**Note to the reader: this piece is from the draft of an ongoing project--any feedback sent to baddreams.suggest@gmail.com would be much appreciated!**

# **Bad Dreams** (Chapters 1-3)

## Chapter 1: The Demise of Mrs. B

 Other shadows have passed through the house in the three years since my death. A few confused cockroaches coming to terms with the fact that one cannot live forever without a head, and one or two human Shadows who died in the vicinity and passed by out of idle interest. Compared to my presence, they barely grazed the place; I have been the largest blot in this house by far. Each dimly lit object, every bookcase or faucet, crib, table leg or shower head has the uncanny appearance of being my toes, head, or reaching fingers. It was not intentional at first. Simply a chilly side effect of my existence, which leeched outward and infected everything. Infested every last corner of the home on 84 Arch Street, Naghasset, Massachusetts. Toes, head, reaching fingers and starved soul, stored in moving shadows that my parents tell themselves *aren’t there*. In flickering lights so frequent and so disruptive that their electrician is on speed dial. In a circle of peeling paint, and of course, in their nightmares. I lurk: the daughter who once—just barely—lived there.

It is a curious house, 84 Arch Street. It radiates rooms outwards from the hexagon dining room. The third and smallest bedroom stands anomalous: instead, it connects to the dining room's adjacent kitchen. It is the most beautiful room by far—in a house that would be called beautiful by most standards, with its star-facing porch and helical outdoor staircase. Not for its architecture, or the view—unlike the dining room, my parents’ bedroom, or the attached attic’s widows wharf, the third bedroom lacks a view of the sea. The room is beautiful because it is hand painted. All four walls are coated with meticulous nimbus clouds and sunshine, with assorted dragons, pterodactyls, birds of prey, an open-hatched airplane, and a slew of over-sized damselflies. I would do anything to have grown up in that room, staring at the painted sky my parents made me. I know every crack and crevice of the paint, sofa, chair, mirror, bureau, lamp and birdcage in that room. I have memorized the passages of the heat vents and air conditioner in the ceiling, of the electrical wiring in the wall. I know that whoever and whatever passes through this room, it is *mine*. It was mine when I was alive, and I have not come this far through time just to watch my parents give it away.

 If I can’t figure out something soon, they will. My mother, Marceline, is swollen around the middle with a child that isn’t me. My father, Thomas, has been looking through the Pantone catalog and humming when he thinks no one is listening. They are happier than they have been in the three years I have haunted them. The nightmares that I send them—of the child born a Shadow, of their remembrances of my last days—were apparently not enough to keep them from forgetting me. The baby’s due date is approaching. And I don’t know what I can do.

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I need someone to talk to or to listen, but I no longer even have Ellie. Her fading, while not unexpected, was selfish. I helped her, like I would help any Shadow. It would only have been fair of her to hold out until the situation with Benjamin was resolved.

I let myself slide along walls, under tables, across pavement, and to the beach. Although the movement itself, like all movement through space, is a passive process for a Shadow, the mere trip drains my energy. I almost change my mind and return to the house at 84 Arch Street, so that I do not have to see the shore empty of Ellie, and remember that has left me here alone with a family that is determined to forget me.

And so I find myself alone at the pier, for the third day in a row. The sun rises up overhead, shooting harsh sparks of orange along the beach, but still those deep black waters yield no Ellie. Seagulls caw overhead, and sandpipers move to the shore to gobble the spare pickings of Naghasset’s beach. I recede to the shadowed space under the piers, and watch foam hiss out from the rough patch of waves where she drowned last July.

Again I force myself to face the fact that she is gone, and a sour sadness peals out from the center of my presence like a bell. Ellie lasted almost a year, the longest haunt of any Shadow I have met besides myself. I had thought, or at least hoped, that she would hang around at least another. She might have done, too. If, if only, her husband’s psychotherapist had not convinced him to move to Anchorage for some fresh air.

I spread out into a patch of shade on the still-cool sand, demarcated by three barnacled pillars. I remind myself that words like *if only* are best left to humans; for a being such as me, they can only embitter. Still, memories of the last year spill outwards from my consciousness. They terrify me, because I have never seen another Shadow last as long as Ellie. If she could endure a year and a half and then fade, how do I know that I won’t fade as well if Benjamin is born? Our situations were not so different at the core.

