

IN MY SHADOW

Maja H. Kvendseth, for R.I.S.K. 2010

*I purchased my love for money,
else ne'er had I known its might;
no less did I sing to the gay harp-string,
right sweetly of love's delight.*

*A dream, though it soon be vanished,
is sweet when it answers our will;
and Eden to him who is banished
is beauteous Eden still.*

(Gustaf Fröding, 1860-1911)

"In My Shadow" is a GM-less story game about grief, anger, fate, and ugly truths. It is also a game about suicide. This game will, through five acts and forty scenes, render five different phases in the life (and death) of a person – our Main Character – and those whose lives were touched by this person.

The five acts consist of scenes. Elements in the scenes are decided using a regular deck of cards. The players play characters that are invented spontaneously and who further the story. There should be a certain amount of continuity in the story, so any important characters that have already been invented and played out, should be picked up again. This is upheld in the rules for playing.

It is important that the players accept each other's ideas and contributions into the story. If they do not, an argument may occur on what is true and false, and what is really happening with the story. Read the rules carefully, and this should be avoided. There should be no doubt as to what is going on at any time.

The game is meant to be pretty serious. The theme is quite severe and there should be room for strong scenes. Take in the feelings you experience by participating in the telling of this story – do not suppress or deny your emotions. If it becomes too extreme for you, you can ask for a break. Do not be snide or sarcastic! Respect each other, each other's contributions, and the story you create together.

Caveat: The game may not be suitable for actual suicidal people. Consider yourself warned.

The crime of suicide lies rather in its disregard for the feelings of those whom we leave behind.

(E. M. Forster, 1879-1970)

In order to play "In My Shadow" you will need:

A regular deck of cards, including one Joker or a blank card (if there are more than one, remove all *but* one).

Pen and paper.

A "director's chip" that will be passed around the table.

Three to six players (four should be ideal).

The time required.

(If you are a lot of players or want to play for a longer time, use two decks of cards and remove all Jokers or blank cards except one. If you are few players but want to play longer, just deal out more cards per person and increase the number of scenes per act.)

A man is but breath and shadow.

(Sophocles, 497-406 B.C.)

How to play:

The story of the game goes over five acts. Each act consists of several shorter scenes. Each act is also set in a specific time or relies on a specific theme.

Each act consists of up to eight rounds, called scenes (you can decide to play fewer scenes to an act if you like). In each scene the director's chip starts in one player's possession and each player plays a card face up on the table to help set the scene. The director looks at the cards and decides who plays which characters, he sets the scene, and the players play it out. The director may end the scene if it goes "dead". He then passes the director's chip to the player on his left. A new scene can then be established.

What has been rendered earlier in the story, from a third person's point of view, is *always* true. Things said or suggested by characters in the story is *the truth as these characters see it*. These opinions can be misjudged interpretations, influenced by emotions, biased, or just plain wrong. Even so, other players are advised to pay attention to such elements in the story and not blindly contradict them just because you feel like it. Play off of them instead. Utilise them.

Each player starts with a minimum of eight cards to her hand. If the cards cannot be divided evenly, count up a number that *can*, and discard the rest of the cards. See to that the Joker is

among the cards dealt to the players. The discarded cards should be cards you feel are less interesting to the game.

As long as the scene played is in act 2 to 5, the Main Character (MC) can “budge in” at any time and participate as a character in the scene even though his presence has not been established. The player who has the Joker in his hand controls the MC. The player does not have to play the card to play the MC in a scene, just show the card to the director and jump in if you feel it is appropriate and you can contribute to the scene by doing it. The card must still be played from your hand at one time or another during the act, just as any other card. When the card has been played from your hand, the opportunity to “budge in” vanishes with it. The player decides how early or late in the act he wants to play the card from his hand. Playing it late will yield more opportunities to “budge in”, while playing it early makes the MC absent or passive for the rest of the act. Each way yields quite different results.

The player with the director’s chip is called the director. She sets the scene and chooses which characters participate, who they are, and who plays them. The only thing she doesn’t decide is when and where the MC comes into play, and who plays them.

The director is responsible for ending the scene when it goes “dead” and none of its participants can add anything new to it.

The director’s chip is always passed to the left around the table. You decide as a group who starts play with it. (Disagreements? Rock/paper/scissors should do the trick. Or flip a coin.)

Scenes may well follow each other up and play off of each other. As long as they’re in the same act they can even be set in chronological order or be built directly on top of each other as parts of a bigger event over the same period of in-game time.

The suites decide what the cards are used for in scenes.

Hearts mean direct speech, initiating dialogue (conversations, discussions, debates, arguments) without an outside description. Emotions and actions should be acted or mimicked as far as feels natural – it is often not okay to hit someone even if your character is doing it. If you are having trouble acting it out, just resort to descriptions.

Spades mean an inner monologue, thoughts, musings, and/or feelings, all from the first person point of view. None of these should be expressed in-game as direct speech or as part of an in-game dialogue. They are silent musings.

Diamonds mean a rendering or description of a scene as seen from an outside viewpoint. These are stories, anecdotes, all told in the third person.

Clubs mean that a secret should be revealed. What that secret is, and how it is revealed, is up to the players. The secret should be unveiled using the other cards that are in play in this

particular scene – in dialogue if used with hearts, in an inner monologue if used with spades, and in a story or description if used with diamonds. If there is nothing but clubs on the table, look for picture cards among them – to indicate a person who can tell us the secrets. If there are no picture cards, the player with the Joker (or who had the Joker in his hand in this act) will tell us the secrets. Don't be afraid to make secrets as dirty and ugly as possible.

