

# THE SIDELINED SHADOW

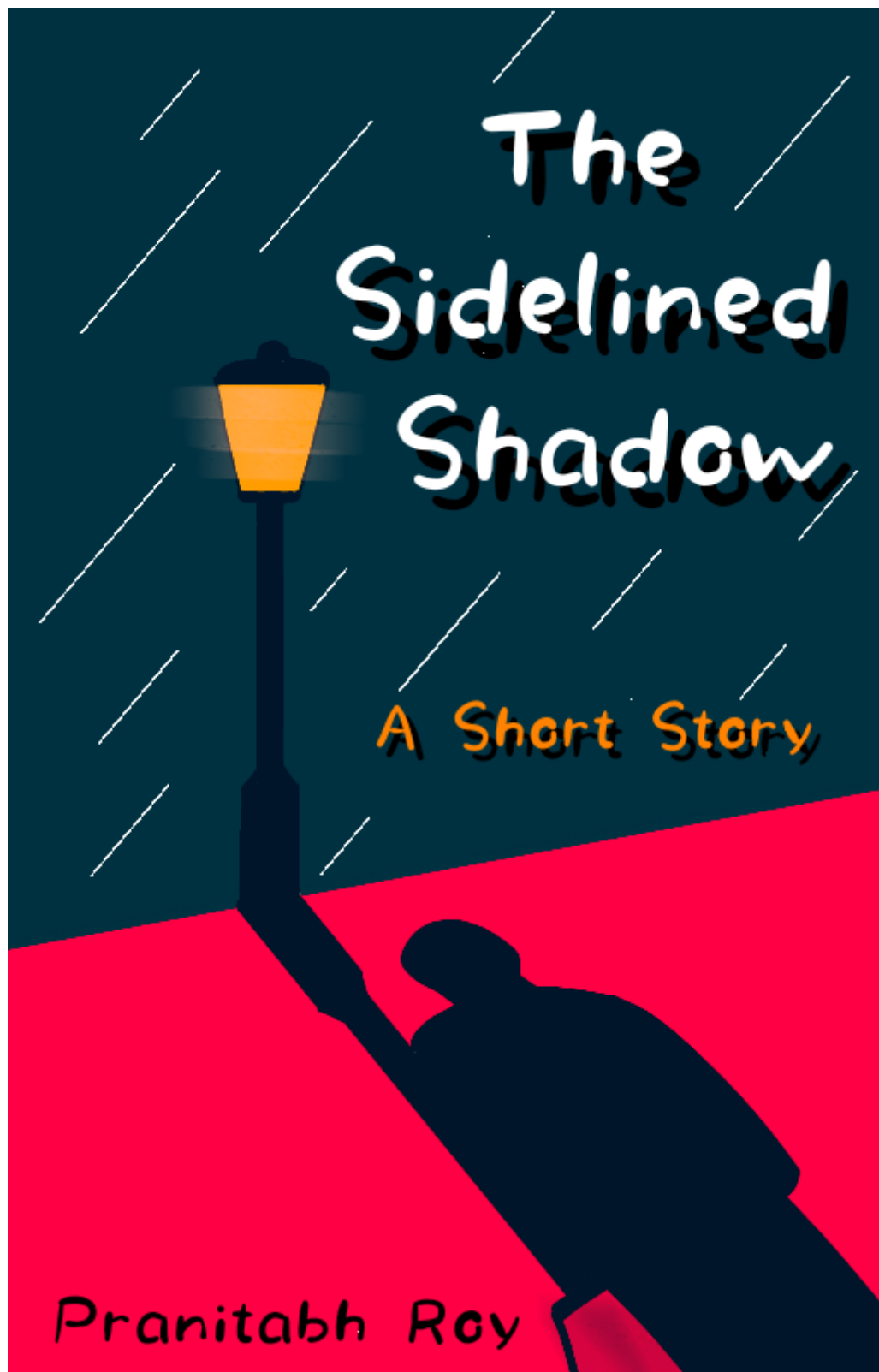
Tales of Hoot

A Short Story by Pranitabh Roy



*The Buried Compass Series #3*

## Book Cover



# About

Rain blurs the city. Shadows slip along the pavement.

On days like this, nothing walks alongside you quite the way it should.

By keeping things in the dark, you chase the ordinary, you stumble into questions you never meant to ask—about what lingers in the lamplight, what's missing when you look back, and why every answer feels just a little out of reach.

