WHAT IF EVERYBODY, WHAT IF NOBODY

a folk tale for two voices and two dancers

by Derek Kannemeyer

*In general, what I'm posting on this web site is either work that has already been published, or that I'm not expecting to try to publish*

*This play doesn't fall into either category. It's from an anthology of short plays called The Forest at the Gates of the Garden, which I do hope to publish—once it's finished. Most of the one acts are written, but there's one that's only half-written, another I'm still undecided about whether to use, and a bunch of transitional bits waiting to be jigsawed into place.*

*So why am I posting this? Because I conceived it as a collaborative piece, more a combination of dance and storytelling than any normal kind of theater; and I'm no dancer.*

*What I'm hoping is that a choreographer might stumble into the site and see it. Or someone who knows a choreographer. And that someone might ping me and say, "Let's collaborate."*

Characters

The Storyteller (F): she narrates, and she speaks almost all the dialogue lines except Eva's

Eva/The Listener (F): she plays Eva, participates in the telling, and assists with other dialogue

Dancer #1 (F): she dances the part of the principal twin (Eva/Everybody), and where

necessary of the Mother, and she plays a Goblin

Dancer #2 (F): she dances the second twin (Nora/Nobody), and where necessary the Mother, and she plays a Goblin

The Storyteller and Eva are also required to dance at times, most notably in the final scene. It is not essential that they be "proper" dancers, but a degree of expertise would be very helpful.

*The stage is divided into unequal halves. The narrower side is for the Storyteller and the Listener. The broader side is for the two dancers. At times, the whole stage may be lit, or be in full darkness, but more often it will be one side that is lit, while the other is dark. Ideally, the storyteller side of the stage will feature a minimal set of some kind. They are on a porch, in rocking chairs or on a settee or a swing, looking out at a garden, with the sun going down.*

**Prologue**

*The entire stage is in half-light, with the dancers on the ground, facing us. To some extent they mirror the posture of the voice actors. All remain half-lit throughout the prologue.*

THE STORYTELLER

A woman gave birth to twin daughters, as different from each other as night from day. The fair-haired child she named Eva; the dark sister, Nora.

*Choreography. The dancers suggest the birth, briefly,*

*but their task is to introduce the two twins to us. They*

*adopt a comfortably still pose as the narration resumes.*

Eva was a quiet, obedient child, who loved to play in their small, trim backyard with her pet tortoise and her schoolbooks. She knew how to count to ten million, how to say *Good morning!* in thirty languages, even how to plot a course by donkey to Timbuktu. Though, of course, she would never actually *travel* by donkey to Timbuktu. In fact, she kept almost everything she knew how to do to herself. The only person in the world who saw anything much at all of how skilled, and resourceful, and secretly almost *strange* she was was her best friend, her twin sister, the dark-haired Nora.

THE LISTENER/EVA *(to Nora, trying to wake her)*

Guten Morgen! Goedendag! Buenos dias! Bonjour!

*Et cetera. Some of her languages may be invented; she*

*continues for a good while. Choreography resumes as the*

*list begins, and ends early in the Storyteller's next speech.*

THE STORYTELLER

*Eva! I'm still soporifical!* her sister might say back, having crawled into bed at God knows what hour. Because Nora, although she was very smart, and annoyingly fond of big words, was neither quiet nor obedient. If her mother said, *Don't open the gate! Stay in the yard, please!* she would open the gate, and hopscotch across the threshold, giggling her little head off. If her mother said, *Don't talk to strange men,* she would lean over the fence and coo, *Hey you-hoo! Strange man! How come my mom doesn't want us confabulating?* If her mother said, *And especially don't rove off into the forest!*, Nora would ask herself, *Now what could make a bunch of trees so curiously precarious?* and she would wiggle out through a window in her hiking boots, to find out.

*Brief choreography. The dancers evoke some of this.*

Yet she never seemed to land in serious trouble. She would tootle home late in the evening, laughing and singing, and hand her sister some berries to taste, or a frog to peer at. And despite all her mother's threats and fretfulness, she just kept doing it! And then she'd brag about how "azure" the sky was, and how "dulcetly" the various birds sang, and what a "frisson" it gave her to watch new leaves frisking in the wind. And omg btw fyi, had she seen some *human* friskiness too! Not even to her sister, her twin, her best friend in the world, would she spill all *those* details.

