

Shadow Play

Creative Writing in English – Spring 2026

Shadow Play is a theme of the students' own devising – one that has inspired eleven interpretations as vivid and varied as the writers behind them. We attribute this multiplicity to the richness and elasticity of the words themselves. To *shadow* can mean to follow, to obscure, to conceal – but shadow is also proof that something has stepped into the light, has taken up space. *Play*, too, resists a single meaning: it can be wonder and invention, or performance, distortion, and pretense.

Taken together, *shadow* and *play* open a space of movement – between light and dark, certainty and doubt, childhood and something else we can't yet see the shape of. They invite us to ask our half-formed questions without the need for perfect answers, to tell our stories without the need for perfect language.

The pieces gathered here grow from that in-between.

It has been an immense joy to learn alongside these writers and watch their work take form. May their shadows be long and lingering. May you find something of yourself in their shade.

Blandine Demotz and Sydney Amspacher

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The Shadow of The Mind

L. B.

Part 1

Every story usually ends with happiness. Mine didn't.

It was the kind of story people could lose their minds over simply by hearing it. By this fall time in the quiet countryside of Scotland, everything seemed perfectly ordinary — or at least that was what I believed.

Rumors often travelled quickly through the small village of Dunvegan. People whispered about a haunted manor hidden away deep within the forest. The house was said to have a sharp black roof and elaborate friezes decorating its stone walls. It stood far from the village, swallowed by the trees. The rumors were so extravagant that many curious villagers dreamed of seeing the place with their own eyes. I, however, paid them little attention.

I had always loved wandering through the forest, its towering dark-green trees and winding paths that frightened most travelers. Yet to me the woods were peaceful. Calm. Almost comforting.

One afternoon, while I was walking deeper into the forest than usual, a tall shadow appeared behind me. He was the kind of man who could make a person lose their senses simply by looking at him. His hair was a vivid shade of red, revealing his Scottish origins. His eyes were dark green, intense and unsettling, as though they could pull a soul into their deepest thoughts. When I noticed him behind me, I instinctively tried to move away, but he calmly stepped around me, blocking my path. Without saying a word, he bent down and picked a flower growing at his feet. He studied it carefully before finally speaking.

“What a beautiful flower, don't you think?” His voice surprised me so much that I hesitated before answering.

“I... I believe it is only a wildflower.”

“*Dinna fash*,” he replied gently. “It's a thistle. Surely you know what a thistle is?”

"I'm afraid I don't." He looked at me with clear amusement.

"Lass, everyone in Scotland knows what a thistle is." His expression suddenly grew more serious. "What are you doing here? Alone in this forest?"

I felt strangely nervous. No man had ever spoken to me this way before. "I come here to wander," I replied quietly. "To breathe fresh air... and to be alone." He studied me for a moment, as if trying to understand something far deeper. "It is always calm here," he murmured. "Until *she* comes."

He stopped himself for minutes, probably lost in his mind.

"I must leave you now," he added softly. "But I expect we will meet again." Before I could respond, he tenderly took my hand and kissed it. Then he disappeared into the forest as quickly as he had appeared.

I was alone again, disturbed by the encounter I had. Who was this person? And who was he talking about? I wondered where he lived. Was he one of these rumors that I had heard about? Indecent rumors.

I came back home feeling excited about seeing him again. Everything about him stayed in my mind: his charisma, his strange way of acting - something I never heard of in Dunvegan.

As I entered my tiny cottage, I put all my stuff on the floor. I continued with my household chores and started a new entry in my diary.

Dear Diary,

If I were able to describe everything that happened today, ten pages would not be enough. I met a man. A strange man. He was tall, with dark green eyes which seemed deeper than the ocean itself. There was calmness about him, yet something in his presence unsettled me completely. He was not like the men of Dunvegan. There was something mysterious about him — something that made my thoughts spin endlessly. I do not usually believe in omens or spiritual signs, but when I first saw him standing behind me in the forest, a strange sensation ran down my spine. I cannot explain it. But I feel that meeting him will change something in my life.

I closed the diary in a hurry, and went outside the cottage, where an odd atmosphere reigned. A violent wind started to blow. The leaves whirled around, creating

a really tense atmosphere. Dogs started barking loudly, as if their lives were in danger. Something about the man was strange.

He didn't react the way other men usually did with me. He left without any hesitation pretending someone terrible was coming.

When I entered my cottage again, he was standing right in front of the fireplace, his dark blue eyes still staring at me. I did not move anymore. I was paralyzed. I looked at him, suspiciously he continued staring at me, which made me feel uncomfortable. He approached, apparently searching for something. It did not realize to me at first, but he had a *large wound on his stomach*, but he did not seem to care about this. I stood back, now afraid by his behavior. (*How could he change so quickly and become such a creepy man?*) He continued walking beside me, and this time, with an almost frightening ease, he placed his hand on my shoulder, as if he had known me forever.

“Why are you doing this? I’m confused.”

He fixed his gaze on mine, and a lovely, even nostalgic smile appeared on his lips. “I would watch you for hours, Elspeth. I’ve been missing you forever. Please, let me see your magnificent face again.”

“Wh...why?” I said as I felt my heart beating rapidly. I couldn’t think anymore “Let me see your face again...”

As he continued talking, it occurred to me that he was hiding something from me: he never saw my face when we first met. He only saw my back and my hair. That couldn't be possible. He approached behind me, and, with his long fingers, he carefully moved my hair aside so that he could brush my neck. I shivered at the touch of his fingers.

Then... everything became blurry. The furniture in the cottage, the fireplace... everything, as if my head was going to explode.

Furthermore, for a reason I couldn’t explain, I woke up in my bed the next day without any memory of what happened except for the passionate moment between us, as if it was anchored in my mind. I stood up from my bed, the sun blinding my eyes. “Why didn’t I remember anything? That sounds very odd.”

And, as I tried to remember what happened, the dizziness became more and more unbearable.

Had he cursed me?

Now, I was sure he was not as gentle and kind as he seemed to be the first time. Over the next few days, I tried to find out everything about this man: the pathetic rumors, which had hardly interested me before, now became my obsession. I had to find out why he was interested in me, what he wanted from me. There were so many women in the village that everything still seemed confusing to me. I came out of my cocoon and asked the herbalist of the village. He was the most intellectual and he knew everything that occurred around here.

As I entered the shop, a warm ambiance reassured me. Plants and decoctions were displayed, ready to be sold. The herbalist's voice was angelic. Everyone in the village loved to visit this man, due to his wisdom, and good-mannered.

"Mr. Ambrose, I need your information about a curious topic," I declared.

No response.

"My apologies for bothering you, but I really need to know about a man's identity." He did not answer, but I insisted. The encounter with this strange man had disturbed me. "He has red hair, dark green eyes, and he is hugely tall. Would you give me some information? Maybe from your ancient manuscripts."

After I had been talking on my own for a long time, he finally deigned to give me a reply. His soul finally seemed to come back in his body. From that, I did not know why, but he looked confused.

"Miss Blakes, it's another crisis. Take a deep breath and exhale." (*Why would he care for me?*)

"I am feeling very grateful for this day. Do not mind me. I thank you very much." He approached me, and hugged me very slowly, as if my body were fragile. "I will drive you back to your cottage." Mr. Ambrose said carefully in a honeyed tone that exasperated me.

He closed his shop, took me home. The atmosphere suddenly changed, making me shiver. Mr. Ambrose was driving me back through the forest. I started being annoyed by him. This man who was supposed to help me was burying me even deeper in something uncertain. When we arrived, Mr. Ambrose still had this empathic face, and, with a troubled face, he declared,

"Miss Blakes, we're at your home."

I looked at him and laughed nervously

“Mr. Ambrose, is that the manor that everyone was speaking of!?” And here, at this precise moment, we came back to the beginning of it. In this dark forest, in front of this manor, the atmosphere reminded me of one of Mary Shelley's Gothic novels.

I did not feel alright, and turned my body instantaneously upon Mr. Ambrose, who fixed his gaze on mine with a sorrowful expression. I lost patience and raised my voice.

“Please! Could you drive me to my home?” He stared at me intently, and, in a trembling voice, he said.

“Miss Blakes, this is your home.”

A horrific expression appeared on my face. How was it even possible? I instantly remembered that I kept all my writings in my diary. I ordered Mr. Ambrose to give me that precious diary.

He came back a few minutes later and gave me my belongings. I presumed he must have kept this diary with him.

I immediately immersed myself in my oldest entries, hoping to find some consistency in this whole story. I found illogical texts that didn't make sense.

Dear Diary,

This is the first day without him, and I cannot even imagine.

I can't stop thinking about the time when we were children and when we were playing together as if nothing had importance.

I remember every single time we were discussing stuff we can't even imagine. I unconsciously hope that you would stand up one more time, kiss my lips just to feel your lips on mine one more time.

Please, wake up Gideon... wake up, my love.

Dear Diary,

It has been 2 years since you've gone, and all I wish is that you would come back to life. Your absence breaks my heart more than it already was, broken by your loss. Why is life so complicated without you that I stopped everything? It all makes me think about you... sleeping in the bed you had built, cooking alone is not something I would recommend to anyone. Please, my love, come back...

While I was reading these entries, everything suddenly seemed obvious to me now, even if I couldn't believe it. I turned back to look at Mr. Ambrose's face and, maybe unconsciously, wanted to *hate him* as much as I could, but I immediately regretted it. Everything was clear now... *again*.

I could not think anymore. It was as if I had lost him a second time.

At this moment, I didn't want to see anyone, but everyone who had already lost someone knew how difficult it was to see the truth right in front of you.

Part 2

While I was trying to remember everything I had lost, a question troubled me. A question I must inevitably ask Mr. Ambrose.

"Mr. Ambrose?" I said with teary eyes

"I'm listening, Miss Blakes."

"How..."

Ambrose's face changed. He had probably not imagined reassuring me that day, maybe occupied selling his medicinal plants and everything that came with it. But, to my surprise, he declared to me,

"Miss Blakes, let me tell you the truth."

"Is it terrible? Did he suffer? Please Mr. Ambrose, do not leave me like this."

"Miss Blakes, you really must be strong enough to listen to what I am going to tell you."

I looked upon him with distress and anger in my eyes. He really thought I was not strong enough to hear it.

"I am starting to get very upset with you, Mr. Ambrose."

"What did your memories tell you about what happened?" he said with conviction.

"I... I don't remember ..."

"You need to, Miss Blakes. It is important for your grief."

I obeyed the man, as if I were a puppet, but... I'd prefer to have the truth instead of being lost. Trying to remember every detail... knowing that it would break my heart again. I closed my eyes and plunged myself again into my deepest memories. But when I

reopened them, everything had changed again. I was in the forest, and Gideon was lying on the grass. He deeply contemplated me, as if I was a jewel to him.

“You finally remember it.”

“Gideon... yo...you need to tell me what happened. I need to know.”

He watched the sunset, the light reflecting in his dark green iris.

“Dear Elspeth, you can’t blame yourself for what happened. It was not your fault.”

“I can’t remember Gideon... I can’t!”

He came in front of me, took my hand to his wound, in order to let me touch it. Then... Everything in my mind came back, as soon as I touched his stomach. Everything that inevitably told me the truth about his death.

Three years ago?

I stood before the fireplace in the manor while Gideon faced me. The room was silent except for the crackling fire.

“Elspeth,” he said softly, “you cannot remain here with a dying man. My illness is incurable.”

My heart tightened in my chest.

“You cannot ask this of me,” I whispered. “You are my husband.” He stepped closer, sorrow filling his eyes.

“I would rather die by your hand than slowly fade away in our bed.” I shook my head, tears burning my eyes.

“How could you ask such a thing of me?” He embraced me gently. Then he placed something into my trembling hands. The sword I had given him for our anniversary.

“Please,” he whispered.

I do not remember the moment clearly. Only fragments remain. The trembling of my hands. The sound of my own breathing. And the terrible silence after the blade entered his body. My hands full of his blood. Me crying on his dead body.

But I had kept my promise.

I had taken the life of the man I loved most in this world.

I took my husband’s life. Without pity.

I had no precise memory of what I had done until now.

Then, it appeared clearly *again*.

I saw him announce to me the terrible disease he was suffering from, and the distress in his voice when he asked me to take his life made me feel even worse.

I saw myself take the sword I had made for him as a gift and pierce his stomach to keep the promise he had asked of me.

As the memories returned to me, the wind began to rise among the trees. The branches groaned above us, and the sky darkened as if the forest itself had witnessed our tragedy. I felt the same storm raging inside my mind. I was angry from the deepest part of my mind. I was angry at myself for killing my husband, but I was also angry towards Gideon.

But I immediately regretted this anger towards him and quickly started to cry seeing the horrible circumstances of his death.

Mr. Ambrose was waiting for me, so that I could remember the traumatizing events that occurred in this place on my own. When I came back, he placed his hand on my back and tried to comfort me as best as he possibly could.

“Mr. Ambrose, do not ever leave me like him! I simply forbid you to do so!”

He showed a sad and severe pout at the same time.

“Miss Blakes, I won't make you a promise, but I will try to respect your husband's last wishes.”

I was grateful to him. Somehow, Mr. Ambrose would be a way to reconnect my broken soul in this world that no longer really belonged to me.

With the little energy I had left, I wrote a new entry in my diary, which I no longer saw as a simple diary, but as one of the only links I had left with Gideon.

“Dear Gideon,

I don't know how long it has been since you left this earth, but I have Mr. Ambrose to remind me, again and again what I did to you.