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# 001 – Drift Before Dark

If you're lucky, thunder only means "close the tab and go home," "go to class," "go anywhere but here." For unlucky people, it means sprinting through June rain, smelling like failed laundry and regret—not a library or a cozy window.

The new shoes squeaked like rubber ducks at every puddle, while somewhere a window and a cup of tea were probably having the best day ever.

Summer storms have the subtlety of a pop-up ad: loud, unapologetic, and always arriving in the middle of something important. My phone's notification started buzzing—definitely not a pizza coupon. I ignored it, I already knew it was a message I was planning not to answer, because answering feels like doing homework someone already knew I'd avoid. I reached the nearest bus stop, praying for someone else to be there so I could pretend to have company.

Nope.

I'm officially "That Guy Standing Alone in the Rain."

Rain always comes with a bit of noise. Funny how sometimes it makes you wonder if there's something important hiding under all that static.

I thumbed my phone.

Lockscreen notification:

"You will never respond will you? Well, goodbye."

Swipe, gone. Guilt, still here.

"They all leave at some point," I muttered, as if saying it out loud will make it less true. It never does. I watched the rain and waited for it to let up like everyone who has ever blamed weather for their mood. I'm pretty sure someone has blamed bad weather for their career choices.

When the rain finally slowed, I headed home, mind wandering in tune to the sound of my own shoes. The street was oddly quiet.

Thinking about the text, I told myself people would understand—if anyone actually cared enough to ask. Nobody ever does, so I focused on the overlapping streetlights: yellow on yellow, like someone spilled a highlighter set and then each lamp casting two, three, or four awkward shadows in all directions, like a Photoshop mistake nobody bothered to undo.

That's when it happened:

I tripped.

A classic, embarrassing, no-grace stumble. My foot went up, my dignity went down, and when I looked for the culprit—nothing. No suspicious tin can. No sneaky bump. No garbage. Nothing. Just my own shadow. Multiple shadows.

I hurried home, dismissed it as luck, or fate, or physics being in a bad mood. That night, in bed, I fell asleep to the feeling that something—not someone—was following.

There was thunder again. That's my cue to sleep. I listened to the rain and wondered if shadows get wet. I bet they do, but never complain.

The next morning, dragging myself to university, I watched my feet just to be sure. You know, the usual "catch yourself before you trip again" strategy.

That's when I saw it—my shadow.

Not beside me, not exactly under me, but a little behind. Keeping its distance like a friend who's mad but won't text first.

A shadow, lagging.

Only by a second.

I almost smiled. Clearly, I needed more sleep. Maybe tomorrow it'll keep up.

Maybe.

## 002 – Glitch in the Twilight

Blaming sleep for everything is practically a university tradition.

Not enough sleep? Blame yesterday's assignment binge.

Too much sleep? Blame the blackout curtains and your own optimism.

"You look half-awake," my only friend mutters as I stumble into class, as if that's a diagnosis.

"I wasn't able to," I reply—which is code for "It's complicated" in student language. I don't mention anything about the message last night. Why broadcast a rerun nobody wants to see?

My friend is pretty much the only holdover from high school—survivor of every group chat, emergency group assignment, and cafeteria lunch disaster. The rest of the group drifted off to internships, study abroad, start-ups. But he stuck, and today he mentions the old squad's text: a meet-up, nostalgia buffet.

I shake my head, stick to my natural habitat—refusing group invitations. "Not my thing." Nostalgia is exhausting, like sorting through your own junk drawers hoping for something good.

He sighs, "You should at least try to talk it out."

My motto: "If I keep quiet, maybe problems will too."

University classes pass in a haze—half lecture, half nap.

Today's topic: microeconomics.

My participation level: micro.

The professor rambles, I drift, and my notebook fills with questionable doodles instead of notes.

Back home, I drop my bag on the table. I live in a solo apartment.

Parents "work out of state," a phrase that means more time alone and less time explaining why dinner is instant noodles for the third night in a row.

My life's soundtrack: kettle whistling, fridge humming, phone buzzing just occasionally enough to remind me other people exist. It feels like the white noise of the room is trying to communicate. Sometimes I wonder what it says.

At night, I wake suddenly—an uncooperative floorboard creaks somewhere below. It's the sound of someone walking. Someone who shouldn't be there.

I tiptoe, lights off, phone in hand like a makeshift flashlight.

Nothing in the living room.

Nothing in the kitchen.

Parents' room is empty, as always.

Back in my own room, exhausted, I drop onto the bed. The old comforter feels heavier than usual. I glance at the wall—instinct.