I spend the rest of the day at the pier, till it is nighttime. Then I hide amongst those shadows and crannies of the beach that hid from the light of the moon, and wait out another night. There is so little time before Benjamin happens that I hate to use it *outside* of home, but the utter inability to stop it is forcing me to keep my distance. I am not wanted there, with a new force: their thoughts tread around me so carefully as they install baby monitors and buy diapers, cloth and breast-pump kits. As if I could break any of it, even as I want to. As if I were not part of the family.

And Ellie is not there to console me, or to tell me what a human would do in my place. I wait, and I look backwards even as I push on forward. I try, and try, and try, and try to think if there is anything I could have done to have kept Ellie here. To keep me here, if I slip the way she did. I know that, with some Shadows, there is no reasoning. They think they are too good to be a ghost. At least that is not my problem, because I know there’s no other way.

“Ellie, send him a nightmare,” I had told her, as we sat down by this same pier and watched the waves which had taken her life.

“Never,” she had answered, and she shook her shadow head back and forth, slow and sad.

“Just a small one,” I had countered. “Just enough to make him stay. He is just a human, they have bad dreams all the time.”

“Like your parents,” she had replied softly, and I bristled. The edges of my presence frayed, and I began to slide towards the patch of water where she had drowned. I knew she hated that spot, and would not follow.

“Riss,” she had called after me, as I drifted down through the water, and slunk off amidst the sea-bed darkness to sulk the day away. “Little Clarissa, don’t be angry. I only meant...”

The sand and water had swirled over me, muffling the words. I glided through murky green until the sting of her words had mellowed and my loneliness caught up with me. I can never stand when an adult Shadow treats me like I have the mind as a human child. They never seem to grasp that the three years I have spent as a Shadow do not correspond to the growing-up of a living girl. For one, I never had the chance to wait for my brain to develop. But more, Shadows like Ellie never wrap their minds around the way that space-time is inverted for the living and the dead. So used to thinking of space and time like a human, they treat me as if I were *young*. Which makes about as much sense as calling a marathon *quick.* And then they find themselves fraying, fading: without the energy or motivation to keep pushing forward in time. They sleep, and less of them wakes up each time—until, by the time they truly understand that our existence is an active, not a passive process, they leave me. If I still had fingers, I could count on those digits the number of times I have slept, because I am not so much three-years-old as three years exhausted.

I stare at the same waters now, as it dawns on me: if I had not been so upset from before, I would have realized then, that it was all the beginning of our goodbye. Her resistance to sending nightmares should have terrified me from the start. When a Shadow refuses to touch minds, what is it going to hold onto? At the time of the conversation, my brother had hardly been conceived; I still thought I knew how to survive. I still think that I would have succeeded with my plans soon if it were not for the swell in my mother’s belly. A fetus named Benjamin. As inevitable a blow to myself as Anchorage was to Ellie. I feel myself dim with a fear that I will go the same way as she did, that I won’t have the strength to sustain abandonment if she didn’t.

Ellie always went half-way, I tell myself. Even if Benjamin leaves me with nothing, I will have done everything in my power to prevent him. While Ellie had haunted the pipes and plumbing of her home through the bright hours of the day, she never actually tried to startle her husband in the process. She told me that he had begun to search real estate listings in Alaska on his computer, but never tried to pass across the screen or so much as leave him ill at ease. She ought to have. The living have no right to desert us, when we are still existing beside them with every particle of energy—but a shadowy patch in the hot water tap doesn’t scream *I am still here.*

She tried to justify his behavior. Yes, it was true air in Anchorage hasn’t gotten as bad as the average city. It leaves even most small places like Naghasset in the dust, quite literally, by comparison. My father, Thomas Crease, has the proof pinned to the refrigerator of our home. I told Ellie about that slightly yellowed clipping of the graph on the front of New York Times from Jan. 2, 2018, when the NIH and EPA did the joint study the news nicknamed “The Grimy States of America”. But Ellie knew as well as her husband and his psychotherapist that that this “fresh air” was a delicate way to phrase “somewhere where you don’t cry every time you see a teacup that reminds you of your wife.”