*Brief choreography.*

Threats and fretfulness having failed, her mother tried persuasive reasoning. Not that the twins could follow its logic. What if *everybody* did as you do? What if *everybody* did no chores, and never listened to her mother, and spent her time doing what she shouldn't—*where* she shouldn't? Spying on consorting couples up to what *nobody* her age should even know about? What *then?*

*Brief choreography.*

The twins laughed, and came up with a new private name for each other. Eva was Everybody: "What if Everybody did as Nora did?" Nora was Nobody, who did what Nobody her age ever should. And God help us all if everybody *did*! Grown ups were so weird! (A brief laughter break.) But what, Eva had begun to wonder, would happen if *Eva* did? Not everyone; just her? Might it not be precariously *curious*, if she began to behave as Nobody but Nora did?

Well, maybe so! And maybe not! Since *that's* the story we're telling, let's find out!

*Transitional choreography. The light fades over the voice actors, so that we may focus our eye on the dancers. But*

*after a while their light dims, and the voice actors' light*

*rises, to put them in half-light, and the dancers in darkness.*

**Scene 1**

THE LISTENER/EVA

What if I behaved as Nobody but Nora does? What if I do no chores, and tootle off wherever I fancy, whenever I feel like it, to get up to whatever goings-on might be some fun to try?

THE STORYTELLER

It was late at night, and she was tossing and turning, in and out of sleep. She had believed she was alone in the room she shared with Nobody, who had hidey-holes all over the place, and rarely came to bed on time—and apparently Eva must have spoken her thoughts out loud—

*The Storyteller rises, and crosses to the dark side of the*

*stage. She sits with the dancers, in almost full darkness.*

*For the rest of the scene, we hear but don't clearly see her.*

because Nobody heard, and Nobody answered.

THE STORYTELLER/NORA *(continuing to speak from the darkness)*

Well, why not? If that's what you want to learn, sally forth into the woods with me.

THE LISTENER/EVA

Is that you, Nobody? I'm sorry, did I wake you? …Well, for one thing, I'd be too scared.

THE STORYTELLER/NORA  
Scared of the forest? Or trepidatious about what mom might say?

THE LISTENER/EVA *(considering)*  
Mmh. Not so much of the forest, to be honest. More scared of upsetting mother.

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

Then I'm not sure I can help you, sis. Unless…

*The Listener/Eva motions her to continue.*

What if we slip out at night? The world's even lovelier at night. If we follow the river, it's miles and miles before the trees grow sufficiently profuse to occlude the moonlight.

THE LISTENER/EVA  
At night? You sneak out of the *house* at *night*? You go into the *forest* at night?

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

You never perceived? Well, then! If all you're scared of is what mom might think, then that's when you should try the expedition. Mom will never even know.

THE LISTENER/EVA

But at night? And you swear it isn't dangerous?

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

Nah… Not unless you do something asinine, like pick a fight with a bear, or lose your shadow.

THE LISTENER/EVA  
Lose my shadow? How could I lose my shadow?

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

Well, you see, the Goblins steal it. It's dark, you see, your shadow's already a little peculiar in the moonlight, all attenuated and quivery. So you might not even notice at first. So you're flouncing along blithely by the riverbank, or through the less impenetrable woods, where the stars and the odd shaft of moonlight can still poke a hole through the leaves to coruscate at you, and then the moment both your feet quit the ground at the very same time—whoosh!—some vile Goblin, or mob of Goblins—they're creatures of the night, Goblins are, they only come out night, they need to hoard bits of the darkness to see by, during the day, the way we need light—shazam, will have snuck your shadow right out from under you. And eek, you and the dark of your shadow will be *theirs!*

THE LISTENER/EVA

*Theirs?* They eat you?

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

*Eat* you? Don't be silly! Well, at least, I don't *think* they eat you. No, they plug you in a wall socket to keep their rooms dark. Though you do also become like their slave, I think. They unplug you to do chores for them and the like, the way mom does. Except more Goblin-y.