I could simply not tell you anymore that I suffer every single second from your loss. Mr. Ambrose said I am suffering from a traumatic condition, but it isn't well-

known in our small town. To have a souvenir from you, I always kept the infamous sword that took your life, so that I would remember you.

Can't tell you anything more. I stayed here, in the manor that belongs to us, until another episode came to me.

But Gideon, my love, if I could, I would desperately tell you that I eternally love you. You're the love of my life.

I placed the letter upon his grave beside the white lilies he loved so dearly. The black veil covering my face fluttered softly in the wind. Tears ran silently down my cheeks as I returned to my carriage. Life would never be the same again. To lose my husband once had already been unbearable. But to lose him again and again within my own memories was a torment I would carry forever. No one in Dunvegan spoke to me anymore. The villagers avoided my gaze, whispering when I passed.

And as I slowly walked back toward the manor, a terrible realization dawned upon me. The rumors that haunted the village... The lonely figure hidden within the dark manor deep in the forest...

The one everyone feared.

It had never been Gideon.

It was me...

With a heavy heart, I entered the house once more. Then, with slow and trembling hands, I closed the immense door behind me. The manor fell silent. And somewhere deep within the forest, the wind carried the same rumor through the village, that the lonely woman of the manor was still wandering its halls, speaking to a husband who had been dead for years.

Catching Butterflies

Loubna

1.

It all started when I was a kid, my dad is a lepidopterist so it was only natural for me to grow fond of butterflies. A lepidopterist is a person who studies or collects butterflies and moths. My dad did both but mostly for the thrill of owning them. He would leave for months at a time somewhere in Europe or even here in the United States, trying to get as many species as he could. Most of the times it was me and my mom, living our little life calmly when he would randomly come home excited over his latest find. Since I was little I never understood why he would put such beautiful creatures into glassware and trap them there forever.

As a five year old, I would be on my tiptoes softly tapping on a butterfly trapped in a glass jar with the tip of my bare nail, while he was telling me that when they are dead they are even more beautiful. If well taken care of they can remain pretty for a long time. We weren't allowed to enter his office when he wasn't there. It was always locked and had that same poster he had made of bond paper all written in black ink hang on the door of his office.

First step : Choose a Butterfly

Observe it's metamorphosis. Once dead place it in an envelope with mothballs until you are ready to start mounting it.

Second step : Collect Supplies

A Stainless steel insect pins. A piece of Styrofoam or spreading board bigger than the butterfly. Wax or tracing paper. Insect pinning forceps. A glue gun. An airtight glass jar or plastic container with a lid. Paper towels. Mesh. Rubbing alcohol.

Third step : Relax the Butterfly

Start by putting a damp towel (equal part water and rubbing alcohol in a jar). Lay a piece of mesh on top of the damp paper towel. Then, lay butterfly on top of the mesh. Next, put another damp paper towel in the container.

Fourth step : Mount the Butterfly with Pins

Use the forceps to place the butterfly on it. Use the pins to keep it still. Place pins in both of the abdomen, then the wings, then the antennae.

Last step : Display the Butterfly

Glass Dome. Jar. Shadowbox. ~~Resin.~~

I could see it in his eyes how they light up each time he would proudly showed off his collection off. Each time we had company over, they were forced to tour inside my father's office as if it were a museum and he would be the guide. I would softly hug my dad's leg as he spoke.

"Did you know that the diet adult butterflies consists entirely of liquids? It's one of the most interesting facts about butterflies!" He would say excitedly. "Butterflies enjoy a liquid diet due to having a tubular proboscis rather than a pair of mandibles. They use this proboscis to drink the nectar of flowers".

In 5th Grade, we did an art project using stained glass. I immediately knew that I would make a beautiful butterfly for my dad to hang in his office. I looked at all the different colors available, until my eyes landed on a beautiful sparkly gold pen, he doesn't have a gold butterfly, I thought. I took the project seriously making sure I wouldn't go over the line, after my mom picked me up, I was basically running to the house, once inside I directly went to his office and proudly showed him my work.

"Look Daddy! I made you a gold butterfly." I say as I excitedly hand him the gold butterfly stained-glass. He took it and looked at it confused.

“But, gold butterflies don’t exist. Yellow butterflies does. For example, you have the *Colias Croceus*, also known as the *Clouded Yellow*. But the shape of this is clearly that of a *Blue Morpho*. You should have color it in blue instead of gold, sweetie.”

I looked at him with big eyes, hurt. He handed it back to me before turning back to his book. I just get out of his office, closing the door. I went to the kitchen to the trash can and throw it. My mom looked at me surprised by my reaction. She quickly picked it up.

“Why would you do that? It’s beautiful”

“Daddy didn’t like it.”

2.

Even now, years later, that gold butterfly was in the kitchen, after my mom had hung it up on the ceiling. Now, it was softly playing with the light casting a sparkly shadow through the kitchen. While eating breakfast I would look at it, just as I doing now. I quickly swallow the last few drops of my milk before heading to school. I walk there, my headphones on playing *Blue Velvet* by Bobby Vinton.

Sitting in my math class the teacher, an older woman, talking about well I dont even know what she’s talking about... something about numbers I guess? Regardless of that I’m lost in my thoughts. I’m wondering about my dad, what is he doing, where is he... but also about that stupid gold butterfly. God I hate it. I don’t even know why my mom decided to keep that awful piece of shit... The sound of the bell, signaling the end of class, quickly brought me out of my daydream. I quickly shove my notebook and pens inside my bag not caring about the mess it would made inside. I got out of class and walk to the school playground. My little paradise. My safe haven. I have a spot under a tree where insects of different types roamed free. It is a perfect spot when I want to be alone, after all insects were a natural human repellent. Beetles, millipede, or even cricket didn't faze me. With a soft thump I sit down on the grass and lean on the trunk of the tree, the hard planes kindly resting on my spine as I feel the little bugs walk across my thighs.

“Butterfly wings are transparent” my father say with his mouth full during diner“ Even though they appear multi-colored, they are actually covered with tiny scales that reflect light. The wing itself is made up of scales formed by layers of the same protein as its exoskeleton.” I partially listen to what he is saying softly playing with the peas on my plate. My mom fake an

awestruck expression and simply nod with a tiny smile. The rest of dinner went on awkwardly. My dad stating facts. My mom nodding. My heart heavy. I couldn't bear it anymore.

"I'm going to bed, I have a headache" I quickly lie, sat up and immediately walk to the stairs straight to my bedroom, not bothering to look back at them. Once in there I let myself fell on the bed. Hugging my pillow as it was my long lost lover coming back from war. Tightly and tearfully. My sobs muffled by the stuffed cloth bag. I had enough. Fucking enough. I am jealous now, envious of those damn butterflies. He only talks about them, only smiles when it's about them... But I, I don't want to live in their shadows anymore. In my head all I could repeat over and over is: *butterfly, butterfly, butterfly, butterfly...*

3.

Lying on the freshly mowed grass of the school playground, I could feel their shadows around me, I watched them gently playing above the grass. All I wanted was to be like them: innocent, beautiful, and perfect. My forgotten book lay on my chest: *The Lover* by Duras. The gentle sunbeam slowly burned my bare arms. I should have gotten up, but I didn't feel like it, I didn't have the strength to do anything. The bell rang and snapped me out of my reverie, I sat up and get on my two feet, faintly groaning at my aching muscles. I caught up with my fellow friends and heads back to class. All I wanted was to be a butterfly : adorned and desired. But even that needed to wait. I slug off while walking back to class. I still had an entire afternoon of class : French then History. Words, dates, voices... But my mind was elsewhere.

For the past few months my grades got worse and worse. From a straight-A student to a flunking one. I lost everything. My ambition. My motivation. My dreams. All because of a stupid insect. I started studying them, with a critical eye: documentaries, recordings, books... and slowly I began to compare myself to them. All I am is flaws. Too loud. Too much. I could see how they are adored for simply existing. I got quieter, not talking only when necessary, I stop eating anything that was solid, my diet was just like theirs, liquids. Friends and teachers began to worry but I just fake a smile and say that everything is fine. Dad began to notice me, and he encourages me to keep on my research on butterflies, and I would just feel like a little girl again, yearning for a couple of praises.

He's been gone for two weeks and tonight he is coming back home. I stayed awake waiting for him by the kitchen floor with my cup of milk in hand. I don't look at the time but my eyes grew tired. I fight myself to stay awake, and that's when I hear the sound of his keys opening up the front door. I sat up nervously now, he walks towards the kitchen. He looks at me surprised to see me awake late at night on a school day.

"Were you catching butterflies?" I ask toying with the edge of my pyjama looking at his tired face. I study it and notice that he is wearing a really funny brown Newsboy cap and hold that same bug net that his parents got him when he graduated from his Ph.D. in Conservation Biology.

"Well yes, what else would I be doing?"

"Yeah... what else." He put his duffel bag on the floor.

"I've found some new rare species you know they are very beautiful and..." The rest don't even reach my ears. I blankly look at him as he lively tell me about it. I just nod like a robot. Still talking about them...

4.

A month now into summer break. I barely passed with a few B's and C's, my obsession was all over the place. I stayed in bed. Rotting away. Waiting for my own metamorphosis. My mom would be at my door pleading for me to get out to eat something or simply to just to take a shower. But no, I was too scared to ruin it, the moment I would finally be desired. The moment I would be finally changed. Once I close my eyes I could see myself fluttering high, surrounded by many of them. *A Duke of Burgundy*, a *Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary*, a *Wood White*,... All of them delicate and mesmerizing, in the garden surround by roses and tulips, and my dad standing there trying to catch me. Today was no different than usual, until I heard my dad's voice through the door.

"Can I come in?" I try to say yes, but only a soft sound come out of my mouth. The doorknob slowly move to the left as he come in. He looks at me in disgust and his nose automatically wrinkles from the stench in my room.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Your room smells like shit and you look like it... You're disgusting, I raised you better than that. Just get up and shower for God's sake"

I just began to sob, my hands pressed to my face and my whole frail body shaking. He talks some more but all I could hear is my own tears. He slams the door and I am alone again.

Everything I did and do was for him, but he just called me disgusting. I could feel my stomach churn, now aware of my own smell and surroundings. My room reek of sweat and stale air thick enough to taste, I look at the dust all over my desk, the dirty pile of clothes on the corner, the forgotten plates left by my mom now moldy, I just turn around trying to block those images from my mind, but even my bed is dirty with yellow stains. When I finally compose myself, I get up from bed, my bones weak. I stand in front of the window, the sun now harsh on my eyes and my skin, I think about me, about what I've become... Another knock. I look at the door, nervously.

"Honey, it's me" it's my mom. I walk to the door struggling, every step feeling heavy, I open it and move to the side to let her in. She just looks at me for quite some time, I could see the tears in her eyes and it made me feel embarrassed of my current state. Then she starts cleaning. Silently, like she already knows what to do. She makes my favorite food, feed it to me like a baby and even got me in the shower. The shower feels like hope, as she lather my whole body with soap, I feel like myself once again. A girl trying to yearn for her father's love doing anything even destroying herself in the process, but it wasn't worth it, I could see it now. I'm a not a butterfly and would never be... my mom softly get me out of the tub and as she wraps me in a soft towel, I looked up at her, seeing the love I desperately search for. My throat feeling tighter than usual and my voice slightly shaking, I gather my strength and blurt out "I love you".

Despite Everything, I Have You

Aeliya Commandeur

Most people look back at their childhood with a nostalgic eye. They laugh, telling how they made fools of the people in their life with a joke or a funny lie. They even cry trying to talk about a loved one that they can't see anymore, for whatever reason. They talk about their friends, their family, how they met them and the little stories that come to mind when thinking about the past.

They can talk about so many things that are piled in a corner of their memory, reminiscing about childhood, teenagerhood, first outings on their own, first love, first everything. They know what makes them who they are today, and to me, this is terrifying yet impressive. I love to hear them talk about their lives, because no matter how hard I try, I can barely talk about mine.

My memory is full of dark spots. Moments that were thrown into the abyss because they were too painful to remember. Laughter and cries that were cast into the depth of my mind so I would keep on living. Walking in the shadows of a past self that does not exist anymore. Trying to build myself from the memories others had of me, polishing myself into a refracting moonstone, absorbing everyone else's light to make it mine instead of sharing the darkness I hold within.

For many years, I walked and shaped myself into a better person, forgetting the deeply wounded person I was before. Trying my best to hold my own past in the shadows, pushing it down again and again until I could no longer recognize who I was. Destroying every tiny little thing that defined who I was. I did not want to see whatever was left of that little human who couldn't do anything else but be swallowed deep into the darkness. And sadly, the only thing I did was make sure they would drown in the sea of the many blurry, incoherent, and sometimes made-up memories.

*** But despite everything, they
were still me.**

And you... Oh, you... No matter the distance, no matter the conflict or the awkwardness our relationship grew into over the years, you held onto those memories tightly, and you cherished them when I could not find a single thing I liked about them. When I so deeply tried to destroy who I was and forget about all these memories, you kept track of everything, and you made sure to cast the person I was in your mind. Caring for that person forever. Making them exist in your memories.

In the back of my mind, I sometimes still hear the riff of your guitar, your laugh when we played random games with our group of friends. I remember how kind and how generous you were with everyone, no matter what we needed. You offered an ear to listen, your hand to help us back up, your shoulder to cry on, your time and your attention to know everything about our day-to-day lives, you even offered your heart. And to me, you offered me something better than a love letter, more beautiful than a heart-wrenching confession of pure affection. You offered me the life I chose to forget but unconsciously craved to remember.