 “Ellie, send him a nightmare,” I had repeated, time and time again. It was the easy, first step. His brain was as permeable as they come, it would be no trouble for her to mold the scraps of his day into something that would send a cold chill slime down his back whenever he thought of moving away, of moving on.

 “I love him,” she had said, in that weak voice which characterizes a fading Shadow.

“What about me?” I begged. I remember how her presence drew closer, and I felt the familiar softness and dimming comfort that her closeness brought.

“Clarissa, darling,” she said. “You know, I never had a child of my own.”

I understood. When Ellie found me, I was a feral sort of Shadow, a swirling and confused creature drifting around Naghasset with nothing to hold but my own loneliness. For one, I could understand human speech, having observed it carefully, but did not yet think in it. I had never learned to speak as a human and no other Shadow took the time to teach me before Ellie.

While she existed, the two of us had complementary knowledge, shareable loneliness. Ellie, torn between her Shadow present and human memory, told me that it was like making everything she knew do a headstand and she just couldn’t wrap her mind around the new way properly. She was not used to seeing in photonegative. She was not used to feeling bright light as pain. She hated being on the perimeter of objects rather than holding them in her two hands. She missed the smell of the ocean. When she had been human, she used to have to push and strain against water if she wanted to swim, that she remembers that too well to take any satisfaction in gliding through the dapples on the waves. If she could have moved like that, she never would have died, which made the effortlessness an empty pleasure. On the other hand, humans didn’t stop existing if they lost their concentration, and she missed the state of not-thinking Ellie called *her zone*. She insisted that, without real memories, I simply can’t imagine the explosion of food taste against the flesh of a tongue or how a simple kiss on the lips can be as bright as midnight.

I tried my best to stretch my thoughts that far, but they sprang back like a spring to remind me what I have been denied. The familiar rage would boil through me, a wound that was balanced out by my desperation to hear more. Her thoughts were not so ragged and wild as mine: they were sensations and words, the taste of taffy and the feeling of sweat, the cool pressure of water against a bathing suit, and the dreams that had slipped through her fingers. Each item came out with the same soft sadness: she did not regret the action that had led to her death. She grieved the years which her body could have lived, if the pores that humans use to take in air hadn’t been filled to the brim with saltwater.

Ellie the almost-a-hero lifeguard would relay precious tidbits of life as a real, live, breathing, muscled, loved and hated human. On the shores of the Naghasset beach, in the dark corners of our respective homes, or wherever else we felt like drifting: I passed a year with Ellie learning about the strange parallel world in which she had lived. She would tell me how differently everything looks with light and dark inverted. How hard it was to find objects that dropped in corners. How the night sky looks to humans as a patch of sun-flushed sand, speckled over with dark dots, would appear to the two of us. I remembered every word she spoke—which astonished her. Humans, minds encumbered by their brains at war with hormones, glands and neurons firing in opposite directions, simply couldn’t learn like I could. Soon, I would know life better than the living, she said. That sort of praise fed my presence with a warmth that I had never felt before, like the comfort of the sun setting on a moonless night.

For almost a year, I would follow her wherever she went. I would press her for more and more such facts until she got too nostalgic to do anything but make vague heaving sounds that I took to be her best approximation of crying. Many Shadows—not including myself, of course—are addicted to nostalgia, or they wouldn’t bother enduring the constant exertion to keep oneself from fading away into nothingness. Ellie was no exception, and she was glad to have me there to listen. Ellie would talk about her funeral for the umpteenth time, how touched she was by the vast multitudes that had attended and the way they really meant their tears. Ellie promised, so many times I lost count, that she didn’t actually *want* them to be sad, that she had *always* known how much they cared and didn’t need grief to prove it.

That was where our understanding fractured: I can’t remember having been loved, and it was only my affection for Ellie that forced me to listen to her talk like that.