THE LISTENER/EVA

Holy cannoli, Nora!

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

Oh, it's no problem if you're careful. Goblins never bathe, so you can always smell them coming. Then you just drag your feet along the ground until they go away. They're not very patient.

THE LISTENER/EVA

But what if something goes wrong? What if they *do* get me? Could you rescue me?

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

Well, the word is that for everyone else you'd cease to exist, wouldn't you? So no, probably not.

THE LISTENER/EVA

Cease to exist?

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

You'd be effaced from memory and from history. The world would rearrange its shape around the hole that was once you, and it would just subsume it. It would be like you've never been.

THE LISTENER/EVA

Let me think about this for a while, will you?

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

Sure! Go back to slumberville. Let me know when you're ready to hear about the bears.

**Scene 2**

*The light switches sides. The Storyteller speaks directly to us as the dancers move around her.*

THE STORYTELLER

That night, Eva dreamed she was following her sister Nora along a path by the river. The forest whispered all around them, creaked and chirruped like a single, vast animal, thrice a thousand times alive. The moon's face peered serenely through the crooks of branches. Stars shimmered in the sky, danced catchless on the surface of the water. Ten feet from the bank, the dark became total. Sometimes, Nobody skipped several paces ahead, or off to a side, until Everybody lost sight of her. Sometimes (although from outside her dream, dreaming it, she was sure this was just her own fear taunting her) Nobody would reappear from the void right behind her—

THE LISTENER *(from the dark side of the stage)*

Boo! I'm a Goblin!

THE STORYTELLER

And she would giggle, and she'd sprawl down in the grass to sniff a weed. Or she would run her fingers through the crinkly dirt, or lie and look up at the moon and stars, or she'd contemplate the whispery shiver of the highest leaves, up where the breeze was at its most intricate. Eva wished she could always tell when her sister was kidding her. About the Goblins, for example! But one thing was certain, Nora had been right about the forest at night —it wasn't just beautiful, it was magically beautiful—any kind of magical creature you could imagine might be possible here! At times, when the path curved away from the river and deeper into the trees, Eva could see barely further than she could reach—as if, if she stretched out her hand just a smidge more, there'd be nothing there. But then she tried it, and it was fine! The world she could touch traveled with her, as if she were floating on a raft, made of ten square feet of solid ground, through a tunnel of little sounds and scents. Usually, her sister was there at its edge, a bit blurry. Sometimes she was just beyond it, in the dark, but Eva could hear her, quietly singing.

THE LISTENER *(singing, from the dark side of the stage)*

I love Everybody, Everybody loves me.

We go for walks in the moonlight, in the whispery wildwood trees.

I sing little songs so she hears I'm there, even if she can't see.

I love Everybody, Everybody loves me.

THE STORYTELLER

The river glittered. A squirrel's skitter somewhere shook an overhang of branches, so that a sprig of berries popped free, to tumble among the rushes. Another squirrel scuffled through the weeds. Or had that been a Goblin? She chuckled to herself. She looked up. How funny—if she stopped moving—the moon stopped moving too!—hovering over her like a balloon. When she started back walking—it stepped easily before her, slipping through the crooks of tree limbs. So funny! When she woke, she told herself, she would let her sister know that she was ready to risk it, and the Goblins and bears could go to heck! (Oh dear, was "heck" a cuss word?) *Nobody,* she would say, *show your sister Everybody this forest of yours. Tonight, Eva? Heck, yes, tonight! Let me get some sleep, and we'll discuss it in the morning…* But in the morning, she found her sister's bed empty—as if it had never been slept in. And when she asked her mother why, her mother said:

THE LISTENER *(from the dark side of the stage)*

What sister, child?

THE STORYTELLER

My sister Nobody!

THE LISTENER *(from the dark side of the stage)*

Her name is Nobody? How strange you are today! *What* *sister*? And *nobody's* name is Nobody!

THE STORYTELLER

Mommy, you're scaring me. Where's Nora gone? Where is my sister?

THE LISTENER *(from the dark side of the stage)*

Child, what are you talking about? How many times must I say it? Any sister you have, or have ever had, is entirely imaginary! Dear me, what if *Everyone* went around making up such stories!