Every single message we sent to each other, talking about our daily lives, whether it was happy or sad. Sharing all of our passions through the stories I wrote, the music you were learning to play, and silent calls just to enjoy each other's presence. Spending so many hours on the phone, dreaming about the future that was awaiting us, hoping that we would never grow apart. And even when we eventually did, you kept a place for our shared time to linger until we could find our way back to each other. We held each other close, without a word, to cherish a past version of one another that we once loved purely, with the innocence that we lost growing up. You held me close with tangible memories, while I held you close with the feelings I had for you and the guilt I felt for not keeping in touch.

I do not know if it is possible for me to accept these memories yet, but what I do know is that I can accept that this person existed. And that even if we change... Even if life goes on and we continue walking forward, the people we were when we met are still laughing somewhere in your memory. I am not only a shadow in a gem's disguise, the tiny, shiny rock I was is still somewhere thanks to you. Because you cared and loved so much that it made the past concrete. Because you still care and you still love, even if we are not the same anymore.

* Despite everything, you are
still the light in my
shadow-filled heart.

To my one-of-a-kind friend, whom I should appreciate more, and who will hold a special place in my heart forever.

With love,
Aeliya

Cheers and Smoke

Orane Firon

[Verse 1]

Cheers and smoke,
Screams and coke,
Heartbreaking song of his.
I'm bleeding at the knees
Not to be the one they mock.

[Verse 2]

As agile as a pebble
Rolling down to a puddle.
I crash through the surface
That reflects a stranger's face.
An endless fall towards rock bottom.

[Pre-chorus 1]

So I do what I do best:
I plaster a thousand-dollar smile
On my million-dollar face,
And step under the stage lights.

[Chorus]

But I'm a disco-ball
Performing on its own.
Spinning around and around
When no one's on the dance floor.

Without the others' light,
I am just a shallow stone.
Spinning around and around

Like dust in the shadow.

[Verse 3]

So I run away
To my own getaway.
A deer caught in headlights
Hoping for the car
To take her away.

[Verse 4]

I can try and bolt,
And untie the knot
That links me to the one
Beaming in the spotlight
But I keep hiding in plain sight.

[Pre-chorus 2]

Deep down I am gravel
Turned into a diamond
Under the pressure and the shade.
I only shine because of my cracks.

[Chorus] x 2

[Bridge]

I rush back to the slaughter,
Naive as a moth with a lighter
Thriving in the hug of the fire.

Like an undesired letter
Always returns to its writer.
A cursed unreciprocated lover.

Blurry silhouette in the mirror
Staring in my eyes like an anchor.
I'm a naked truth with a decor.
They're screaming my name for an encore.

Chapter 1: A Debt Collected

Evan Lachassaigne

“You call this living?”

The old man kept his gaze upon the horizon, towards the sea, his keen blue eyes piercing the dull light of the evening. His white hair blew in the wind, a stern look bending the wrinkles on his weathered face. He leaned on his walking stick, a glorified tree limb, fast rooted in the muddy ground, running his fingers through his well-kept beard.

His son didn’t answer straightaway. He did not look back and kept working the field, his back bent and his face turned to the ground, beads of sweat rolling down his face while he swung his scythe. His large, broad hands had been roughened by years of such farm work.

It was a grey day, as every day always had been and always would be, it seemed. The storm was especially rough for the end of the Dark Season. It was beating down on them, and the mostly unripe crops waved like billows in the squalls of wind. “Again with this lecture, Thudius?” he sighed.

“But I mean it this time,” Thudius said softly, his voice barely audible. “Are you truly fine living the rest of your days on this grey rock we call home, slaving away for scraps?”

“I do have a family to feed, if you have forgotten. I’m the one who puts food in your mouth, you thankless geezer,” the younger one retorted. “You already drilled so many of your reckless ideas into my son’s head with your tales.”

“The boy has a will to rise, unlike you, Iphior. I am sure he’ll grow to be more drawn to this Life we’ve been outcast from, even more than I. And they’re not just tales; you should know that. There is a whole world waiting out there —”

“That we cannot reach,” snapping back, Iphior stood upright and anchored his scythe in the ground, leaning on it. “You want us to swim across the Chasm? Or perhaps your so-called Magic will help us grow wings?”

“Clearly not, but what good is it if we don’t try something? I’m an old man, I do not want to leave this realm knowing my Life meant nothing, and I’m sure your son feels the same.”

“Well, you can’t do anything about it, and spreading these wild thoughts around isn’t going to help you. If you want my advice, you should start helping out and teach these children to tend to the farm rather than to read.”

“I don’t blame you, you know. You weren’t there; you did not see the wonders this world has to offer. I still remember my very first errand with my own father and his friends, atop the red desert cliffs at the edge of the world, and the wild lands above...”

As the man trailed off, a glimmer could be seen in his eye, the same glimmer that always appeared whenever he recalled the world beyond the Chasm. The two men stood in stillness for a time, and as Iphior was about to get back to work, a small figure came from the road behind them. Long, red hair flowing from the short girl’s head, her brown eyes lighting up her smooth face. Her soft steps fell silently in the wind, until she was right behind them and tripped on a branch. “Rimea my dear, it is not this day you’ll frighten your grandfather to death,” Thudius slowly turned to face the child, and knelt to her height with an audible grunt. “What is it?”

“Auntie asked me to tell you two dinner is ready!”

Iphior sighed and bent to pick up the few straws of hay he had reaped. He tied the stalks into messy bundles and threw them with another sigh in a small cart waiting nearby.

“Will you stop lazing about and lend me a hand picking these up, child?” Iphior called without looking.

“Yes sir, sorry sir.” Rimea answered with an annoyed tone, but carrying out his bidding nonetheless.

Once all the wheat had been gathered and put in the cart, all three quickly departed, Iphior pulling the cart while Rimea went trotting along the path further ahead and humming a song she did not know the words to. The muddy path snaked through flat lands and near small, barren fields. There were barely any trees in sight, or any shrubbery at all, for that matter. Soon enough, the path opened up and the first few rough houses started showing. They were made of basic materials, mended many times over with scraps as time and weather wore the buildings down. They sped along as thunder cracked and rain poured from above, soaking them. Iphior quickly threw a large cloth over the cart,

desperate to protect the handful of sheaves which would hopefully help feed his family for the next few days. As they kept walking, Thudius called Rimea to his side to distract her from the few beggars and famished people sitting helplessly in the mud, bodies curled, their rags doing little to hide the thin skin on their sharp bones.

“You know, all of this was once just as green as the other side of the sea”, as he spoke, Thudius made a large sweeping motion with his arms. The girl looked up at him with a wondrous and curious look in her eyes. “Squirrels and rabbits roamed around the hills and lived happily with their kin!”

“And birds?” the little girl asked, jumping excitedly

“Oh yes, many birds flew in the sky back then! Some of them blue, some of them yellow, some of them red, there were birds of every kind!”

“But why did they all leave? Did they get bored?” Rimea turned an odd sort of curious, almost downhearted.

“No, my child, it’s more complicated than that... They left—”

“Can we please get it over with already? We’ll be late for dinner at this rate, and I don’t plan on getting soaked here the whole evening.” Iphior cut in, his patience having worn off. The two quickly joined him at the front again and quickened their pace, walking the rest of the way in silence.

The family’s hurried footfalls broke the uneasy silence, stepping over and through the many puddles on the main road of Lowcliff. The day was darkening, and the market stalls in the city centre were all closed and empty, when they finally arrived home. The grey walls of the building were covered in mud near the base, and the window was filthy and blurry, from the accumulation of dirt over the years, never being cleaned. A faint, flickering gleam could be seen inside, and a slightly uncomfortable smell was coming from the house, through the door left ajar. Iphior set aside the cart under a tent of his own making, connected to the house, to let the sheaves dry while Rimea ran inside, shielding herself from the rain with her arms. She was quickly followed by Thudius, his walking stick making known their arrival to the two folk present in the room.

Standing with her back turned to the front door, Dellea was finishing preparing a stale root broth. As Iphior stepped into the house and closed the door, she turned and carried the grimy pot to the table in the centre of the room, upon which an old candle was

slowly melting. Her brown, soiled hair cast long shadows on the ground as she walked over, greeting the newcomers and embracing her husband.

“You sure took your time walking back,” she observed playfully, “I was afraid we’d have to start without you.”

“Well, you know how Rimea and my father are, always rambling and meandering around. If it wasn’t for me, they’d still be out there gazing at the horizon in the rain,” he remarked, giving the two concerned a frowning look, “Are you not going to greet your father, Calden?” he added, turning his attention to the young man sitting at the table, seemingly paying no attention to the scene, his head buried in a dusty old book

“Good evening, father,” he answered blankly, never looking up from his book. It had been gifted to him by his grandfather for his twentieth birthday. The story was that of a fairy-tale for children, but Calden loved it and had already read it multiple times, with the same fondness.

Everyone now sitting at the table, hot broth in their bowls, they gladly drank it despite its thick brew and foul smell, for it warmed their bodies during the cold winter evening. The storm outside had swiftly worsened, and the wind beat against the frail walls of the house, letting itself in through small cracks near the roof. The meal was spent mostly in silence, broken only by some coughing from Thudius from time to time. The storm outside grew relentless and the family was almost finished eating, when three loud thuds were heard at the door. They all knew who it was, of course, for only he would brave such weather to visit them. The focus shifted to Iphior, who had frozen in place since the knocks came, a shiver running down his spine. As he and the others stood, the door flew open, and two men entered the room. They were broad and tall men, with many scars on their faces and forearms. A glimmer from the moon, coming through the window, highlighted the hint of blades hidden against the men’s skin, under their light clothes. Everyone had reacted as they entered, but the men said nothing, and for a while everyone stood still in the kitchen, hopelessness anchoring in the family’s hearts. Finally, a third man walked in, smaller and less threatening than the others, though his presence alone instilled fear. His clean clothes were a stark contrast to everyone else in the room. His sharp gaze fell on each of the people standing near the table before looking directly at Iphior.

“To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit, Vaedran?” Iphior finally asked with an uneasy tone, “Our next payment isn’t until the year’s end, right?” “Indeed, this was what we had settled on. But you see, times are rough, and I have a network to run. The Hogs are becoming bold in their onslaught against the town. You wouldn’t want them to come and burn your house like they did in the south, would you now?” Vaedran smirked, looking at Rimea, who went to hide behind Dellea’s chair.

“No, no, definitely not,” Iphior answered quickly, “we’re all very glad to be under your and the Golden Ravens’ protection. It’s just... we don’t have enough to pay you yet. The harvests haven’t been kind of late.”

“Yes, I saw the woeful bits of hay you have in your cart outside. It is a shame, truly.”

“But still, I’m sure we can come to an agreement! We still have some objects from the old world; it should surely still have some value!” With this, Iphior swiftly moved to the table, grabbing Calden’s book which he had left open, and showed it to Vaedran, earning a disapproving look from Thudius, who was watching from the side.

“No, keep your dusty trinkets. But you are right, there is one thing that we’d accept as payment,” Vaedran answered, waving off the small book in Iphior’s hands. Calden, who had stayed near the table, listening, stooped and picked it up to put back on a nearby shelf.

“I’ll give you anything you want, just name it!” Iphior cried out, not grasping the terrible weight of his words.

“Right,” Vaedran said slowly, “we’ll take the little girl.”

A sudden stillness fell in the small room, as if a spell had been cast to stop time. For a moment again, everyone stood where they were, too frightened to move or even breathe too loudly. Calden was the first to break the silence, stepping in front of his mother and his cousin. Dellea had also instinctively shielded Rimea behind her.

“What? You can’t be serious!”, he burst out, looking directly at Vaedran. “You heard me right, young lad. And you heard your father. He said he’d give us anything, isn’t that so, my good Iphior?”

“Well... I did say that... but...”, Iphior seemed to be wholly lost, unable to move or react to the situation. He simply stood still, trying to reason with both Vaedran and himself. “But surely you can’t expect us to hand over one of our own...”

“It’s either that, or we drop the protection on your house. Or perhaps you really want the Hogs and the other clans to have sport with you?”

There was a brief silence before Iphior spoke again, and it seemed he had made up his mind. “You’re right, as ever. Fair enough,” the words sent a glacial chill in the back of the room.

“Good. Bring her here now.”

Vaedran shoved Iphior to the side, helpless to do anything to shield himself. But as he approached, Calden would not move, and in the back, Dellea broke out in tears. “No! No, you can’t take her! I won’t let you!” her vision blurred as she held Rimea to her side.

Vaedran turned around and looked at the two men guarding the door, “Take her. Make sure not to harm her in the process.” As he said this, he turned around for a final farewell, and walked out, “I’ll be waiting outside.”

The two men walked over to the table and split, one going to the left, the other to the right. They moved slowly, their expressions not of cruelty, but of resignation. Dellea and Rimea kept retreating, until they hit the wall of the room. Calden was quickly incapacitated and thrown to the side, and the realization of their being cornered sent the mother and her niece into a numbness. The large men closed in, and though she kicked and screamed, they soon got the better of Dellea and pried her niece from her arms. They bore the child out of the room and to the entrance, nobody able to stop them anymore. Dellea stayed on the ground, sobbing quietly, as Calden slowly got back up. He had just reached the door when he heard a whip crack and a horse neigh. Stepping outside, he saw a small carriage leave for the centre of the city. Rimea, bound and gagged, watched with distress as her home grew smaller in the distance. The night was dark when Calden went back inside the house, and the long cry of a crow broke the uneasy silence of the night.

Waiting for A Shadow

L. R.

She had been living in the old house in the remote village for so long that she felt as if she were fading into the scenery.