In turn, it was me who told to just have to keep focused on maintaining your presence, or down you go like a shark that forgot to swim. I told her again and again sleeping was a hazard to a Shadow. No matter how sweet she it once felt to wake up in the same spot as she had slept, it was dangerous. If she forgot, she might fade into her death, an insidious and gentle end that would separate us forever. No more would she see her husband, I warned Ellie, never again would she remember how tangerines tasted, the feel of crusted hairspray as she fastened her wedding veil, or the way that she had swallowed her first lost tooth by accident.

It did little good: she would rise up from the black harbor water at 5:05 every morning like clockwork. Grasping around for the limbs of the drowning man she had come so close to saving. It always took her minute before she remembered that she was a Shadow, and therefore didn’t need to breathe. I would be there, and would remind her who and what she was.

I did not want her to fade, so I taught her everything I knew. I promised her that she would get used being a Shadow, that she had me to help her when I had had no one. For the rest of the day, she was more the mother and the teacher, but at 5:05 in the morning Ellie needed me to help her. It may be strange, but I will miss that more than most things now that she is gone.

I tried to take her inability to adjust lightly. I would make even fun of her for crouching behind the “NO SWIMMING” signs. Actually crouching, it was quite pitiable how she contorted her presence into the familiar pattern of arms and legs, of wedding ring bulge and still acne-studded chin. The daylight would burn at stray hairs and fingers shapes that she couldn’t tuck out of the way of the sun, but I could never convince her to be amorphous. Unable to stop moving, she would shift back and forth in her crouch like an epileptic toad: it was a sight I will always recall. At the time, I thought it was funny, back when I thought that she was learning slowly but steadily how to exist as a Shadow.

To her credit, in the end, Ellie tried.

During the final few days, as he began to pack his bags, Ellie sent nightmares to her love. Once she got going, they were some really vicious specimens which impressed even me. It was all too late. For all that he woke up crying or screaming, the man had already sold his house. He took the good doctor’s advice, and he up and left Naghasset. He would never again wake up bawling at 5:05 A.M., eyes turned magnetically towards the sea.

Once when her husband left for a fresh lungful of Anchorage, Ellie lost her will. She stopped telling me about the crunch of crusty bread and the pain of her ear infections the summer she learned to dive. All Ellie could talk about was the new life her husband would have in Alaska.

“He will probably marry again,” she said. “I am happy for him, you know. He deserves…happiness.”

“He loves, you,” I countered. “Besides, it is cold in Alaska. Judging by Thomas’s dreams of polar research, your husband is more likely to freeze.”

“I know that loves me,” she replied, torturing her Shadow form into a human smile. It made me feel small and ignorant, and I did not know how to answer. “Riss. You sound so much older that I forget you are really just a toddler.”

She faded slowly for a week, no matter how I warned her, just didn’t have the strength left to tread on forward through time. By the last day, I was begging: I told her that she had to hang around just a month or two longer, that she couldn’t leave me alone to face Benjamin’s birth.

Ellie left me alone to face Benjamin.

“I hope you find your peace,” she told me, two days ago, before she faded into nothing. I hope I do not, because that is what she found. It was deadly, and it is the reason she is gone.

I refuse to be a half-way Shadow, and let any part of the life I had slip away. I refuse to fade like Ellie did. I hope that refusing will be enough. If only—

I gaze at that same patch of the Naghasset Harbor now, where a lifeguard named Ellie had drowned last July. It is dawn again, still too cold to swim, but an older couple walks along the shoreline in waterproof boots and long coats. The sun, almost overhead, has shortened their shadows, and I thin myself to follow the twin patterns. In the trail of their steps, I drift further from the familiar patch of saltwater that I no longer have a reason to visit.

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The day of Benjamin’s arrival, our door opens slowly. I drift towards the front hall, terribly afraid and certain of what I will see. Indeed, when my mother limps into the house, she carries with her an ugly ruddy little living breathing preemie: my brother.

Marceline Crease balances half her weight on my father’s arm as they navigate the strange geometry of the house. Down the front hall, and through that hexagon of a dining room. They huddle together as they step, like a creature with three heads, twitching with every flicker of the light. I follow them, slipping through the dark patches behind furniture, morbidly excited to see the thing which has cracked my world apart.