That's when it happens:

My shadow, beneath the lamp, doesn't sit when I do. It keeps moving, slow, like a bored background character.

Only after a moment does it catch up—matching my posture, as if imitating me with a lag.

I raise my left hand, testing. The shadow just stares back, unmoved. After a few more seconds, it suddenly obeys—an awkward, delayed update.

The lag is getting worse.

For once, even I can't blame sleep.



## 003 – Gone with the Night

If there's one good thing about university, it's that you can look out of place and people chalk it up to "creative genius" or "finals stress." Today, I had neither excuse—just the persistent feeling of being out of sync with myself. Like when everyone laughs at a joke and you're the only one who didn't get it, so you pretend to check your phone.

I walked toward the class, careful, slow—almost rehearsed—to keep my shadow from drawing attention. The lag was getting worse. I hated attention. The best part about being quiet is you don't have to explain weird things. I kept my eyes down. People who stare at the ground are either deep in thought or avoiding tripping into someone's YouTube video.

My friend spotted me and said, "You look out of place." I shrugged, staring at his shoes.

As we moved down the corridor, I asked my friend about the get-together, trying to sound casual.

"So, the old squad met up?"

"Yeah. It was good. You should come next time. It wouldn't kill you to talk to people."

I replied, "Maybe."

Translation: probably not.

He added, "You always shut down before anyone gets a chance."

It's true. Silence is easier to manage than explanations—like keeping unopened notifications just so you never have to reply.

By the time I got home, the sun had already clocked out. I went room to room, flipping on lights—not looking for anything, just hoping normal would find me. My shadow lagged behind every movement: pouring water, flipping through channels, even brushing my teeth. Always a moment late, like a person showing up to help after the hard work is done, but just before snacks arrive.

I sat at my desk, hand on the mouse, watching the glow on the wall. The shadow traced behind, then paused.

It felt like losing Wi-Fi in the middle of a group call—the connection still there, but the lag impossible to ignore. I tried to figure out the shadow thing. Googled “why do shadows lag,” got articles about physics, not existential dread.

I was tired. I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling, waiting for the comfort of familiar darkness. For a minute, I thought my shadow stretched along the wall—late, but present.

The next morning came, too bright. I glanced at my feet before standing. Desk chair, wall, bathroom mirror—the test patches. But this time... nothing.

No lagging shadow, not even a thin slice behind the door.

No shadow left to trace me.

## 004 – Stillness Near Dawn

Searching for a missing shadow is ridiculous, but I did it anyway—like looking for the last biscuit in a packet you were sure was empty, or for the pen you just dropped that somehow vanished into another dimension. I checked everywhere: beneath the desk, behind curtains, under my shoes, in case it decided to take the day off like I wanted to.

No dice. My own reflection looked normal (well, normal-ish), but the space beside me stayed blank. I didn't go to university; I couldn't imagine making small talk about a disappearing shadow. That's not on the syllabus, no matter how many electives you take.

I sat by the window, hoping the sunlight would coax it back. People romanticize sunrises, but today it felt more like an interrogation lamp—too bright, too honest, showing everything I didn't want to see. Every boring thing I'd put off. Every message I'd ignored.

My phone buzzed—a text from my friend asking where I was. I stared, let it dim, choosing not to answer. Explanations are tricky, even when you have one.

By evening, I gave up pretending. I wandered around my neighborhood like a bored detective in a rerun, hoping to spot something strange: the edge of a shadow in the park, a trick of dust in the empty shop window. I circled the same places so many times I probably left more footprints than a thief in a poorly written detective story or perhaps a supernatural left shoe on Tuesday?

Anyway, It got dark. The rain returned with the punctual cruelty of bad timing. I ran, hoping the shadows would pool under the bus stop like they used to. Instead, someone else was there—my old friend, the one from the “goodbye” message. I hesitated; the rain played referee.

I ended up sheltering in the old bus stop.

We were both silent. You know that awkward silence where the only thing louder than the rain is the sentences neither of you want to start? That one.

It's hard to relax when every raindrop feels like it's counting your secrets.

Finally, he spoke. "Why do you always keep things to yourself? Can't we just talk like we used to?"

I stared at the rain. "I don't want to explain."

He barely paused. "You leave us behind. You put up a wall for no reason and act like nobody could ever possibly understand."

I stayed silent. Silence is safer. Silence never ghosts you.

"Yea that's the thing," he said, "it's always silence with you. You shut everyone out, push everyone behind, and then act surprised when nobody stays."