Yet, no one ever noticed her. It was as if her footsteps never made a sound, as if the stares went straight through her, as if her body were made of thin air.

As time went by, with no one to speak it out loud, she almost forgot her name; the only reason she remembered it was a worn-out jewellery box, hardly remarkable in the clutter gathering dust and spider webs in the small attic. Every night, she would go up and let her fingers hover over the six letters carved in the tin plate tightly screwed on the oak. *Maisie*. She repeated it over and over again in her head, even whispering it to the broken furniture and useless piles of cardboard boxes the rare times she would feel bold enough. Because if she feared forgetting her name, it was nothing next to the dread of wearing it out; with only herself to speak the two little syllables out loud, it could so easily lose any meaning it had left.

She barely knew what she looked like anymore; her reflection seemed to flee her.

Outside the house, the world kept on turning, and every morning, the sun kept on rising. People went on with their lives, aging alongside their loved ones, while she was stuck alone in her empty prison.

She couldn't remember how long she had been living this way when time and memories blurred in a hazy fog.

Until the woman came along.

Unlike everyone else, the woman noticed her.

The first time she saw her, it was from afar, as she was stepping out of a scratched-up red car. She had been quietly hanging out by the dirty window when the unfamiliar sight caught her attention. Sure, her memory might be everything but reliable, but a tingling feeling told her this car and its driver were both new in town.

At first, she didn't think much of it. The woman walked with her shoulders hunched and her head dropped low, wearing a discreet grey and white flannel over a light top that stood out against her brown skin and worn-out jeans, the fabric at the knees torn. The numerous rings adorning her fingers and on the rim of her gold-framed glasses caught the

afternoon light. Her black hair was tucked under a beanie, even though the sun shone through the rare clouds on this warm spring day.

Driven by a sudden pull of curiosity, Maisie watched as the woman shut the car door and looked around in confusion, one hand shielding her eyes from the sun and the other clutching her car keys, before walking to the house next door and knocking. A few moments passed during which she kept shifting her weight from one leg to the other and glancing rapidly around her, until the door opened and she disappeared into the house.

Maisie lost track of how long she remained by the window, glassy eyes fixed on the spot where the woman had been standing at the threshold, as if it would make her reappear somehow; she didn't even notice the sun setting.

As the night had now fallen, Maisie retreated to the attic as she would every night, staring once more at the name engraved on the jewellery box; then she blacked out, as she often did.

She was unable to guess how much time had passed when she finally came back to her senses; she was sitting on a wooden bench, watching the sun rise over the countryside and eventually registering the birds chirping lively in the trees, but it could have been merely hours or days since... since what, exactly? Something had happened; she knew it. Something had lit up the dying spark in her soul, something... no, *someone* made her feel the closest to *alive* she had been in a long time.

A woman. There had been a woman.

And unlike anyone else, the woman noticed her.

As if the universe had heard her, said woman walked by, hands stuffed into the pockets of her oversized hoodie, and the memories from the previous day—assuming that only one day had passed—slowly came back to her like pieces of wood in an ocean breaking the surface. She stared as the woman strolled down the street, her pace slow but sure. Her gaze met Maisie's and she nodded in acknowledgement with an easy smile that would have made Maisie's heart skip a beat and her stomach flutter, had her body still been able to feel those things.

What?

No. She frowned and glanced behind the bench, but no one else was there. She shook her head. She must have hallucinated the interaction. It was just her mind playing tricks on her in her great loneliness; the stranger was already walking away.

A small bird—a blackbird, a voice at the back of her mind unhelpfully specified—landed near the bench and hopped next to her feet. She sighed.

“Hi there, buddy.... I think I’m losing my mind. I mean, more than usual.”

The blackbird chirped, looking up with its shiny, beady eyes, then picked at crumbs with its orange beak. Maisie sighed.

“Of course, you can’t hear me and I’m just talking to myself like a perfectly normal and sane person.”

When the woman first talked to her, Maisie was hanging out by the bookshelves in the living room. She had always been fond of books, but ever since the night she disappeared from everyone’s sight, she had been unable to pick one up again. Instead, she just hung out in the place that kept bringing her great comfort. Alone with her thoughts, she could picture herself as a character in one of those fantasy books that her little sister loved so much—sometimes the hero, sometimes a sidekick who got to live their life without much trouble. She used to read along, just so she could see the way her sister’s eyes would light up when she had someone to discuss the stories with; from time to time, she would read some excerpts out loud during a rainy afternoon or after tightly tucking her in bed on the nights their parents were out.

So, here she was, mind wandering to faraway fictional worlds where everything is possible, drowning out the ambient noise of the rain splattering on the windows and the creaking of the house, when the sudden sound of someone clearing their throat made her jump out of her skin.

“Hi. I knocked.” The perpetrator smiled, fist still up against the wooden door frame, her other hand hooked onto the strap of her black satchel covered in colourful pins.

If Maisie was taken aback, it was most certainly because no one had directly spoken to her in a long time, and not because the woman was of outstanding beauty up close: the way her black curls framed the dark skin of her round face, the corner of her mouth lifting to form a crooked smile and the glint of curiosity shining in her raven coloured eyes.

Maisie stood there, mouth agape and eyes wide as saucers, for what must have been a concerningly long time, considering the woman took a few steps towards her with outstretched hands.

“Are you okay? You don’t look okay.” She took a quick look around the room, suddenly avoiding her gaze. “Am I disturbing? I’m sorry, I can go. Do you need anything— you know what, I’ll just come back later. Sorry!” She gestured towards the exit, face red, and made her way out in hurried strides.

“Wait!”

Maisie would have expected her voice to be hoarse from going so long without speaking; however, it wasn’t. Despite coming out a little thin and muffled, it was loud enough for the woman to stop and turn back to face her.

Maisie blinked, at a loss for words. Inside her mind was raging a storm of contradictions. Her whole being screamed that it couldn’t be real, couldn’t be natural, to finally be noticed by someone other than herself; her longing heart wanted to burst into relieved sobs, because at last, she wasn’t alone anymore.

The woman—an angel, she stupidly thought; only an angel straight from heaven could save her from her purgatory—was still looking at her with a curious expression, a hand resting on the door frame.

Right. She was supposed to speak, not just stare at her with eyes wide as a baby deer caught into the headlights.

“You... you can see me?”

The angel frowned.

“I mean, you’re kinda blurry because I’m not wearing my glasses, but yeah, of course I can. Am I not supposed to...?”

This shouldn’t be possible. This had to be some cruel trick fate was playing on her. Or maybe she had gone insane, and her brain had made up a pretty woman who could see her to cope.

“Why, are you some kind of spirit from another realm sent on a divine mission or something?” the angel joked, an easy smile showing dimples on her brown skin. Maisie almost burst into a fit of hysterical laughter; fortunately, the rational part of her brain that still controlled her actions pointed out that acting like a deranged woman in front of someone who could be her salvation might not be her brightest idea.

“Not exactly,” she shrugged in what she hoped was a nonchalant manner, even though if her heart was still beating, it would be pounding against her ribcage as if it were trying to escape.

“Wait. Who are you and what are you doing in my house?”

Oh, shit.

Maisie had been living here unnoticed for so long that she had never considered that the house might get new owners, or that this specific new owner might see her and think she was a stranger who had no right to stay here—not like she could leave anyways; she had tried so many times without any success before giving up and accepting she was doomed to be stuck here for eternity. Fortunately for her, the angel offered her an easy way out of this mess.

“I saw you in the street the other day. Are you supposed to give me a tour? I wasn’t informed that someone would meet me inside.” A pause, then: “I’m Aisha, by the way.”

“Right! Right, my bad. I’m supposed to show you around.”

That was it. This was her opportunity to find out why this clearly very alive woman could see her.

“Uh, before we get started, can I ask you something that might sound weird?”

The angel raised a brow, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, and crossed her arms over her chest. Eventually, a hesitant “sure, shoot” left her lips. Maisie breathed a sigh of relief and took a step forward.

“You need to promise you won’t freak out first.”

The angel chuckled awkwardly, eyeing her from head to toe.

“You’re starting to scare me.”

This was it, the moment of truth.

“Can you like... shake my hand?”

A beat, during which the angel stared at her with visible relief and some confusion, judging from the way her body relaxed but her brows knit back together.

“That’s it?”

Maisie nodded, holding her breath as the woman reached out to touch her own pale outstretched hand. For a foolish second, she believed that the flesh was actually going to make contact, that her fingers would wrap around the other’s calloused hand.

“WHAT THE FUCK?” the angel yelped, jumping back as her hand went through Maisie’s.

Great. One out of two options: either Maisie was definitely going crazy, or nothing had changed except this woman could see and hear her for some reason; in both cases, the situation sucked.

Priority number one: not to have a mental breakdown in the middle of the living room. Deep breaths. In, hold it, out. Repeat. Her mind cleared a little; even though the exercise had no actual physical impact as she had stopped being able to breathe years ago, it still tricked her mind into getting a grip on her emotions. Breakdown postponed.

Priority number two: come up with a reasonable explanation so that the beautiful woman staring at her with wide eyes like a deer spotting a hunter crouched in the bushes wouldn't bolt out of the room and never come back, taking any hope of salvation with her.

"In my defense, you promised not to freak out." Wow, real smooth. *Well done, Maisie! You scared the pretty woman AND now she must think you're being an asshole!* "Sorry. Uh... If it makes you feel better, it's as confusing for me as it is for you."

The angel took a step back, then another, her eyes darting around the room.

"What's happening? Is this a prank? Because it's not funny at all. Is there a hidden camera somewhere or do y'all really not want me moving in?"

Maisie tried to think of anything reassuring or at least rational to say, but drew a blank. So, she raised her hands in what she hoped was a peaceful gesture and went for the most straightforward answer instead.

"I'm what some call a ghost, and you're the first one to notice me since I've died."

The woman paled so much that Maisie could swear she was about to pass out in front of her—and she wouldn't even be able to catch her like a knight in shining armor, what a shame... wait, what? *Focus, Maisie!* She vehemently shook her head.

"Please tell me you're joking."

Maisie scoffed, a bitter grimace contorting her face.

"I wish."

A long moment passed in silence, to the point where she started worrying that the beautiful woman—and her only connection to the living world as well—was having a stroke. She was about to speak again—maybe try to elaborate on the situation; truly, she had no idea what she was doing, but she knew she needed to do *something*—when the woman beat her to the punch.

“I guess the neighbours’ warnings about the house being haunted do make sense after all.”

Maisie thanked whatever divine entity was out there for bringing her someone who took the news so well.

“This is insane...” the angel muttered. Oops. Maybe she had spoken—or rather, thought—too soon. “I have so many questions.”

“Of course, anything.” She took a deep breath, mustering the strength to ask one crucial question herself. “But first: what year is it?”

She had tried keeping track of time as it fled by in a blur, reading the dates on the newspapers left on the coffee table, gathering clues by listening to the residents’ conversations, trying to catch some information through the news on the TV—until no one lived here anymore, and the moments blurred together, making her feel as she was slowly sinking in quicksand.

“It’s 2026.” A beat. “Wait, you don’t know how long you’ve been... like this?”

2026.

The numbers echoed in her skull.

It couldn’t be 2026. 2026 was a faraway future.

2026 meant that she had been dead for over thirty years.

2026 meant her sister was probably settled into a stable life with grey hair and kids.

This was so much worse than she had thought.

Her parents... God, were her parents even still alive? Were they buried in the town’s graveyard just down the road, and if so, how long had they been lying in the cold, dark earth, so close, yet forever out of her reach?

She didn’t even remember their names. They had long moved on from her death, and *she didn’t even remember their names.*

While she was busy spiraling, the angel had started pacing around the living room, muttering curses under her breath and rubbing her temples. She kept fishing her rectangular device out of the back pocket of her jeans, glancing at the bright screen, then would change her mind and slide it back in.

“Uh... you could start by telling me your name.”

Maisie’s breath hitched—well, she had no tangible breath anymore, but her body still remembered the feeling.

Her name.

She had a *name* and was no longer the only one able to speak it. She could have cried if there had been any water left in her body. It was stupid to get so emotional over something as simple as two syllables, yet in her case, she didn't think it was.

She had long dreamed of this moment, when her name wouldn't be something belonging to her only.

"I'm Maisie." She wiggled her fingers in front of the other's face. "I'd shake your hand, but..." The hand went straight through her angel's arm.

It got a nervous chuckle out of the woman.

"Cool name."

"Thanks. You too... Aisha, right?"

The woman nodded with an irrepressible giggle that sent Maisie's mind reeling. Was that what angels sounded like?

However, the sweet melody soon faded and the angel's—Aisha's, the angel was named Aisha—expression turned serious once again.

"What am I supposed to do about this? I mean, the house is mine, but I'm not gonna just kick you out!"

Maisie winced apologetically.

"Yeah, I can't exactly leave the property. Believe me, I've tried."

She had indeed. After her death, she had spent countless hours—no, days, *weeks*—examining every square inch trying to find a breach, a hidden path to escape what had become her purgatory, without any success: every time she had attempted to step foot outside the perimeter defined by the empty house, the narrow driveway, and the tiny garden, an invisible force had stopped her. It felt as if her body had turned to lead, her movements becoming slow and sluggish the closer she got to this barrier. It was quite ironic, really: brick walls and steel gates couldn't stop her anymore, but thin air itself seemed to solidify against her and her only. A simple fence, she could easily climb over—she used to do it all the time as a kid, to her parents' greatest despair—but this invisible wall of magnetic energy, she had given up trying to figure out. Eventually, she had convinced herself that perseverating in such a doomed-to-fail task was doing more harm than good. At that moment, she had abandoned any hope of her situation ever changing and had turned into a spectator in her own life—death?—rather than an active

stakeholder; accepting her fate had felt like a second death. The slim sparkle of hope that remained stubbornly lodged deep in her soul slowly got smothered by the dullness of time.