THE STORYTELLER

At which Eva went very quiet.

THE LISTENER *(from the dark side of the stage)*

What would Nobody do now?

THE STORYTELLER *(crossing back into the darkness)*

And she slunk back into her room. To think.

**Scene Three**

*The voice actors' side stays dark. The light comes up fully on the dancers; but after this initial brightening, the lighting may be whatever the choreographers wish. This scene is conceived as being all choreography, and for the first time, the dancers move to music. Loosely, it should evoke a retelling of the story so far: Eva is going back over everything in her head. But there should also be freedom to interpret, and to respond emotionally, and to showcase skills.*

**Scene Four**

*The lights go dark, and come up again across the whole stage. The dancers, for the moment, are gone. So, for the moment, is The Storyteller. The Listener stands alone center stage.*

EVA

That night, I waited until my mother was asleep, and I slipped away into the forest. Oh, I'm not as reckless as my sister; I brought a flashlight, and an apple, and a little paring knife, to peel it. Well, maybe also to stab Goblins. The path led quickly to the river, just as I had dreamed it, but it wasn't long before I came to a fork, where a fainter trail curved away into the dark heart of the forest. This is the path, I decided, that my sister Nobody would have taken.

*The stage dims about her flashlight.* *She takes a few dance-like steps forwards.*

So I left the river and I followed it, deeper into darkness—carving through that darkness—less afraid than maybe I should have been—with the swish of my knife—and with the strong beam of my flashlight. Oh, I was scared, but I refused to pay much attention to it. I focused more on my anger. Whenever I heard a rustle in the bushes, I spun to confront it—

*We begin to sense some movement out beyond the*

*flashlight's reach. One dancer, then another, then both,*

*enter and exit dimly around her.*

Where is my sister, my sister Nobody? What have you done with her?

The rustling fell silent, or it grew larger, the kerswish of something scurrying away. I walked for hours. I was heading deeper and deeper into the forest, and yet the trees were becoming less dense, until once again I could look up and see the moon and the stars. It was so beautiful! Until I reached a kind of clearing. A kind of mossy glade, where the trees made a wide ring, but their crests all leaned into the open space like the walls of a tent, leaving a broad, perfectly round skylight in its roof. At its exact center shone the moon.

*As the lights rise a little, a secondary spot comes on to*

*reveal the Storyteller, back at her station, seated.*

THE STORYTELLER

The effect was so magical that Eva dimmed her flashlight, just to look. Oh, the sweep of those trees, up to the trees' tippy-tops, to that miraculous sky-lit window. The trees were of all kinds: firs, oaks, elms, silver birches, a redwood, a magnolia, a hemlock, an impossibly tall willow, even an enormous, still more incongruous apple tree. And the shadows they cast made patterns—there even seemed to be colors, like a subtly subdued stained glass. The air, though, was pungent with an odd smell, something like the fetor of dead leaves—but nastier—that rose up to the skylight, she saw as her eyes adjusted, in visible, gusty rings, as slow as smoke. When she looked back down, she found that she was standing in a ring of Goblins.

*Towards the end of this speech we have begun to hear soft,*

*rhythmic drumbeats. If it is possible to add extra actors*

*here, to help surround Eva, it would be helpful; but the two*

*dancers and the Storyteller, rising to join the circle, might*

*suffice. They remain motionless until their exit. It is the*

*Storyteller's voice which dominates, but the dancers speak*

*with her, echoing her in immediate, breathy whispers.*

EVA

So you are the Goblins.

*They laugh, a noise like the wind sighing through the trees.*

You laugh like the wind in the trees.

*They do it again.*

So. What have you done with my sister?

*They do it again.*

I ask it a second time. What have you done with my sister Nobody?

*They do it again.*

THE STORYTELLER *(with the two dancers)*

So you have a sister? Called *Nobody?*

EVA

Her name is Nora. Her pet name is Nobody. She is my sister. I ask a third time.

THE STORYTELLER *(with the two dancers)*

Well, this is a turn-up for the books. We've stolen her shadow. *Good* at stealing, we are. By rights, you shouldn't remember her. *Odd,* that. So we thought, let's have a talk with this one.

EVA  
So talk, then.