The number on the card decides how much it affects the scene. You can basically count an approximate number of lines, pieces of information, or sentences based on the number on the card in question. An ace would give lots of room for elaboration and/or a lot of extra time to talk, or the opportunity to say something very meaningful in very few words (how to interpret the short, meaningful message will be up to the players).

Picture cards have their own function. When you play one from your hand, you include one of the MC's nearest and dearest; a friend, family member, lover, boy-/girlfriend, co-worker, neighbour, or similar.

The first time a picture card is played like this, its character is established, and should be tied to the same card for the rest of the game. Note down on a piece of paper which characters are tied to which cards. Also note down details about the characters that come into play, so the information can be used later. If a character's card comes into play after the character is supposed to be dead, you can play a flashback from a time when the character was still alive.

Characters that are not tied to picture cards are considered less important and can be used, re-used, or discarded as need warrants.

The player who has the Joker card in her hand in any given act, is in control of the MC for that act's duration. She can now "barge in" and play the MC whenever she feels like it so long as the card remains in her hand. The exception to this rule is in the first act, when the MC is not played. The player with the Joker must still accept the truths that have already been stated about the MC.

When a card is played from your hand and used in a scene, it is spent and should be discarded. When all players have played all their cards, the act is over. The cards are gathered, shuffled, and dealt anew. A new act is declared. The person who had the director's chip in the scene of the last act, passes it to the left – this player is now in charge of the new act's opening scene.

How to deal with acts:

Preparation: The players count up the amount of cards they want to use – they should be evenly divided on the number of players, and the excess cards should be discarded. See to that the Joker is included in the cards that are dealt. Shuffle the cards and deal them.

Each player looks over his cards. If a player wants to trade cards, he asks for it. The group decides how many cards to trade (each player must trade the same number of cards). Each player puts down the cards he wants to trade face down on the table and slides them to the player on his left, taking cards that are passed to him from the player on his right. Trading cards like this is only permitted once per act, and only in the beginning, after the cards are dealt but before the scenes are played. All players must agree to trade cards – the majority decides.

First act: The suicide has just been discovered. The actual act of killing herself could have happened some time ago, but the discovery is recent. All kinds of characters can be played in this act except the MC. The player with the Joker can opt to read aloud some sort of suicide note if she likes. The setting – that is, the premise of the story – is established. **Suggested scenes:** The body is discovered, the family is informed, descriptions or stories from police officers or paramedics, the neighbours' experiences, diary entries, suicide notes, or the primary investigation.

Second act: Earlier in life. Scenes should be distributed across a lengthy period of time. Try to set it in a time frame, for instance two years ago, five years ago, or ten years ago. This is subject to the MC's age, of course. Remember that there is another act that deals solely with childhood, so childhood things do not belong here. All kinds of characters can participate in this act. **Suggested scenes:** The MC's first job, last job, best job, worst job, colleagues, hobbies, travelling, school days, college days, old friends, new friends, pressure from parents/siblings, a party, a wedding, a funeral, first/last boy-/girlfriend, bullying, violence, or illness.

Third act: The turning point. A great change in the MC's life. The scenes should be distributed evenly over a short period of time. Try to set it in a time frame in the same way as in the Second act. All characters can be played in this act. **Suggested scenes:** A personal crisis, a job offer, getting fired, moving away, moving home, a change of scenery, nervous breakdown, marriage, divorce, abortion, children, alienating close friends, reconciling with enemies, death in the family, an accident, bullying, violence, illness, unfaithfulness, alcoholism, an unpleasant discovery, criminal activity, or something that has been going on for some time and now suddenly comes to a climax or just abruptly ends.

Fourth act: Childhood. All characters can participate in this act, except those who aren't born yet. **Suggested scenes:** The first day of school, the first bike ride, mummy/daddy, siblings, violence, bullying, learning disabilities, pets, grandparents, bedtime, scary stuff, illness, playtime, injury/accidents, hobbies, diary entries, identity, gender, teachers, friends, or birthday parties.

Fifth act: The breaking point. The MC makes the decision to kill himself during this act. Something should happen to force this decision, if it has not happened previously in the

game. Suggested scenes: A terrible letter, a terminal illness, having done something unforgiveable, saying goodbye, violence, bad memories, sleeplessness, bullying, trauma, psychosis, a pact, taking a secret to the grave, avoid punishment or... was it *really* a suicide?

Flowers will grow from my rotting corpse, and I am in them, and that is eternity.

(Edvard Munch, 1863-1944)

An example of a scene:

Cards played: Three of diamonds, eight of clubs, Knave of hearts, and ace of spades.

The director decides that the scene should consist of a dialogue (hearts) between the MC's brother (Knave) and a therapist. After the characters part ways, each will make some significant (ace) inner musings (spades) about the situation.

The director chooses the player who played the Knave to play the brother, and another player to play the therapist. He then points out that the scene should incorporate a secret (clubs) that may have affected the MC significantly (eight). Thereafter the director gives a descriptive sentence about both characters and the room they are in (three pieces of information, for a three of diamonds).

The scene is played:

The director describes the brother as a man in his late twenties. The therapist is a middle-aged woman. They are in her office, which is tastefully and relaxingly decorated, with two soft armchairs. The MC's brother is in therapy because he feels guilty about his little brother killing himself, and somehow blames himself for looking down his nose at his brother while he was still alive. The therapist asks a few questions and keeps the brother talking. For the secret, the brother also mentions to the therapist how he stole money from his parents and made them suspect his little brother instead of him, something that could well have led to the alienation between the MC and the parents before he died. When the therapy session is over, both characters make some inner reflections on the situation: The brother talks about his own guilt, while the therapist talks about the irony of small things having greater effect than we first perceive them to.

The director ends the scene there, as it is about to "die down".

The director's chip is passed to the player on the left.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

Suites:

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