And now, this beautiful stranger had just revived the spark she thought had long died. Moved by a sudden impulse, she took a symbolic, tentative step forward.

“You could help me.”

Aisha’s gaze, which had wandered across the room, snapped back into focus; its intensity sent a chill down Maisie’s spine.

“What?”

“You help me pass over, or come back to life— I don’t know, but find a way for me to get out of here, and your house is ghost-free. It’s a win-win situation.”

Aisha frowned and shook her head.

“Of course I’m willing to help, it’s just... real life ghosts aren’t exactly common. I have no idea what to do.”

There went her hope that there had been other cases similar to hers that might offer some kind of how-to guide... She tried to hide her disappointment the best she could after years without schooling her features and shrugged.

“Me neither. We’ll figure something out.”

Aisha rubbed her forehead and exhaled.

“OK. Sure, let’s try.”

For the first time in years, Maisie counted the days: the days that separated her from her beautiful angel, the days until she could talk to someone and feel real again, the days before she could feel tangible again. She was eager to see her angel’s smile, her shining obsidian eyes, her adorable dimples, her kind face and of course, she couldn’t wait to find a way out of this eternal limbo she had been stuck in for too long.

As a couple of days passed, then a couple more, she began to wonder if she had hallucinated the whole interaction, and the thought chilled her to the bone. The woman had said she would be back next week to move in, but it was hard to track time from the empty house. What if she got scared and never actually planned to come back?

However, all her fears vanished the instant the scratched-up red car eventually drove down the pebbly road and parked in front of the small garage.

And there she was, stepping out of the car, satchel in hand, hair pulled up in a bun that was half falling apart, wearing denim overalls over a simple white t-shirt. She barely had time to close the car door before she was greeted with much excitement.

“You’re here!”

She was met with a nervous smile.

“Hello to you too, Maisie...”

Unable to stop the grin from stretching across her face, Maisie launched herself into an unintentional monologue about all the ideas she had come up with to test her ghostly abilities with someone who could see her until her rambling was gently interrupted.

“Let’s go inside first.” The muttered words were accompanied by skittish looks around; however, the narrow street was empty. “I don’t want my new neighbours to think I’m a nutcase.”

Maisie nodded, buzzing with excitement—a feeling both familiar and foreign—as she rushed to the entryway. She glanced behind to see Aisha grab a cardboard box from the passenger seat and follow her pace quickly, the hint of an adorable blush creeping up her cheeks.

“You came back,” she said as soon as the door closed. It was meant to be a simple statement, but came out more enthusiastic than she intended.

Aisha set the box in her arms on the brown tiles that were surely cold as they always had been when Maisie would rush through the house barefoot in summer as a kid.

“Of course I did.”

A strange feeling warmed Maisie’s being. Her angel came back—well, not for her in particular, but she was part of the reason why, right?

“You could have ditched the house. Made new plans.”

A shrug.

“And miss out on the most exciting mystery of my life? Never.”

Maisie’s stomach began doing flips—stupid stomach, still annoying her even in her death; couldn’t a girl rest in peace?—at the small smile tugging at the corner of Aisha’s lips.

“Listen, I— I know we have your... case to solve, and I’ll gladly help you, I promise!” She stuttered and stumbled over her words, her voice higher-pitched than usual at the end

of her sentence as if she had prepared a speech that she couldn't recite right. "But some neighbours offered to help me with moving in, and— and I planned to just move in today, but we can get to work tonight if you want!"

"Oh... yeah, of course. No problem."

Maisie gave her a thumbs up then proceeded to retreat hastily to the tiny tool shed in the garden, mortified. Of course she would have other priorities. How stupid she had been to think Aisha would jump on the case without a second thought. Unlike herself, her angel still had a life to live.

All day, she watched the townspeople unload vans and carry pieces of furniture and cardboard boxes to the house, then arrange it all. At some point, they took a break and gathered to eat lunch in the kitchen, their loud, happy voices carrying through the open window. Maisie longingly watched from outside said window until she made eye contact with Aisha and decided to disappear to the attic after a shy smile and an awkward wave.

Eventually, the people left one by one. Maisie watched from the small attic window as the last one walked out whistling an unknown tune, then took a deep breath to brace herself and came down from her temporary hideout. When she joined Aisha in the living room, the latter set her satchel heavily on the coffee table, then plopped onto the couch with a sigh of relief, rubbing her eyes and stretching her arms above her head.

Maisie shoved the pang of guilt aside; if she had waited years for salvation, she could surely wait a few more days until Aisha was better settled in her new house; yet, she didn't want to. It felt as if every second passing without searching for a solution brought her closer to a forever-sealed fate in this state of half-life, half-death.

Fortunately for her, Aisha wasted no time in pulling out a new-looking notebook and a fake leather pencil case from her beloved satchel, then proceeded to take out bright pens and sort them by colour on the table before flipping the notebook open. Curious, Maisie settled by her side and threw a glance at the empty page.

"Alright, let's do this. I need you to tell me everything relevant to your... situation."

Of course, Maisie focused on the important matter:

"Why do you need so many pens?"

"To sort the information." It was stated as the most obvious evidence. "Things you can and can't do, what you remember, potential leads regarding why you got stuck here, and so on."

Maisie let out an impressed whistle.

“You are not joking about this.”

“I love mysteries. When I was little, I used to beg my parents to buy me every detective story they could find. I’ve watched *Knives Out* too many times to count.” A pensive beat. “Granted, there is no murder to solve, but same principle, right?” A gasp. “Wait, were you murdered?”

Maisie chuckled awkwardly, a little taken aback by her sudden enthusiasm, but soon sobered up.

“I.. I actually don’t know.” She ran a hand through her hair, avoiding the piercing gaze that seemed to see straight into her soul. “I know, it’s stupid, I don’t even remember how I ended up here.”

Aisha’s eyebrows scrunched up as she chewed on her lower lip pensively; after a second of hesitation, she picked up a red pen and bent over her notebook to write something Maisie couldn’t make out from her spot. The last rays of sunshine outside caught onto her golden nose ring as her head moved to follow the tremors of the pen scratching the paper.

“Well, that’s definitely something we have to clear up.” Maisie caught sight of the big question mark next to the words “cause of death.” “In most legends, ghosts are stuck in between planes of existence because of unfinished business, and it can have to do with their death.” A pause. She set the red pen back on the coffee table next to an old scratch on the wood, and picked up a purple one. “Do you remember anything about it? Even small details could help.”

Maisie shook her head. A few more questions followed, each with few real answers. They had barely started, and it felt as if she was already up against a wall. An insurmountable, ten-foot-high wall made of solid concrete trapping her in the house.

Aisha eventually sighed, fishing the rectangular device Maisie hadn’t understood the purpose of yet from the front pocket of her overalls.

“Okay, let’s try something else. What’s your full name?”

“I... don’t know that either.”

“What?”

Unable to stay still, Maisie started pacing on the dusty rug, waving her hands around widely in frustration.

“I forgot, okay? I forgot almost everything. I barely know who I am. You might as well come up with basically any made-up backstory for me, and I wouldn’t be able to tell real facts from fake ones!”

“There has to be something. You remember your name, right? That’s a start.”

Right, the name engraved on the jewellery box she read every night to not forget. Strangely, even though it might, somehow, help them get started, she couldn’t bring herself to talk about it. It was her secret—the only thing she was sure of, that really was hers and hers alone.

“I used to read books to my little sister,” she blurted out instead. “Don’t ask me why, but she enjoyed *Lord of the Rings* as a bedtime story.”

Aisha nodded.

“See? That’s a start.” She set her rectangular device aside and picked up a pink pen—pink for family, she explained—and painstakingly wrote down the information.

It was as if the gates safely keeping the few memories she cherished had opened and couldn’t be closed. She started talking about the small, specific memories that had stayed engraved in her brain: planting amaranths in the garden with her mother, the motorcycle she and her father had repaired for her sixteenth birthday, that time the nice lady next door had offered her cookies fresh out of the oven after she had failed her English test, galloping through the fields on horseback and getting thrown off...

They filled three pages this way before Maisie drew a blank. The white sheet covered in colourful ink seemed to taunt her. Almost everything she remembered was encapsulated on the thin paper. Three pages. That’s what her existence was reduced to.

“Do you ever get lonely?”

Maisie bit back a burst of bitter laughter. Of course she did! She had been utterly alone and left to herself for years. Of course, she missed the everyday things: the sun warming her skin, the wind on her face, the soft fur of dogs under her fingers, filling her lungs with the humid air after it had rained, the softness of a cushioned sofa or a mattress, the old wooden floor creaking under her feet; but most of all, she missed being able to be seen and heard. What use was speaking when no one could hear? What use was a body that couldn’t be held in a warm embrace?

Instead of expressing the terrible feeling of longing to be alive, she just shrugged, her face set in what she hoped was a neutral expression.

“I’ve gotten used to it.” It was true; she had had no other choice but to shut down the part of herself craving human connection.

Aisha nodded, although a frown creased the lines of her brow.

“Still, it must get pretty boring being stuck here all by yourself.”

A small smile tugged the corner of Maisie’s lips. On the contrary: for the first time in... well, in too long for her to recall, she finally found another reason to stay stuck in this state of half life, half death.

“Well, not completely by myself. I have you now, don’t I?”

Aisha bowed her head slightly, avoiding her eyes, but Maisie could discern a smile by the way the skin of her cheeks stretched and the corners of her eyes crinkled; and... was that a blush covering her cheeks?

“I’m not exactly great company, you know.”

“Lucky for you, I don’t have anything else going on in my life. I mean, death. Whatever, that’s not the point.” Her intentional stumble across the words had the desired effect of getting a chuckle out of Aisha, which made Maisie smile proudly. “This is the most entertained I’ve been since last century. I’m like your little shadow.”

Had the situation been any different, had Maisie been made of solid matter, had Aisha been more comfortable around other people, friendly punches on the arm and retaliations would have been exchanged. However, they weren’t exactly what one would call normal; so, they settled on lying on the blankets shielding them from the cold of the floor within a certain distance of each other, still relaxed in each other’s company.

Somehow, as the hours passed, they ended up lying next to each other, staring at the ceiling. Well, Aisha was staring at the ceiling; Maisie took this opportunity to steal glances at her silhouette in the light of the dying fire.

Never had she wished to be able to move solid objects more than at this moment; the urge to softly cover her friend’s sleeping form with a blanket as if the thin fabric might be able to protect her from all the dangers and pain of the world, to brush a soft curl from her face, to press a feather-light kiss to her forehead, was tearing her apart.

“I’m really glad I found you,” she whispered over the sleeping figure.

Then, she sat back heavily—if an immaterial body could even be heavy—near the fire, watching the rise and fall of Aisha’s chest in the dimming light of the flames. As the

fire went out, a sleepy mumble pierced through the sound of the raindrops splattering against the roof.

“I’m really glad I found you too...”

Maisie had been impatiently pacing the house for the last thirty minutes when Aisha finally came out of the bedroom, rubbing her eyes still heavy with sleep. A few strands of hair had escaped from the braid hastily done the previous night.

“Good morning.”

Her hand shot to her heart and her eyes widened as she noticed Maisie standing silently in the corridor, suddenly very awake.

“Jesus!” A shaky breath was exhaled as she brushed the hair falling in front of her eyes. “You scared me.”

Maisie shrugged half apologetically, although a teasing smile was tugging the corner of her lips.

“No Jesus here, just me. Sorry to disappoint.”

Aisha grumbled and made her way to the kitchen without ceremony.

“Someone got up on the wrong side of the bed,” she chirped, following the woman like a shadow as she rummaged through the cupboards for cutlery.

Another grumble was the only answer she received, making her chuckle. Aisha may be a night owl, but she was certainly not a morning person. Well, that wasn’t exactly true: while Aisha was as sociable as a bear in winter, she didn’t necessarily mind being woken up by the birdcalls and sunrays slipping through her window. It was something she didn’t know she missed until she moved to the countryside, she had once confessed as they were watching the sun rise in the garden; in the busy cities, noise was constant: engines roaring, people shouting, music playing. Maisie had to take her word for it, as her whole life had been spent in the countryside, and her few trips to bigger cities dated back at least three decades.

Minutes went by: Aisha busying herself with popping a slice of bread in the toaster, and Maisie distractingly watching her from a respectful distance. In truth, her mind was wandering—more precisely, to the box that hadn’t left her thoughts for the last hour or so. Aisha took the bread slice out and spread hummus over it—strange breakfast habit of hers that Maisie had given up trying to understand.

Maisie took a deep breath. Aisha stood in front of the window and took a bite, letting the sun wash over her face, the sound of her chewing filling the quiet kitchen. Maisie repeated the speech she had come up with in her head. It wasn't even a speech, really, just a few simple sentences. The problem wasn't the words themselves; it was the implications and the consequences they would bring about.

Finally, Aisha took a seat at the table in front of her bowl of cereal. Maisie decided the moment was as good as any to rip the Band-Aid off.

"I might know a way to recover some of my memories."

Aisha barely looked up as she huffed—her very personal way to encourage her to continue—her hand still steadily pouring oat milk over her cereal. Not the reaction expected, but then again, Maisie had gotten used to her roommate's morning grumpiness over their weeks of forced cohabitation—not that she complained about sharing the house with the kindest, most beautiful woman she had ever met... *Priorities, Maisie!* she scolded herself.