“Stop right there,” I command them. Of course, they do not hear me, any more than they can hear each other’s thoughts. “Turn around, dispose of him, and come back when you are sorry for this.”

Marceline stares intently at the lump in her arms. She stares as if it would disappear should she look away for a millisecond—she is so focused on the thing in her arms that nearly trips over the threshold as they pass into the kitchen. Thomas reaches out an automatic arm to steady her.

“Good catch,” she says, and then starts to bawl.

“Shh,” Thomas says. “Shh, shh. Just sit down here.”

“Drop him,” I plead. “Oh, please drop him.”

Thomas propels Marceline back into the dining room, and then hurries to the kitchen to fetch her a glass of ice water. My father’s eyes dart from wall to wall as if expecting the shadows behind them to change under their glance. He blanches pale as bone. He has nothing to fear at this precise moment, though: I am too busy assessing the situation to let myself be seen. I compress into the shadow of their microwave on the linoleum floor of the kitchen. I watch his sneakers clump down on nearby tiles as he grabs the ice tray from the freezer. He cracks it twice on the counter to loosen some cubes. His hands are wobbling, and the digits sweat fingerprint patterns against the glass.

It is hard to tell whether my mother is laughing or crying this point. Tears stream down her face, over the craters of her dimples, and collect on the small point of her chin. Benjamin caterwauls from inside the bundle of fabric in her arms, and the terrified smile on Marceline’s face grows wider. I am baffled: I wish that Ellie were here to explain the expression to me, what it is and what it means.

“Shh,” Marceline says to my squalling brother, and the tears speed up as they race down her face. “I’m sorry, Thomas. I should make today happy—I just—”

“Stop crying,” I command them both, helplessly.

Thomas sets the glass down in front of her on the dining room table, and condensation sweats down the side of the glass. My father bends over, laboriously, until his head is at the same height as the screaming cloth bundle. He doesn’t say anything. He kisses my new brother on the ear, and a magnificent pang of emptiness spirals through my presence. I wish that Ellie were here to explain this to me, because I do not understand. I cannot fathom the way that this being, this Benjamin, has sent my parents into orbit around him, when he did not even exist a day ago. I want her to use soft words to make it make sense, that a life I have been denied is given to him as if I were not there to watch and grieve it.

Thomas holds Marceline’s hand until Benjamin is quiet, and then until she is calm and has finished her water. The two of them sit under their own roof at last and watch Benjamin Crease breathe that air into his fresh young lungs. Safe and warm inside their arms, he has flesh and he has bones. They can hold him and feel his heart beat out a contract to be real and alive and for them to love him. It makes me sick, and I spill out of the room with a consciousness clouded by a hatred so powerful that I can hardly contain it and remain intact. I swear to myself that I will not fade, that I will not be like my almost-mother of a Shadow.

“Don’t look so calm,” I whisper. “I will make myself dangerous if I have to fade trying.”

Imperceptibly, they twitch.

I wait until they have tucked him into his bassinet in the third and smallest bedroom of the house. The two resident parakeets pay no heed to their new roommate. Marceline falls instantly asleep in the armchair by the basinet, her head turned toward the sleeping bundle inside it as if she could stare through her closed eyelids. Thomas moves around the house for another hour, tall, heavy-footed double checking the baby monitor and re-reading the sheaves of paper from the doctors at Angel Memorial Hospital. He falls asleep alone on the bed in the parents’ bedroom.

As always, his mind is impermeable. I have almost never managed to invade it with a nightmare, he is too tightly bound in a feeling like a wrap of cotton batting. Through the fine crevices between the wires, I catch the usual glimpses of his anger and exhaustion. Today, there is also something else. Something which sends wisps of warm smoke from the cotton edges of his consciousness; the wisps smell strange and sweet, but without Ellie to guide me I cannot quite interpret them.

I slide through the wall, where I find the sleeping mind of the baby, a boring orange glow that lacks a definite boundary. It seeps outwards, making the air of the room vaguely murky.