THE STORYTELLER *(with the two dancers)*

We see only one explanation, see. You two are the same girlie. Not two different folk at all.

EVA  
Sure, we're twins, if that's what you mean. So what? We're as different as night and day.

THE STORYTELLER *(with the two dancers)*

Ah, well, that's it, you see. You've never noticed how night and day make this exact join—to, like, slot into each other—at the edges? One proper whole, wouldn't you say?

*Brief choreography, as Eva reflects. For example*

*the two dancers change places, then switch back.*

EVA

Fine. So what now?

THE STORYTELLER *(with the two dancers)*

Well, now, half a shadow's no good to us. If we could have swung it, we'd have stolen your half tonight, but it's almost daybreak, and we haven't managed it. You don't…skip as much as your sister does, do you? So we have a proposition for you. A kind of wager.

EVA

I don't understand.

THE STORYTELLER *(with the two dancers)*

If we win, we get to keep your shadow too. Life with us isn't so bad. You might even get to like it. On the other hand, if you win, you get your sister back.

*A repeat of the earlier brief, simple choreography, as Eva reflects; or more likely, a brief, cool variation of it.*

You're smiling, we see. So we have a deal.

EVA

Oh, I'm smiling at something else completely. You see, you seem to have the two of us confused. It's my sister who's the gambler.

THE STORYTELLER *(as the dancers race and rage)*

*Stop her!* cried the Mob Boss, as Eva spun on her heel, and ran all the way home, anxious to be back in bed before her mother awoke. She ran, and she ran, ran so hard that her shoes flew off, so that a Goblin threw them after her, to conk her on the head, but they missed, and she picked them up, and laughed, and she was out of the forest and into the garden! She had made it.

EVA *(settling back into her spot)*

But I *lied*, you see. I'm just a different *kind* of gambler than my sister.

*(The Storyteller follows her over and settles back in also.*

*But so do the two dancers follow, to stand listening. The lighting continues to be undifferentiated, across the stage. )*

THE STORYTELLER

Well, they had admitted it, hadn't they? Half a shadow was no good to them. They would have to try something else… So Eva lay down to get some sleep. And when she woke—much later than she usually did, of course—her sister was back in the other twin bed, softly snoring.

EVA

I knew it! Good morning, you! Guten morgen! Buongiorno! Bonjour! *(She skips around the Storyteller, chanting and poking.)* I got you back from the Goblins!

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

Excuse me, but what is my seriously strange twin sister talking about?

EVA

The Goblins! They had to let you go!

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

You're frankly quite non compos mentis, did you know that? What do *you* all of a sudden know about Goblins? If I weren't fast asleep I'd guffaw at you.

EVA  
What do I know about them? How do you think got home? I went into the forest last night, didn't I? I rescued you from them, didn't I? I tricked them!

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

Eva, now listen to me. There are NO SUCH THINGS as GOBLINS! You were DREAMING!

EVA  
No such thing as…? But you said…

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

I made that stuff up to tease you, you sweet silly. I can't believe you actually fell for it!

EVA  
But it must be true. I must have been in the forest. Look how late I've slept!

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

And what a lovely long weird dream you seem to have disported yourself in!

EVA  
It was not a dream!

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

Oh no? You were in the forest? Show me your shoes.

EVA *(slipping off her shoes, to look)*

But… The Goblins! The Goblins must have—

THE STORYTELLER/NORA

Of course. The Goblins. Tell you what, why don't you come with me tonight? To the *real* forest.

` EVA

You know, I don't think I need to. I spent most of last night there.

*(Having heard enough, the dancers drift back to their side of the stage.)*

THE STORYTELLER/GOBLIN *(drifting over to join them)*

See you tonight, little Nobody.

EVA

And the next day, when I woke, my sister was gone again. It was as if she had never been.