"I need you to open a jewellery box in the attic."

Aisha stared at her expectantly, most likely waiting for an explanation. Or maybe she was just hoping she would shut up so she could finish her breakfast in peace.

"It's... it used to be mine. I think there are... photos, or drawings, *something* from my past in there."

Aisha's hand twitched so suddenly that some of the oat milk splashed on the table.

"And you're telling me you knew this whole time and said nothing?" Her tone was more incredulous than angry, although the latter wasn't entirely out of question, judging by her furrowed brow and wrinkled nose.

Maisie took a sudden interest in the kitchen cupboard—this scratch on the wood was new, wasn't it?—feeling embarrassed like a little kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

"Well... better late than never, right?" she tried with a sheepish smile.

Just as she had done countless times before, Maisie phased through the ceiling into the small attic. A few seconds later, Aisha emerged from the hatch, sneezing as her shoes sent dust flying around her. The familiar creaking of the floorboard under her weight brought Maisie an odd feeling of warmth.

To say the situation was strange was an understatement: Aisha was the first living person in a decade or two to set foot there. The energy in the room shifted to something more alert, heightened, as if the old furniture and useless cardboard boxes filled with sentimentality had woken up from a long hibernation upon sensing the change to come; these few abandoned square feet of space had been Maisie's inner sanctum, her anchor to sanity as a dead person haunting the living world. Having someone else by her side felt surreal.

Aisha's eyes swept her surroundings, taking in the only room of the house she hadn't seen. If her gaze was curious, her posture remained guarded, hands twisting and feet shuffling.

Maisie hardly paid her any attention—which was, admittedly, worryingly unusual of her—as all of her thoughts focused on one thing and one thing only: the box.

Her footsteps made no sound and left no trace as she walked over to it, fingers hovering over the wood; she tried to imagine the faded scent she used to love. Aisha quietly shuffled to glance over her shoulder, her eyes darting between the small yet oh so precious object and the distant look on Maisie's face.

"It's beautiful." Her soft, low voice startled Maisie who met her gaze with a tight, bittersweet smile.

"I like to think so too."

Aisha reached out for the box, waiting for its owner's nod of approval before delicately lifting it from its spot on the wobbly desk.

The sunlight hit the box for the first time in years, and a tightness squeezed Maisie's chest; not exactly pain, just... a swarm of indescribable emotions overwhelming her all of a sudden as Aisha's fingers delicately trailed on the wood with a respect that almost felt religious. The surface darkened where dust was sent flying, a million grey particles lazily swirling in the light that burned them golden. The sight was so simple and so common, yet fascinating to witness. As a kid, Maisie would wipe dust off random objects under the light cast by the sun, first for her own enjoyment, then her sister's, and they would watch the spectacle of nature over and over, no matter how much it tickled their noses and throats.

The soft, gentle voice that had become so familiar these last weeks jolted her out of her childlike wonder.

"Are you ready?"

I'm terrified, she wanted to reply: terrified of learning who she had been, terrified of changing the monotonous but safe status quo, terrified it would lead nowhere. But the dark brown eyes looking at her were so earnest, so gentle, so hopeful, that she couldn't turn her back on everything they had worked on to get here because of her fears. Instead, she offered her friend a tight-lipped smile.

"I've been waiting for this moment for over thirty years."

A flash of recognition passed on Aisha's face as she distractedly ran her thumb over the tiny metal plate where Maisie's name was engraved—a gesture so similar to Maisie's every night—yet all of Aisha's attention was focused on the woman herself rather than the only reminder left of her existence. More than ever, the ghost felt *seen*.

"There are some things we're never quite... ready for." Aisha's free hand twitched as if it was about to stroke Maisie's intangible cheek, but it changed course at the very last second and she tucked a strand of her own hair behind her ear instead. "It can wait a little longer if... if you want."

Maisie wanted to believe her tone was bordering on hopeful; but it couldn't be, because who would want to be stuck with a ghost wandering their house forever? Certainly not someone who valued their privacy and solitude as much as Aisha. No, her tone was simply hesitant due to the uncharted waters they were about to dive into. Maisie drew in a sharp breath and gestured in what she hoped was a nonchalant manner.

"Now's as good a time as ever." Her voice wobbled a little. She cleared her throat. "Go ahead."

Aisha complied with a curt nod, holding the box with great solemnity as if it were a precious artefact. Maisie sucked in breath as the fingers delicately pried it open. Her whole life could be in there, not to mention it might determine her future as well.

Click.

The rusty hinges creaked as the box finally opened.

The pounding in Maisie's head increased, and her heart would be racing if it were still beating. The box was gingerly set on a nearby piece of unidentifiable furniture and Aisha took a small step back, offering Maisie a clear view of the neatly stacked papers and the few pieces of jewellery inside.

Maisie extended a shaky hand, letting it hover over the contents of the box. There, almost buried under a faded photograph of her family—her parents, sister, older brother and herself posing in front of the house with bright smiles—was a silver necklace. Her gaze lingered on the picture; she allowed herself to fully take in their gleeful faces, tracing every detail of their appearance she had forgotten and committing them to memory before they could fade away once again. Her eyes squeezed shut for a second, the image of her happy family flickering behind her eyelids. With a slow exhale, they drifted to the piece of jewellery that had initially caught her attention.

She ached to grasp the metal, yearned for the cold sharpness of the chain, craved its weight on her neck as it once rested where it rightfully belonged. The necklace was important, she knew that much; it drove her to the brink of madness not being able to remember why. It was as if the knowledge had been thrown to the bottom of the ocean, weighted down so it sank, while physics kept Maisie at the surface.

Transported by the memories, she would have forgotten Aisha's silent but comforting presence behind her, if not for the familiar sound of her breath, occasionally interrupted by stifled coughs as dust tickled her throat.

The floorboard creaked under Aisha's feet as she stretched out her hand towards the box with a questioning look in her eyes. Maisie blinked for a few seconds before nodding. Aisha started emptying the box meticulously, spreading the items on the furniture with great delicacy. As her hands grabbed a yellowed piece of paper carefully folded, she stopped.

"There's a letter." She squinted at the cursive handwriting that Maisie would have recognised anywhere. "It's from someone named... Penelope?"

Penelope.

The name rang in her ears.

Penelope, her baby sister.

Penelope, who was in the car when the accident happened.

Penelope, whose fate had remained unfairly unknown to her, the information cruelly close yet out of reach.

Penelope, for whom she had spent her entire life doing her best to shield her from the harshness of the world.

Penelope, who was the reason she kept on blaming herself even after forgetting her name.

Penelope, who had just learned the truth about her sister and loathed her for it before the crash.

She remembered now.

They had been driving back to their hometown to spend a week with their parents for Easter—a tradition she despised but indulged in anyway to avoid another endless argument with her parents. Maisie had been sitting behind the wheel while Penelope leaned back on the passenger seat, complaining about her university teachers. The radio was playing *Somebody To Love* by Queen; the conversation had drifted to the rock band's lead singer and the sisters had started discussing—no, not discussing, arguing: something about Freddie Mercury liking men that didn't sit right with Penelope. Maisie remembered the fear coursing through her veins as she had struggled to take his side without outing herself in the process. Rolling her eyes, Penelope had reached out to lower the volume, or maybe to change the station; Maisie had slapped her hand away and voices had been raised. Maisie had taken her eyes off the road only for an instant, one hand on the wheel, the other gesturing widely...

Then, the last thing she remembered before blacking out was the deafening screech of metal scraping and her confusion as a wave of shock went through her body.

Then, she died.

Or so she assumed: she didn't even recall waking up. Was it by the road or in the house? How much time had passed between her death and the moment she came to her ghostly senses? Was she by her family, so close yet unable to show she was still here, or completely alone?

With a sharp inhale, she ran shaky fingers above the faded ink, trying to recreate the characteristic smell of old paper and its barely imperceptible bumps and crinkles in her mind. The tips of her fingers delicately traced the edges and the signature at the bottom, as if too sudden a movement would make it crumble under the empty air replacing her flesh and bones. The morning sunlight hit the paper, bringing out the darkness of the ink against the pale surface. Bracing herself, she laid eyes on the first words.

Dear Maisie,

I miss you. Shit, that's the worst way to start this letter, but it's what urged me to write it. I miss you so much it's a physical ache on some days.

I know it's stupid. You'll never read these words, but imagining you somehow can from wherever you are now (I'd say heaven, but you never were big on religion) brings me some comfort, so please indulge me, and ignore the tear stains, smudged ink and shaky handwriting.

Four years have passed since the accident. We have long moved out, but Mum and Dad have finally found a buyer for the house. We came back one last time to clear out our stuff. I'm writing this in the midday light of the attic; you always loved this place, so it feels fitting. Poetic irony, or something along those lines; you would probably know the right expression, since you loved English class... but I'm getting off-track.

I miss you, and I guess I wanted to say... I'm sorry. For what I told you in the car. I guess I didn't really know what to say; I was ignorant, so I repeated what I heard. But I have changed my mind since then.

People have reached out to me while I was in the hospital, you know? People I barely knew, but who seemed to know you well. Your roommate was... eccentric, to say the least. I'm sure you had a lot of fun with her.

One of your exes reached out too... I wasn't expecting it. She was pretty distraught. I didn't know you were... you know, like Freddy Mercury. I guess it explains a lot. I'm sorry for how I reacted to that... You were still the same Maisie I'd always known, my big sister who read me to sleep and walked me to school.

I saw Queen in concert, you know? Even though it wasn't the same without you, I swear I could feel your presence with me there. Freddie Mercury is dead now, so that's sad. Hey, maybe you two met in the afterlife?

I'm glad I'm still alive. I've found a great boyfriend; we've been together for almost six months now. I wish you were here to celebrate it with me.

Anyways, all of that is to say, I love you, and I miss you every day. It gets easier with time, but coming back here brought back a lot of memories. I hope you're happy wherever you are now.

Your sister who will never stop loving you,

Penelope

For once, Maisie was grateful that she couldn't hold the letter in her hands; otherwise, it would have slipped from her fingers. She sank to her knees, clutching her trembling hands to her chest, her whole body wracked by invisible sobs.

All this time, she had thought Penelope resented her.

All this time, Penelope had just wanted her big sister back.

She felt Aisha quietly kneel beside her, a hand hovering over her back without being able to rub it in a comforting gesture, and whisper words she couldn't make out.

After what could have been five minutes or three hours, Maisie looked up and was met with an incredibly empathetic face—the woman was an open book, and it was one of Maisie's favourite things about her.

"Is that good crying or bad crying?"

A small smile made its way through the sobs at the softness of the question. She slowly got to her feet, followed by her friend.

"Good, I think."

Aisha replied with a tentative smile; however, it soon dropped and she paled. Maisie followed her gaze and gasped as she caught sight of the outline of her hands slowly fading into nothingness. Then, her wrists started blurring as well.

"It worked..." she sputtered. It was everything she had ever wanted; so why couldn't she rejoice?

"It worked?" Aisha repeated her words, her voice unsteady.

Maisie nodded, a lump in her throat. She expected Aisha to cheer, maybe jump with joy with a big smile across her face; instead, she bit her lip and hung her head low.

"I'm no ghost expert, but I'm pretty sure this means I'm fading away." Her attempt at breaking the tension with a joke fell flat as her voice broke.

"That's... that's good. That's what you wanted, right?" The words came out strangled through Aisha's uneven breathing.

"I did! I do, but... I— I didn't expect it to be so soon."

Truth was, she had never felt less ready to go; but it was too late for regrets: the matter was out of her hands now; she had to accept it and make the most of these short last moments.

"So, I guess this is goodbye..."

Aisha glanced up with wet eyes, and Maisie could have sworn she saw something breaking within her soul at that exact moment. Aisha swallowed hard and ran a trembling hand across her face, her lower lip quivering; the sorrowful sight was like a stab through Maisie's heart.

"No, this can't... it's too soon, I— I'm not ready! You can't leave now!" Aisha's voice gave out, but she pushed through and launched herself into a panicked ramble. "We still have to watch *Mamma Mia* together! And you haven't listened to Lady Gaga, and— and what about Mr. Whiskers?"

Mr. Whiskers, the cat Aisha had rescued from the streets before a stormy night and who now happily wandered around the house and in town but always came back to the woman who had saved him, would be just fine without Maisie. As for the TV and music, well, what was the point when she would eventually forget it all?

Never had she wanted more than in that moment to cradle this distraught, sweet face in solid hands, tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear, and reassure her with soft kisses and a warm hug; but her arms were already half gone, as were her legs, and the rest of her body was fading away at an alarming pace. Instead, she had to rely on words—some of the very last she would get to say to her; it was already getting harder to think as well.

"It'll be okay." Aisha vehemently shook her head, but Maisie shushed her by placing a hand above her heart; for a second, she could have sworn she felt Aisha's erratic heartbeat beneath her fingertips. "I'll never be far. I'm your little shadow, remember?"

Aisha hastily wiped a treacherous tear forming at the corner of her eye, and Maisie smiled to herself, feeling bittersweet. A few weeks ago, she would have given anything—not that she had had much left to give in the first place—to be able to cry again. Now...well, she would willingly stay stuck on this plane of existence between life and death if it meant enjoying Aisha's company a little longer. But she knew if she stayed, she would get too attached and eventually never want to try and leave, too scared to disappear; it wouldn't be fair to Aisha to leave her hanging on to a literal ghost, nor to break her heart and pull her away from a life still waiting for her out there. Either way, it would end up in tears and heartbreak; it was better to cut the cord while the damage could still be minimised.