"I don't want to say anything to someone who doesn't get it."

"Really? What about your other friends—do they understand you? Or is this just your hobby?"

I said nothing. Saying anything would mean starting, and that's where things always go wrong.

He snapped back, voice sharp like biting into a lemon. "You think you're the only one with problems? Is that how it is?"

I clenched my fist, irritation mixing with embarrassment—a familiar combo.

And then—

Snap.

"YES! YOU ALL WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND!!!"

His reply was louder. "THEN MAKE US! STOP HIDING EVERYTHING IN THE DARK AND PILING IT UNTIL IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO CARRY!"

The rain still fell, but it must have changed tempo, because suddenly my heartbeat is the only thing I could hear.

The lamppost lit up as if saying, "Start". I kept my head down, letting the words land—everything I never said thudding harder than ever.

Off my chest.

## 005 – In Step with the Sun

My Sunday starts with my alarm being a jerk. It rings so loud the neighbors probably mark it as a weather event in their calendars. I fumble my way into the bathroom and brush my teeth half-asleep. My phone buzzes—my university friend doing his best impression of a school bell: “You better not be late sleeping like a sloth.”

Classic.

I check the time.

I’m late. Not my fault, obviously. My brain was processing last night like a badly organized word document.

The get-together’s today. My phone buzzes again—this time it’s the friend I got back yesterday.

“Still rushing around half dressed and multitasking? We reached already.”

I smile, but I’m in a rush.

I put on my shirt—right-side-out on the second try—then pull open my drawer for that old high school photo. The group shot is faded, full of grins that look like they belong to somebody else. I prop it on my desk, almost as if it might answer some of my questions if I stare at it long enough.

Yesterday’s fight at the bus stop echoes in my head—words about keeping things in the dark, about not trusting, about being the guy who ghosts everyone and calls it “being busy.”

I tie my shoelace, stand, and feel a tiny weight lift. Maybe it’s because nobody sent a “goodbye” text this morning. Maybe it’s just momentum.

I remember what my friend shouted yesterday—“Don’t keep things in the dark and burden yourself.”

He’s right, you know. You can’t just expect people to understand your silence. You’re not mysterious; you’re just a little lonely. There’s no prize for keeping secrets nobody asked for.

But what about the burden part? Maybe darkness is what you make your shadow carry. I didn't keep things in the dark. To be precise, I kept them in my shadow and made it haul the weight. No wonder it left that day.

I grab my bag, swipe the old photo, and head for the door. Sunlight's out, almost showing off.

And finally—I open the door, step into the light and look down. My shadow is there, sticking to me like spilled coffee on exam notes—exactly where it should be. No lag, no distance, just following me perfectly.

For the first time in days, I smile, and my shadow smiles back the only way it knows how: by simply being there.

Turns out you don't need to sideline your shadow; you just need to stop sidelining yourself.

\*The End\*

# Author's Afterword

So this makes three. Third corner of a shape that doesn't exist yet—but it might, if these short stories keep showing up at my desk like uninvited guests who somehow brought the right snacks.

The Sidelined Shadow is a small story about a small wrongness—when what should follow doesn't, and how that gap grows louder than people do.

People do this all the time, don't they? Keep things in the dark and expect the room to read our minds. We dim our thoughts, hold our words, and then feel strangely betrayed when no one understands the silence we carefully curated. The habit is almost comforting—like hiding behind the lamppost and blaming the rain for the view. The truth is simpler and harder: unspoken isn't the same as understood. Nothing learns to walk beside us unless we let it.

If this is the first book encountered in this growing collection, welcome aboard the slow-moving vehicle of magical realism fiction.

If it isn't, yes—there are little threads tugging back to the earlier pieces.

There are references made to earlier stories! Hope you got those.

None of it is required reading, of course; but if curiosity is itching, take it as medically advised prescription to read.

As for a moral—if a story has to wear one, let it be this: outlines change, and that's not a failure. Close the distance with words when silence isn't enough, and with patience when words won't do. Somewhere between the light and the rain, things remember how to keep pace.

I enjoyed writing this in the peak of the rainy season and side by side enjoying Murakami's work.

And yes, the next story has already been foreshadowed here. It's in the background, where it belongs, pretending not to be noticed. Good luck figuring it out!



# The Buried Compass Series

1. Tuesday's Left Shoe

2. So... What Are We Blaming Today?

**3. The Sidelined Shadow**

4. The Voice Amongst the Noise

5. TBD