued—“Ok, that’s fine I understand. What’s your ID on the Hub?”

“557-740-III”

In an instant, Carlo closed his eyes and surely jumped straight inside the hub—“Gotcha! Oh... we have no common interests, in fact, you have no interests at all. What happened?”—Carlo’s eyes opened wide and his face lost all its expression.

“Many things.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t worry. Nothing to be scared about.”

“Everyone I know has at least something listed on their profile, but you had nothing, not even a name. What have you done?”

“Left.”

“Left? What do you mean?”

“I don’t—besides shopping—use the Hub anymore, or at least try not to.”

“What?”—Cried Carlo.

“Yes, around 6 months ago, the same thing happened to me as happened to you. We had an outage at our building. The screams of other men and the fear of death woke me up from sleep. Unable to connect, I ran outside in a hallway, same as you, with the hope to get a signal once I get out of the building, but I never did. I never found the exit. I was lost. After a while I gave up searching, the yellow maze won over me. I lay on the floor, hopeless, listening to cries from everywhere around me, and at that moment I felt like dying. My Monkey mind was totally mad, demanding stimulation and escape from this cruel reality, any escape, if no other option, even the permanent escape, death. But it was impossible to satisfy those needs. All I could do was absorb all the pain and cruelty reality has to offer and get through it. And at that moment, through the



inescapable exposure to the real world, it happened. I woke up. I became conscious of what was happening. Where I am. Who I am. I became conscious for the first time in many many years. I felt something so much sweeter and more rewarding than anything you can find on the Hub, I felt the taste of freedom. As the signal was slowly returning to the building and all the UBIs started again falling into their unconsciousness I realized something amazing. I don't need to go back if I don't want to. This glimpse of control was all I needed to realize that until that moment I didn't really exist, it was just my body stimulating itself with dopamine 24/7, nothing more. At that moment, I realized I'm much more, I'm me. And so from that moment, I committed to avoiding the Hub as much as possible. No matter how cruel the reality at moments feels, it's still, at least a little, real. So from that moment, I gave up public gatherings, community games, questionnaires, movies, porn, casinos, AI girlfriends, you name it. I left—or at least I'm trying to.”

“So... you're an outlier?”—said Carlo as the excitement returned to his face.

“Yes, I guess I am.”

“Woah! That's so cool. I heard so many things about people like you. Do you have someplace in the real world where you all meet? Did you find a way how to get to the backend of the Hub? Infinite money glitch? Man, you have to tell me everything this is so exciting.”

Shadow chuckles—“You've heard too many fairytales. Don't you think if I had infinite money I would be living in a center with Chads? Fucking real girls? Eating real food? Do you really think I am some powerful entity that can control things that happen on the Hub? A real-world gathering place? No, in fact, you're the first person I met since the day I left.”

“What is it like to be an outlier then?”

“Lonely. Life as a UBI man is painful. You can afford nothing more than your little cubicle. When it comes to food, you either eat very sparingly or you eat something that can be barely called food. Just

some high-fat and addictive piece of matter. Everything around you screams that you're a failure, you know that there are Chads living in the real world, in big light and colorful houses, and that you will never be able to become one of them, and for some reason, you decide, that the only thing that makes you forget how shitty this existence is, the Hub, is your biggest enemy and you need to do everything that is in your power to fight your urges to dive into its depths."

"I don't think I understand. Why would you ever leave? If life is so painful without it?"

"I asked myself this question many times. Once you wake up you can't get back, even if you want to. Once you gain consciousness for the first time, you realize how fake everything inside the Hub is, and by that, you invite pain into your life. But the pain is real, it is the only real thing you have. The pain is truly yours. And so you decide to withstand it, it's the cost of existing, of being alive."

"But what are you doing all day? The world is so empty outside the Hub."

"That's what the FAANG's trying to convince you of. That life outside the Hub is not worth living. And indeed, getting outside of your cubicle in the District like ours, you may really feel that there's nothing that the real world can offer you, but let me tell you this. It's a lie. Do you really wonder what one can do as an outlier? Well, besides the constant mind battle against the urges to get on the Hub back again, there are a few things you can do. Let me show you one of them."—with a wave of his hand, he started moving toward Carlo and without stopping, passed him and headed towards the place that was his goal in the first place.

In a moment, they stood in front of a round hole in a wall of around a meter in diameter that is used as a safety device against floods.

Shadow turns on Carlo that is nervously stepping around—"Are you ready to see something that you've never seen? To feel something that you've never felt?"

“I am.”

“Okay, then let’s go.”

Shadow shrinks and starts crawling through the hole. The wall is around 4 meters thick and on the other end, you could see nothing but a white eye-shattering light. The contrast between the artificial lights of the city and the power of the sun is like opening eyes after a long dreamless sleep. Shadow climbs out of the hole and straightens up. Sun warming up his cold pale body. It takes him a few moments before he adapts to the intensity of the light but after a few seconds, a green field unfolds in front of his eyes.

Meanwhile, Carlo crawled to the end of the hole as well, but once putting his head out to the light, a terrible cry fills the surroundings as Carlo swiftly backed up into the hole.