"I don't wanna let go," Aisha whispered, fingertips reaching out to brush the air where Maisie's cheeks were. Maisie choked back a sob through a pained smile.

"I don't wanna go either."

“Then don’t!”

“I can’t... I want to, but I can’t go on living like this. It’s torture to spend every day next to you without being able to truly be there.”

“I know,” Aisha breathed out, her voice barely audible over the wind whirling around the otherwise quiet house. Her face was so close that if she had been able to feel the air on her skin, Maisie’s lips would have tingled from her rapid breath.

“Goodbye, Aisha. Thanks for saving me,” she breathed as her body started to dissolve into the air.

“Goodbye, Maisie.” Like dust swept away by a gust of wind, she disappeared in a matter of seconds. “I love you... my little shadow,” she whispered to the empty spot in front of her.

It's About You

M. R.

My eyes open slowly only to find the tender light of the sun casting soft shadows in the bedroom. Through the large windows, I can hear the trees out front gently rustle with the breeze. Filtering through their leaves, the sun makes them appear as they would in autumn, despite it being the middle of spring. The rays, ending their course on the bedsheets, lightly warm the covers.

I live on the second floor, in an old, wood-floored flat. I've just moved in, about a week ago, and it may explain why other than the bed, nothing much occupies the room. Perhaps it might also be because of my laziness.

Yet I don't mind. One could think the tenderness of the sun fills a room enough to give it a soul. One could think it's about the fine details of the architecture. Wooden finish, carved into the skirting boards, despite being damaged, keep their charm in a world full of rough angles.

Although both are correct, both are wrong. What fills this room is slightly to the left, next to the window, in front of the bed I find myself waking up in. It comes through a door leading to the "kitchen-living room", because what fills this room, is your shadow. The shadow of you, making breakfast, as I hear the simmering sound of scrambled eggs.

I recall; you don't belong in my world, my bedroom. Only your shadow is cast into my realm, and I may never have a grip on it. Nevertheless, your shadow fills this space so much that with every move you make, I fear it might disappear and let my ceiling crumble down on the world. Your shadow projects itself across this floor through that door like when planets align. One step to the left and you're out of that frame. I live in my bedroom, yet my world is you.

Who could you be? I see your shadow, and although it resembles that of so many strangers, I know it's you. You, one of these strangers. As a matter of fact, whoever you may be, you are more special to me as a shadow than as a body, because any shadow can be you, and anyone can be this shadow. By loving this dark puddle, I love everyone, and yet I love only you. I cherish what you represent, the situation we are in right now. I admire this faint signal of a presence so important in itself. I love you, shadow. And while it might

be cast from a piece of cardboard, I don't care. This dark stain is the product of an idea. Written on the floor, it moves around the world, faster than a pamphlet or any novel. Shadows are ideas, fragments of poems, another dimension, a second vision, and any type of love. They are the hidden foundations of presence. The forgotten part of existence. A material glimpse of humanity. They do not simply mimic a situation; they are the universal experience of existence in all its variants.

The shadow of this cardboard she installed to recreate his presence after his passing. The shadow of this mother, cooking breakfast for her children, singing.

The shadow of this stranger in the bathroom stall.

The shadow of this student, walking in the school corridor.

The shadow of this grandma, baking a cake.

The shadow of this police officer, handing out a speeding ticket.

The shadow of this murderer, yet to be caught.

The shadow of this kid, playing in the fields.

The shadow of this person, existing.

You could see all of them in the reflection of a single puddle. You could love everyone for the banality of their existence, for the simple result of being. You could love humanity's shadow. And when it fades away in the dark, you could love the whole world.

But when the dark night arrives, like a river flowing in between walls, running over the golden fields, swallowing seas and mountains, laying its cover upon the warm asphalt of the city, an army rises against it. Light after bulb after led after lamp after fire. Fighters for the empire of the all-seeing human eye. A flame of the same nature as the sun powers the net encircling the world, illuminating the streets. Battling to maintain humanity's individuality, the never-setting suns cast shadows permanently.

So I close my shutters, and you disappear into the wilderness. We travel atop this mountain, beneath the night sky, where I can't see you but feel everything. I wish I could leave my window open and listen to crickets singing. But in the dark, there's always a possibility for you to be here, a possibility for crickets to make their choir, just like when we met, and that's enough for me.

The Shape of Growing Up

V. S.

When we were kids on quiet days,
my siblings and I would find our ways.
We'd close the shutters, turn off the light,
and wake the walls up at night.
We'd raise our hands out in the glow,
and shape a bird in the shadow.
A snake would move across the wall,
a dog would bark at a rabbit so small.
Our bodies faded from the room,
leaving the shadows free to bloom.
Back then the dark felt wide and free,
as if it had no end for me.

In middle school, beneath the sun,
our teacher showed us shadows could be fun.
With sticks of chalk we traced our shapes that day,
under the sun's bright, steady ray.
We left our shadows on the ground to stay,
the bell rang and we all ran away.
When we returned, our shapes had grown,
no longer where they had been drawn.
Time had stretched them, thin and tall,
the light rewriting us on the wall.
In awe we stood still,
as we watched the sun change us at its will.

In boarding school, in borrowed beds,
with sleepless thoughts inside my head,
I'd watch the ceiling's shifting shade,

perform the quiet games we played,
though my poor eyes could barely see, what
shape the shadows presented to me.
They made the room feel less empty and cold,
and in their presence, new stories were told.
A quiet world I could barely see,
somehow could still speak to me.
The dark filled the empty space,
and made the room feel like my own place.

Now shutters stay open in the day,
and childhood rooms feel far away.
My siblings are gone, time moves fast,
the games we played are things long past.
Yet sometimes when the lamp burns low,
I watch my shadow starting to grow.
It does not change to beasts or wings,
nor twist itself into playful things.
It only follows where I stand,
a silent shape at my command.
Maybe shadows were always small,
and I was the one who grew too tall.

But, last night, as curious as before,
I faced the light and tried once more.
My fingers bent into the light,
and slowly formed its wings in sight.
The bird appeared, not strong but tall,
its shadow trembling on the wall.
But in its fragile, flickered flight,
I felt our laughter in the light.
For just a second I could see,

the child that once was a part of me.
And if I lift my hands just right,
I can still wake the walls at night.



Where Shadows Answer

Yeliz Soyak

I.

12 October

My dearest,

I write to you from a place that appears to exist beyond the jurisdiction of time itself—an antechamber, perhaps, where duration falters and continuity dissolves. Hours do not pass here; they accumulate, motionless, as though reluctant to commit themselves to memory. The walls are bare to the point of austerity, almost ascetic in their refusal of ornament, and the light—if such a hesitant emanation may still be granted that name—quivers with an uncertainty that renders it nearly sentient.

Yet it is not the light that troubles me.

It is what it gives rise to.

The shadows here do not behave as passive consequences of illumination. They linger with a deliberation that suggests intent; they adhere, withdraw, elongate, and contract with a subtle autonomy that I would once have dismissed as a trick of perception. Now, I no longer possess such certainties.

Yesterday, in an effort to reassure myself of the persistence of natural laws, I undertook what I believed to be a trivial experiment. I placed a candle upon the floor and positioned myself before it. My shadow unfolded obediently across the wall, elongated yet faithful, as predictable as any phenomenon governed by physics.

And yet—

When I moved, it did not follow with the immediacy that should have been its defining condition. The delay was infinitesimal. Undemonstrable. And yet undeniable.

It was sufficient to fracture something essential: that silent accord between body and projection, between cause and consequence.

It was then, quite involuntarily, that I thought of you.

Do you recall those evenings when we would conjure entire worlds upon the walls of your room? Our hands—transfigured into improbable creatures—gave rise to narratives you insisted were not ours, but theirs. You maintained, with a seriousness I regret having once mocked, that shadows possessed a form of narrative independence, that we were merely the occasion of their manifestation.

I dismissed you.

I would not dare do so now.

Write to me. I find myself increasingly estranged from what I once understood as reality, and I fear that, without your voice, I may soon relinquish it entirely.

Yours, in a growing uncertainty,

A.

II.

19 October

A.,

Your letter has left me in a state that resists precise articulation. Unease would be too facile a designation; fascination, too indulgent. What I experience is something more insidious—a gradual infiltration of doubt into the very fabric of what I had believed to be unquestionable.

You attribute to shadows a degree of agency that verges upon the metaphysical. Ordinarily, I would have resisted such a proposition with immediate skepticism. Yet now, I find myself hesitating—perhaps not in belief, but in refusal.

Last evening, compelled by a convergence of curiosity and disquiet, I endeavoured to reproduce your experiment. A single lamp, a vacant wall, and my own silhouette cast in obedient monochrome.

For a long time, nothing occurred.

And yet—

There arose, fleeting yet irreducible, an impression that unsettles me still. I did not feel observed—such a sensation would have been almost reassuring in its familiarity—but rather... interpreted.

As though the shadow before me did not merely reflect my form, but proposed a version of me that exceeded my own comprehension.

You must understand what you have initiated.

Clarify, if you are able.

—L.

III.

27 October

L.,

Your choice of the word “interpreted” strikes closer to the truth than you perhaps intended.

Shadows, I am beginning to suspect, are not replicas but translations. And like all translations, they are susceptible to infidelity—not only to the original, but to the very notion of origin itself.

Something here has altered. Whether the transformation lies within the space I inhabit or within my own faculties of perception, I cannot determine. The relationship between gesture and projection—once immediate, unquestioned—now appears contingent, as though each movement required a silent negotiation before consenting to appear upon the wall.

Yesterday, I extended my hand.

It followed.

But not at once.

Or perhaps it is my memory that deceives me, rearranging the sequence of events into something more disquieting than it was. Memory, after all, is itself a species of shadow—distended, selective, irretrievably incomplete.

I find myself returning, with increasing insistence, to the recollection of our final evening together. The sudden extinction of electricity, the room plunged into a darkness so intimate it seemed almost conspiratorial.

You said then, in a voice that remains engraved within me: “In the dark, I feel closer to you.” I failed to understand you.

I begin now to suspect that it was I who remained obscured.

Yours, in belated comprehension,

A.

IV.

2 November

A.,

Your letters no longer confine themselves to the act of reading; they persist, reverberating through the most trivial gestures of my days. They have begun to inhabit me.

You asked for something real. I shall give it to you, stripped of all artifice:

I miss you.

Not with the tempered melancholy your prose might aestheticize, but with a disruptive intensity that fractures continuity itself. My thoughts disintegrate mid-formation; objects elude me; I find myself turning—absurdly, instinctively—toward spaces where you are not.

Last night, something occurred.

I hesitate to recount it, not out of doubt, but out of fear that you will transform it—render it into something more elaborate, more distant from its raw immediacy.

And yet, perhaps that transformation has already begun.

If there remains within you any allegiance to the tangible, I implore you—anchor yourself. Do not abandon me to this alone.

—L.

V.

6 November

L.,

You persist in halting at the threshold of revelation, and I confess that this restraint has become unbearable to me.

Tell me.

As for anchorage, I fear I have long since drifted beyond its reach. The room—or my apprehension of it—has acquired a clarity so severe it borders on the doctrinal. The shadows no longer hesitate; they assert themselves with an authority I cannot contest.

Mine, however, has ceased to resemble me.

What began as a negligible deviation has evolved into something unmistakable. It stands with a coherence, a conviction, that I do not recognize as my own.

Yesterday, I remained perfectly still.

It did not.

And yet—

I was not seized by terror.

I was seized by something far more disquieting: recognition.

As though what I observed was not foreign to me, but truer than I have ever been.

Tell me what you have seen. I sense, with an increasing certainty, that whatever unfolds here does not confine itself to me alone.

Yours, in a clarity I cannot bear,

A.

VI.

9 November

A.,

You demanded the truth. I will no longer withhold it.

I stood once more before the light.

At first, everything adhered to expectation. My shadow obeyed me with the docility of a well-rehearsed illusion.

Then I spoke your name.

Audibly. Deliberately.

And my shadow—

turned.

Not I. Not even a fragment of my body.

Only the shadow.

As though it had heard.

As though it had been waiting.

I extinguished the light immediately, though I cannot say whether it was fear that compelled me, or the unbearable intimacy of what I had witnessed.

Tell me, A.—what has become of you?

And why do I feel, with a certainty I cannot justify, that whatever it is has already begun to claim me as well?

—L.

VII.

14 November

My dearest L.,

What you describe does not astonish me. It confirms what I have long suspected, though I scarcely dared to articulate it.

Shadows are not constrained by distance. They are governed instead by alignment—by that fragile geometry linking light, body, and perception.

When you spoke my name, you did more than summon a memory.

You aligned us.

There exists, I am now convinced, an intermediary space—not here, not there, but between—where our respective projections converge. It is a locus of instability, where identities overlap, distort, and, however briefly, coincide.

A place where separation falters.

You speak of absence as rupture. Here, absence has acquired another meaning: it is not the negation of presence, but its transformation.

Tonight, I ask of you a singular act—one that I would not dare demand were it not for what binds us still.

Stand once more before the light.

Do not turn away.

Whatever manifests—endure it.

If there remains any path between us, it lies there.

Yours, beyond distance, beyond form,

A.

VIII.

Undated

A.,

I obeyed you.

And in doing so, I believe I have crossed a threshold from which there is no return.

At first, there was nothing but the familiar obedience of light and form. Then, gradually—so gradually I might have doubted it—something exceeded the limits of expectation.