*(Three person choreography this time, as the dancers*

*claim Nobody for their own. The Storyteller is at times Nobody, at times the Mob Boss, until the lights go dim over the whole stage. We hear a transitional music, more*

*country rock or bluegrass than the earlier dance music.)*

**Scene Five**

*Lights come up on the voice actors' side of the stage. Eva is in her spot, sitting alone. Ideally, she is the one playing the music, and she plays little licks off and on throughout.*

EVA

So I grew up as an only child. I became a young woman, then a less young woman. Sometimes I told people this story—I suppose I told it to everyone I grew close to—how I had a sister called Nobody—well, Nora—who was living with the Goblins. I lost a few friends, but not many. I had a reputation for strangeness, you see: this kind of thing was expected of me. I came to imagine, or to believe, quite sincerely, that I was living, not just my own life, but my sister's too. You see, I was convinced that the Goblins had no real power over her as long as I myself stayed away from their forest, and kept my shadow firmly to myself. Maybe, one day, they would give up and let her go again. Or maybe, in the dream world of the night, she was beginning to take on some of my characteristics, as I was taking on hers.

My first clue. That I was, if you like, becoming her… Was when I realized how much I liked consorting with strange men.

Especially men with wild hair, and large, unkempt backyards.

The ones who not only refused to weed the flower garden, but who might deliberately plant odd, scraggly weeds among the chrysanthemums.

Sometimes, I'd meet an interesting man, and I'd ask, "How often do you mow the lawn? Show me." And how my heart would leap to see wildflowers hip high in his thigh high grass, with all the bees and the cats and the damselflies of the neighborhood flocking to romp in it.

*The Storyteller retakes her place* *beside her.*

One evening, I was sitting out on a porch with this guy I had really gotten to like, at his little cottage way out in the woods, we were enjoying a drink, and a confabulation, and looking at each other and at the fireflies, and I had taken a chance, to maybe spoil everything; I'd told him about my sister Nora. My sister Nobody.

THE STORYTELLER

Huh. That is a very cool story.

*The two dancers return, approaching quite* *near to them.*

Best keep a foot on the deck then? Woods. Moonlight. Shadows. You're swinging both legs.

*To his charmed amusement, she obeys instantly.*

Like that old Hollywood rule for chaste and modest love scenes. One foot on the floor at all times. We can call it the Goblin Rule.

EVA

Or we could just take this thing inside?

*The Storyteller laughs, completely smitten.*

THE STORYTELLER

What if you're wrong, though? What if you never had a sister, what if you never saw the Goblins, how would you know the difference?

EVA

Oh, I might be wrong. But not in the way you suggest. Sometimes, I do wonder if maybe, it might not still be the night after the night I first dreamed I went into the forest. The Goblins have cast some sort of spell on me, so I *think* that years of my life have passed, but it's *really* all just a dream. A trick. To make me lose patience, and doubt myself—so that I'll go back into the woods. But I won't, of course. Because, eventually, I'm betting that *they'll* be the ones who lose patience. And I'll wake, and I'll be a young girl again, and Nobody—the Nora Nobody—will be in the twin bed right next to mine. Free at last!

THE STORYTELLER

Huh. Which would make *me* a figment of your imagination. I think I liked your last idea better. About going into the house. I think I need to show you just how real I can be.

EVA *(laughing)*

Oh, I do not doubt it! You big dreamboat… So you see, either way, I win! I get my sister back, or I get you. And your fireflies, and your smelly compost pile leaves! Your yard is just so beautiful. Really close to the woods, a bit too close to the woods, even? But so magical.

THE STORYTELLER *(standing)*

Come inside, Eva. Just in case? And please, no sneaking out in the middle of the night!

EVA *(letting herself be raised to her feet)*

Oh, I don't do silly things like that. I'm the *careful* sister. Or I *used* to be. Catch me!

*Releasing The Storyteller's hand, she dashes, one foot*

*always on the ground, into the garden; perhaps into the*

*audience. The dancers follow, their hands reaching out*

*to snatch her shadow out from under her.*

THE STORYTELLER  
And in some versions of the tale, he does catch her. And in others, he doesn't.

**Scene Six**

*Once again, this scene is conceived as being all choreography, with the dancers moving to music. Once again, there is some freedom to interpret, and to respond emotionally, and to showcase skills. But this time the end of the play is also being thrown up for grabs: Eva is dashing back for the safety of the stage, as the Goblins pursue her. And she is dancing with them; and then so is The Storyteller. The lights go down with their tug of war still not resolved.*

SCENE