I pass over the small lumpy brains of the parakeet couple and turn to Marceline. Her mind is one of the more permeable I have seen in my three years’ haunt, and as always, it is a simple task to scour her subconscious for dreams, and to alter them. As I drift down through its outer layers, I see that the parched grey landscape is tinged with orange. I cast about through the passageways her mind; I search halfheartedly for the kernel of a dream that I could pull or poke at to start a nightmare. I almost turn around and leave—I begin to think that Ellie was wise to admit defeat rather than watching this sort of erasure.

But then, I watch a vision pass before her sleeping eyes, of a small figure cradling the air. The figure wanders back and forth, whispering to space in the crook of her arms, until she steps under a light. She watches a puddle of darkness slide between her fingers.

With a start, I retreat from her mind. Her flesh-and-blood eyes jerk behind their lids, till tears leak out the corner. Her heart pounds fast, too fast, till it sounds almost like the parakeets nearby.

I have misjudged my situation. There is still something left for me to work with in Marceline’s mind. My mother is already dreaming, and my mother is dreaming of me.

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I stay in the third and smallest bedroom the following morning, observing the baby until Marceline and Thomas bring it into the kitchen with them. I am too frayed to follow.

*Is this how it feels at the end? Is this what it is like to fade?*

I do not think so, but to calm myself, I drift into the circuit. I trace the path of the wires through the walls, forming a flat cylinder shape that glides between the insulation and copper. Up, past feathery chunks of asbestos, and up through the bulb of the bendable lamp on top of the bureau. As I burst through the bulb I blot out a section of the light. In their domed cage next to the lamp, Mr. and Mrs. Budgerigar-Darling cluck raspy mocking nothings to each other, as if I were nowhere. *Preeeety bird. Gree-e-ee. Preeety birdie. Ultersooound.*  I head back down the bent spine of the lamp, and then back up through the wall again: for all that the parakeets know, the lamp itself is flickering.

 *Cluck, tweet*, sings Mr. Budgerigar-Darling with a thrill of his tapered wings. *Smarrrt birrrrdie.* The lamp’s flickering intensifies: Mrs. B-D tosses a rapid glance in its direction as if embarrassed at her mate’s chatter. There is something really sharp and nasty about my mood, and as if getting the sense of that, she pecks nervously at the powder-free finish bars at the far edge of her world. An irritating sound if there ever was.

 Ellie would have told me to calm down, but she is not here, so there is no reason why I should.

I hesitate in the lamp bulb this time round the bureau, rather than passing through the blind spot as quickly as possible. I move once the burning gets too bad, but it stretches my mind out wonderfully to imagine that terrifying blank scape sweeping out over the horizon instead of a clear black night. The parakeets chatter for a moment at my eclipse of their lamp, and then forget the incident entirely.  *Preeetty. Glub ill warrrn. Treeeeee-tree-tree.*

Down through the circuit, a detour through the clock, and back to my laps through the lamp. Running this circuit generally fries out the day’s gloom pretty well, but even flashing through the bulb can’t seem to knock my sourness today. If I were a human, they would lock me up right now: with my brother trying his best to replace me—and Ellie faded—I am jagged and bitter around every insane edge of my presence.

 “Bye-bye-byeee,” twittered Mr. Budgerigar-Darling: his stupid birdbrain was on point like a human ballerina, and his performance interrupted my thoughts. The lime green bosom puffs out: “El-lo pretty bird. Byee-bye.”

 *Shut up, will you?* I think at the parakeet. For a fractional moment, I huddle myself down inside the dark cavity where the wall wiring meets the lamp’s outlet through a halo of peeling paint. For that slice of time try to tell myself that it wouldn’t be so lonely for long. After all, hardly a month went by without some sentimental person or other who wanted to cling on long enough to watch their loved ones cry and tear their hair around a coffin full of flesh that had gone from them too soon. Perhaps one of them, someday, would be another Ellie. Perhaps if I waited and hoped and tried for long enough, I could almost have the warmth that my parents are giving to Benjamin.

 “Counttooootinonetootreee. Parakeetwantreat-treat-treeat. All go-ooo-on. Preeeety birrrd”

I snap.