Shadow bends down, and faces the hole to see Carlo—“It’s a little too much right? The light and warmth. It’s alright. It took me some time to get used to it as well. If you don’t feel comfortable getting any further just stay there, but listen. Out there, lies a real life, and as you could’ve seen—and felt—it is more intense than anything you can find on the Hub. The truth about stuff you find on the Hub is that they’re numbed-up versions of real things artificially mutated to release as much dopamine as possible to keep you hooked. But the real world has so much more to offer than the dopamine. But as long, as you spend your time on the Hub, you will be unable to live in the real world.”

“B-but how does one don’t use the Hub, I mean, practically? After all, the Hub is the part of me, actually, it is me.”

“Are you on the Hub right now?”

“Partly yes, partly no. As long as I talk to you I’m not, as long as I walk I’m not, but lying here, only listening to you, something calls me back.”

“So you can see as long as you’re actively interacting with the real world, you’re not in the Hub, because your mind cannot live in the two worlds at the same time. I can show you the real world, but it

will cost you the artificial one.”

“Isn’t there a compromise? Your offering seems quite tempting but I like what I’ve already built inside the Hub. Can’t I just keep the life I already have and from time to time hang out with you here?”

“No. Once you truly wake up, once you gain complete consciousness, you will never be able to go back, your life will never be the same. You will realize that nothing you’ve done until that moment was real. Your online friends will cease to exist, your life will be in ruins, and you will realize how much hatred you have toward the Hub and toward yourself and how hopeless everything feels. You will destroy your perception about spending time on the Hub, you will no longer be able to be there. The guilt and disgust will always push you out, to once again, feel what is real. But in exchange, you will get something so much better. So much sweeter. So much... real. You trade slavery for freedom. Addiction for nature. Artificial life for real life.”

“But what if I feel that the Hub is real? That the things I do inside there are real? Isn’t that all that matters in the end?”

“Alright then. Tell me your average day. Tell me six activities you usually do.”

“Yes, I spend some time with my girlfriend, Gloria. Then I play some Historic Warfare, and then I... I... I don’t actually remember.”

“Let me help you. You wank some, eat some unhealthy shit, watch movies, spend time at public gatherings, and most of the things you don’t even remember. You’re on autopilot and some outside force is living your life. Am I right?”

“Autopilot... That’s a good word to call it. But then again, what if I like it like that?”

“You only like it because you’ve never experienced anything else. Since the day you were born, you were raised to keep your life digital, you never felt how it is to be truly alive.”

“Then tell me, how it feels to be truly alive? Is this life better than the one you had on the Hub?”

“That’s a bad question to ask. My life sucks, most of it I spend in

constant depression and battle of desires. But still, it is incomparable to what I was before. How can I say my life is better now when before, I didn't even have a life in the first place? What you have to understand is, that as long as you're hooked on the Hub, you're not alive. You're just a body constantly looking for another dopamine hit. Nothing more."

"But is it worth it?"

This question shocked Shadow. He never thought of it this way. He had no choice but to wake up, he was forced by circumstances to gain become conscious, but Carlo can still get back, forget about all of this and live his life in a sweet unknowingness. Is it right to convince him to wake up?

"I don't know how to answer your question. As you could've seen and hear, most people cannot handle disconnecting from the Hub. Once an outage appears and they have to become conscious for even 5 minutes, they go mad. They lie on their mattresses—hopeless, defenseless. Screaming and crying for help. But you did not. You're different! You, for some reason, decided that you should take action. And then again, the little people who take action most simply kill themselves. But you had a goal and you acted proactively towards it, even when the goal was to connect to the Hub once again. This makes me feel that you might be able to survive the awakening. Maybe. But I don't know. It is more painful than anything you felt in your life. I like you and, quite frankly I desperately need a friend, but I don't think I can put you through it without being sure it is your own decision. Do you know what? I will give you a test. Meet me here, in front of the hole, tomorrow at the same time. If you will be able to survive for 24 hours without getting hooked on the Hub again I can be sure you're like me. Use this time to think. To think about how all the things on the Hub are fake, how are they using you for their own benefit, you have to become disgusted, you need to hate

the Hub, and the way it makes you feel, and be. Only hatred can get you through those 24 hours. If you won't feel any hate, any grudge. If all you will feel is the endless need to get back, then there will be nothing holding you in this world. And you will never see me again. But if you will get through it, you will wake up. Somewhere during those 24 hours, the epiphany happens. And we will meet here and your new life will start."

Carlo stayed silent for a while, staring blankly at the Shadow then told this—"I don't like the idea of hatred. I don't believe it is the only way to stay in the real world. I like you Shadow, and I believe I can be your friend. I will be thinking of you. You will be the reason to stay in this world."

A tear appeared on Shadow's face. He then said with a slight smile—"I really hope to meet you there, tomorrow."

"Tomorrow"—Said Carlo and started crawling back into the depths of the New Prague.

Shadow wiped his tear and stood still for a while. From this short interaction with another human being, he learned more than he learned from solitude in the last 6 months. Maybe there really is another way to stay out of a Hub than pure hatred.

He wondered if it was the right decision to not wake him up immediately, to leave it to him. And also, if it wasn't too selfish of him to try to convince him to wake up in the first place. Giving Carlo those 24 hours, and the freedom to wake up by himself, he risks everything. He may get hooked on the Hub again, never gaining another glimpse of consciousness. He risks losing the one thing he desperately needs. A friend. By letting him free, by not being strong enough to force Carlo into the real world, he may have lost him forever.