My shadow elongated.

Yours—yes, I will name it thus, for I cannot conceive of it otherwise—met it.

They did not merge. They resisted one another, each striving to impose its coherence upon the other. The resulting figure was neither singular nor divisible, but something fractured, intolerable in its ambiguity.

And yet—

Within that dissonance, I felt you.

Not as memory.

Not as illusion.

As presence.

I moved toward it.

But you did not.

Or perhaps you could not.

The light trembled.

And when it steadied, there remained only one shadow.

Mine.

I write now in darkness, uncertain whether I have lost you...

or whether I have, at last, joined you in that place where loss itself ceases to have meaning. If you retain the capacity to answer, do so.

If not—

I shall return to the light.

For if you are there, I would rather dissolve than remain divided from you. —L.

Yellow Steeple

Ava Staunton

The gilded yellow steeple poised high in the sky,
Stricken by a force of light, towering over the wildlife,
The jasmine and blades of green dance under its reign,
Beside the river, orchestrated to the ripple of gold.
The earth's shadow reaching out through interlaced branches,
Across the glimmering stream that flows between life forces,
As a finch crossing over the eve of the solstice,
Illuminating the cold corners of the riverbeds,
Conjoining hot springs with the cool of evening,
To caress into a moment of shadowplay.
Here the world stands still and the trees begin swaying,
Echoing tender truths out of each playful silhouette.
A bed of sunny dandelions surrounds the tall stake,
The running water moving as a breath through the body,
A growing light stretching out from the stone centre,
Lighting up our shy and shaded bodices,
Shining on through, through to our glorious natures.

* ° ✧ · ° ✧ **His Own Little Sunshine** ✧ ° · ✧ ° *

I.U.

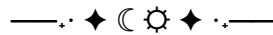
The glowing eyes were back.

But he knew better than to fear them now. Despite the familiar darkness of the room, there

was no reason for him to flee. He was no longer the helpless boy he used to be. Everything was different now. Now he had her.

He could still remember falling asleep with her hand in his; she was there, she kept his heart warm, even as the world grew cold. So no, there really was no reason to flee.

He let out a mental sigh and let himself dream.



It used to destroy him, how one of the things he wanted to forget like no other, never left him alone for longer than an instant. For so long, nothing was more familiar than the eery ambiance of that room. The squeaky floors, the mattress that didn't seem to know of the color white. It had been since the very first day a weird mix of gray and yellow and it always smelled like sweat and cheese and something almost chemical.

What a weird thing to remember.

Oh, how he wished he didn't.

Sometimes he was given a sheet to cover it with, most of the time he wasn't. The pillow, the one and only he had, was just as bare. More often than not, he didn't even lay his head on it, instead choosing to hold it against his chest, like his mother used to hold him when he was little, when she cared, when the comfort of her only son was still on her mind, when she didn't have more important things to take care of.

Thinking of her always made him feel hollow, for so long he had waited for her to come back, and he had hated her for just as long. Weirdly enough, the two – very contradicting feelings *one might say* – used to coexist peacefully somewhere inside his chest. A painful peace, but nonetheless, a peace. He knew better now. Nothing was left but regret and indifference, if she wanted to come back, if she cared enough to check whether

he was still alive – she would have done it already. But she didn't, and Klein wasn't delusional enough to wait forever, not anymore.

Weirdly enough, thinking about the basement was better than thinking about his mother. About the way her eyes were of a color he could no longer remember, about facial features that were probably so very similar to his own, but that he couldn't for the life of him picture all together. Standing in front of a mirror, he used to search for every piece of himself that he might have taken from her, but despite knowing he had her forehead, her eyebrows, her pointy chin and turned up nose, her face remained a blur. Or it used to be just turned up, a smooth swoop following the bone and cartilage all the way to a soft pointy tip. Now a small bump was there, in the middle, bone permanently displaced, nose broken one too many times in his teenage years. Somehow, while it hurt so much in the moment, he grew to love the way his nose was now his own, there was no more need to search for something that would only hurt him in the end.

Anyways, back to the basement. Squeaky floors, and an even squeakier bed frame, an old mattress, a pillow and a blanket. A lonely sight. The blanket was something he was told he could keep, coming into *their* house, one of the only memories he had of the days when everything was still okay, when he was just a little boy, and not a case in a thick folder. The blanket was a blue, fluffy thing, too small for a figure that grew too fast, one of the corners slightly burnt from the tragedy. He loved it like no other, until one day it just disappeared, never to be seen again. He had blamed his bunk mate, even punched him in the face, taking an alarming amount of pleasure in the way this had cracked under his knuckles, *it wasn't just about the blanket*. But no one cared about a lousy blanket, they did however care about his *anger issues*. Back then, he thought they were over-complicating things, he thought he didn't have any, he thought everyone was out to get him. Now, he knows he did have anger issues, maybe he still does, and while some were truly out to get him, most simply didn't care enough to do anything about it.

The room had only one light bulb, colorful wires exposed, hanging by sheer willpower rather than anything else. What a weird thing to say, isn't it? But that had to be true, because otherwise it wouldn't have survived the loneliness, the sorrow, the desolation. It worked most of the time, even though at some point the light grew dimmer, the issue was elsewhere. The light switch was – for whatever reason – outside the door, and even when *they* didn't switch the light off to punish him for whatever sin he had

committed by breathing in their presence or something, it would still sometimes go off ; their children had always loved to *play*, after all.

The wooden stairs – just as squeaky as everything else in that basement, as it seemed – had always looked endless, and yet he would climb them every day, more than once and sit by the door. The first few weeks he had banged on the door, crying and screaming his lungs out, those that followed he learned to beg. Keeping his pride didn't help him any if he had no food in his stomach. He learned to bite it down, to swallow the humiliation along with the leftovers from whatever it was that the kids from upstairs didn't want anymore. After a few more weeks, however, the begging stopped. It didn't do anything, after all. As long as he kept quiet, he would get food, but begging got him the same amount in exchange for *their* sadistic pleasure. So instead, he just sat there, listening to the barely audible chatter somewhere in the house, comfortable conversations and laughter. Things he had never even dared to wish for.

At some point the door opened, *they* didn't have the choice, he had missed far too many months already, he had to go back to school. He was around fourteen at the time. Even opened, it remained an invisible barrier between him and the outside world, him and *them*. Each morning, he went to school, then he would try to keep up in class, avoid people, and eat his thin sandwich in silence. On the walk “home”, word that never felt right for the place he inhabited, he would spend as much time as he could in the park, just *breathing*. Every exhale hid, the sight of the bright shape of the moon from his gaze, if only just for a moment. He used to let his eyes flutter shut and just stand in the cold.

For some reason, he never tried to flee. Instead, after his walk, he would always go back to the hell he lived in. No one ever cared if he came in late, or if he didn't come before morning, not that Klein needed them to, not anymore.

He used to see the basement every night, nightmare upon nightmare, but nowadays, it was a rare occurrence, and it was because of *her* – because of course it was – every single positive thing in his life was now somehow related to her, after all.

Ever since their worlds collided on that rainy day, his skies went from gray to blue and the angry, dark clouds made way for fluffy white ones that took many forms and didn't hide the sun all that much. She made him feel alive again, something he hadn't felt for years.

His own little sunshine.

Since the day they met, Klein's life became so exponentially better that even waking up in the morning wasn't a chore anymore, and yet, something was still amiss, lacking, not quite there yet. A new type of nightmare began plaguing his nights. The basement. A monster. Glowing eyes. Every night was the same, he would go down those *damned* stairs, see the eyes, hear the steps and either wake up, or wait until the monster tried to touch him. Afterwards, he would end up walking around the block for hours, or just lying there motionlessly, not daring to look at the warm body slumbering nearby. More often she would wake up alone, in a cold bed and he would have to pretend he couldn't see the disappointment in her eyes, promptly replaced by resignation, couldn't see that she too was pretending, because of course it bothered her, *who wouldn't be bothered by their partner disappearing every night?* And yet her smile never waned, eyes never lost their spark.

Things had to change, he knew that much. Because those eyes, the soul behind them deserved so much more than his half-assed attempts at being anything better than mediocre, than the lukewarm affection he could give her on the best of his days. Than *him*.

But he was a selfish man, and that meant that he couldn't let her go. He wasn't ready to go back to the way things were before her. Now that he knew how it felt to be wanted, to be loved, he wasn't sure if he even could go back to the way things used to be, to the cold indifference of the world.

If he wanted the sun to still shine in his sky, he needed the clouds to clear up and that meant things had to change.

This time, everything would be different, it had to be.

It was destroying her; he could see it on her face as plain as day.

He knew that sooner or later, the day would come and she would leave. Maybe not right now. Maybe not tomorrow. Lacey has always been patient with him. And yet, it wouldn't last, it never did. Because people leave, and they have every right to. No one wants to wait forever, for something that may never come. For someone that may never be ready. For a shadow too scared of the light.

Lacey was different. She didn't scream, didn't cry, didn't leave, and yet, Klein knew that something had to change, he had to change. Because even if she wouldn't leave, she would die trying to water something dead, something *rotting* slowly under the desert sun.

And Klein? Klein couldn't do that to her. He wouldn't.

Despite not being able to voice it, to say it loud and proud, it was when she was near that he was the happiest. When her hands were in his, when he could pepper the endless number of stars covering her shoulders and back with kisses, creating his own constellations. When she would smile at him as if his eyes were the only ones she wanted to gaze over every curve and dip of her body.

His own little sunshine.

She brought light into a room where the curtains had been closed for too long. Just came in marching, her small bare feet thumping uncharacteristically loud against the cold tiles. She walked in and opened those heavy curtains, dark and opaque and hiding him from everyone who had ever cared about him. She tugged at them with all her might, as if her life depended on it. Maybe it did. She tore open the window, letting fresh air in. It was like an explosion of color on a black canvas. Reds and blues and yellows.

Klein always knew something was different about him, and yet, he never seemed to know *why*. Because, sure, he knew his childhood years were... *abnormal* to say the least, and so were his years as a teenager, but he wasn't the only one and if they could find their place in society – why couldn't he? If they could love loudly, proudly – why couldn't he?

He was but an empty shell with no voice of its own, not even an echo coming from within its walls. Hollow and empty, discarded somewhere between the sharp edges of the rocks, left to fend for himself, against the incoming storm.

But *she*, she was no storm; she was a gentle wave caressing his surface and whispering sweet nothings into his ear.

The first time those three little words left her beautiful lips, he felt like a blind man seeing for the very first time.

He could tell she meant it. Even though he couldn't for the life of him figure out *why* she ever would. Maybe, just maybe – it was because he felt it too.

He knew that he loved her, and yet those words never left his lips. In the gloomiest parts of his heart, bloomed something long forgotten, akin to hope. Hope that those he loves the most wouldn't leave him alone in the darkness. And yet darkness was the only thing he ever knew. Ever since... ever since his father died, since his mother left, since those that were supposed to keep him close as his little world crumbled, closed the basement door shut behind him.

The memory – of the squeaky floors, of the faces that were so very different from his own, of the voices behind the door, barely there, and yet, unapologetically joyful, laughing as if he wasn't wasting away in the darkness – kept him up every night.

The loneliness broke him. It truly did. But he wasn't about to let it break the only soul that had been trying to glue the pieces back together. He wouldn't let the sharp edges of his heart cut the fingers that had so many cuts of their own, and nevertheless kept trying to bandage his wounds, to shed light into the empty halls of his heart. The tiniest cracks in the walls of his mind letting sunlight bleed through, created shadows. Shadows that weirdly enough, didn't scare him as much as the darkness did.

That had to stop, he knew that much. To heal, he had to actually want it, and with her hand in his – he did.



As Klein opened his eyes and saw the same basement that haunted every day of his life, saw the same yellow eyes glowing in the dark, he knew not to fear, not to run away. Instead, he sat down at the bottom of the stairs and let the creature... no, it was no creature. Instead, a boy stood in front of him. He let the boy come to him.

The steps that followed were slow and sloppy, bare, injured feet making their way to him. The child looked uncanny, black spots, white ones, purple, red, blue, green and many others swirling on the surface of his skin, and yet, Klein felt no fear. Not when he could still remember the touch of Lacey's hand. Her eyes searching for his own.

For so many years, he ran, but now, he knew what it felt like to have someone that wanted him to stay. That actually wanted *him*. The him he thought had died so long ago.

Klein felt the touch before he saw the tiny hand clasp his hand. It was cold and so very careful. Tentative.

There were tears on those soft baby cheeks, and scratches on his neck. Some more on his forearms and legs. Nails bloody and torn.

He could still remember clawing at the wooden door. The features of the face that used to be so innocent and soft, were now distorted and not quite the right color.

This time was like so many others, but instead of trying to get away, Klein opened his arms and let the boy in. The second his arms closed around the child in a tight embrace, the basement disappeared, as did everything else. The last thing he heard was a watery thank you.

Opening his eyes wasn't any easier than usual, but he felt lighter, as if the dove, the one he had tried to cage for so long, was now flying freely in the blue sky. He turned over, the bed squeaking unpleasantly, and saw her. This time, he didn't get up hurriedly, he didn't turn away, he didn't even lie there in silence, letting all the *love* – he wasn't going to hide away from that word no longer – flow up and down his tortured mind and body. He let it take over, like a tide in a storm. Instead, he got closer and whispered softly, “I love you”.

She didn't hear him, but that didn't matter. This one was for him, just to make sure he could. Next time he would make sure the words made it to her. He would make sure she knew that he meant every one of them.

His own little sunshine.