I drift up the circuit, slowly, and settled in the flaming wire of the lamp. The whole room is cast into blind light for an instant, but I spread out my Shadow self until the burning bright was nearly quenched. Mrs. B-D mutters some profanities and then falls asleep with her head sunk into her neck like a cork. Mr. B-D takes the opportunity to leave a set of droppings on a twig. Vapid creatures, who have decided a moving Shadow was just night come early: these two residents of the room that had once been meant for me and would now be given to a vapid, living breathing, preemie, flesh-blood sack of tears and droppings and spit. I get a sort of sick feeling in the center of my presence, like I’ve heard babies get when someone snatches a food from their weak-pudding hands, not to eat it but to trash so as to watch the baby sob.

I flex the shape of myself, and then things began to get interesting.

To the birds, one sleeping and one awake, a threatening patch of darkness seems to play against the wall. An objective reality, strict about the presence and absence of electromagnetic waves, would not have detected any change. Unfortunately for the birds, they were conscious—at least, conscious enough for me to play with. The dim outline of feline ears and whiskers, of a hunched back and dagger straight tail appear more like a cat’s shadow than the real item would have, magnified hugely onto the opposite wall. And, as I have slunk into a really nasty mood, I add claws for good measure.

 The female parakeet’s dusky blue feathers begin to shiver and shake under the slatted shadows of the cage dome. While her mate stares stupidly out at the bedroom beyond the bureau, on the theory that a threat that he could not see was no threat at all, I supplant Mrs. Budgerigar-Darling’s dreams of supple green seeds cracking inside her beak with nightmares of rot. Of damp-matted feathers, and the loudening sounds of clawed paws—powerful enough to kill, slender enough to reach through the bars of a cage, and flexible as smoke.

Its small heart begins to race, to shiver, and run out of its control, and so I make the nightmare nastier. I slink patches of darkness into Mrs. Budgerigar-Darling’s delicate little brain, and once inside I dismember Mr. Budgerigar-Darling before her subconscious and then turned to her with a toothy grin. Rip away the dictionary of words and chirps she has rote memorized, and leave her moving her beak in silence as the green powder-free bars of her world begin to hiss and reach towards her. Closer and closer, with faceless steel tongues.

Mrs. B-D loses her grip and dies. The stout beak spasms upwards, for a beat—and then the bird keels forward from its perch and splashes down into the drinking dish. Water chasing over the tiny feathered shipwreck.

 I slide upwards, almost aghast, as I smell the last trickle of nightmare leaking from its small, ruptured mind. Fear, flapping, interrupted by whatever I have caused. Heart attack or seizure? A curious warm feeling begins to creep through all the corners and nooks of my presence: I caused something. Mr. Budgerigar-Darling looks down at the splay-winged body of his lifelong partner, and cracks open a particularly tough seed with a squeeze of his beak. Heart attack or seizure, I caused something, a flesh and blood and bone thing. A thing that is soaking up water in a feed dish, on a in a green domed cage on top of a bureau, in a house on a spinning planet, in a wide world of matter in which up until now I was watching, which up until now had paid to spectate at, if only in photonegative with every iota of my being.

 Now, it was different, now that I had learned how to kill.

## Chapter 2: Nature and Nurture

 I am still in the third and smallest bedroom when Thomas finds the widowed bird and its dead mate. He stares through the bars of the cage for a long time, as if trying to figure out whether Mrs. Budgerigar-Darling were *sleeping* in her water dish, beak open, one wing in the air. Of course she isn’t. Then, in one motion, he flicks open the latch with a thumb and index finger, opens the door, blocks Mr. B-D from escaping with his elbow, and retrieves a corpse so tiny seems to disappear inside his fist.

 “Shit,” he says, water from the soaked feathers running down the back of his hand, onto his sweater. It drips onto the carpet as he leaves the third and smallest bedroom. It spatters on the kitchen tiles as he returns to Marceline.

 “Did you find the pacifier where—” she begins, at the sound of his footsteps, without lifting her eyes from my brother or blinking. She is at the kitchen table, elbows braced against the chair; she holds Benjamin as if he were made of butter, greased to slide out of her arms. She is so tired that she is almost dreaming—a heaviness oozes out of her mind like tar.

 Thomas stands behind Marceline, still, a darkish puddle spreading up his forearm. I creep through the furniture shadows to find a better vantage point, and settle in the tower of shade my father casts on the floor as he stands there and waits for her to look at him. He unfurls his hand, and they stare down at it together.

Mrs. Budgerigar-Darling is still lovely, with a dusty brown and white hood of feathers extended over her baby-blue chest, with eyes shut into a delicate slit over full cheeks. I wonder what my parents would think if they knew I had snuffed out what little consciousness that ornamental lump had carried.

“Look mom—and dad—look at what I did,” I say, even though neither of them can hear me. They don’t need to hear me right now—they can see the bird, and that’s enough. “I’m still here. Does the budgie tell you? I’ll kill the other one if I have to.”

Marceline’s eyes instantly bubble over with tears, which course down her cheek and land on Benjamin’s forehead, making the baby blink, making Marceline gasp. *Just wait*, I think to it. Its thoughts are small, pebbly bulbs, meandering outwards from the infant mind. They look less interesting than even the Budgerigar-Darlings’, but somehow it still gives me the impression that it is *aware* of me. Of the strangeness of the feathers and flesh in its fathers’ hand.

 “Goddamn hormones,” Marceline says, turning her head to wipe her tears on her own shoulder. She inhales, deeply, and her mouth crumples. “It’s just a bird.”

 “What could have happened?” Thomas asks, staring at the lump. He does not seem to have heard her—although, with him, I can never tell.

“Honey, ignore me, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t let it get me all—”

 “Parakeets get about six years. Typically—Marcy, did you notice, was she feeding normally?”

 “Who knows?” Marceline answers. She fixes him with bright red eyes. He waits. I wait too, knowing that Marceline will fill in the silence. Her mind is overflowing like her tear ducts,

“God I hate crying. Thomas, I’m sorry, I know you loved the damn birds, I just…these things—”

My father leaves the room, hovering in the doorway for a moment and then disappearing out of sight. My mother’s head drops, slack-jawed, till her forehead nearly touches Benjamin’s. Deprived of Thomas’s cast shadow, I slide under the table and settle along the lace-less shoe tongues which dig into the instep of Marceline’s swollen feet.

She shifts her feet slowly, half tapping them on the floor, half kicking. The motion is tense, constrained, and I can sense bright flares of pain spreading out to blot her thoughts with every *tap, tap, tap*. Benjamin begins to squall, and she constrains the tap still more tightly, bunching her quadriceps while her feet tick an ever faster beat. *Tap, tap—*

“I’m sorry,” she cuts herself off. Then, louder “Thomas, come back. I’m as sad about Mrs. Budge—”

Benjamin yells loudly, vapid sound. Whatever my mother was going to say is drowned out by his noise; the feet stop, and her attention is drawn down to the needy creature.

“What do you want?” she asks. “Are you hungry? Are you hungry? Or do you just want your mommy to stop making knots out of everything. Hungry it is.”

But Benjamin isn’t interested in feeding. He turns his head away from her chest, and yells into the folds of her dress. It is a pitiful sound: it sounds like he is suffering, which I hope he is.

She lifts him close to her face, and sniffs the backside. It isn’t soiled.

 “What are you crying about?” Marceline asks. Her face pinches with distress. Tears start to roll down her cheeks again, but she doesn’t seem to notice. “You don’t need to cry. You don’t need to cry. Momma’s here. Momma’s got you.”

 I shrivel; those are my words. I have heard them a hundred times in Marceline’s nightmares, when she dreams about me dying. But, though a flicker passes through her mind like a skipped heartbeat, she is thinking about Benjamin. Thoughts for my brother is drifting like steam from Marceline’s mind, so thick and viscous that I’m almost surprised the humans’ can’t see it gather above their heads. She is focused intently on his rotten crying face, trying to comfort whatever hurt he might be imagining for himself, while I curl in the shadows of her shoes. Almost as good as faded, as far as she cares.

 I wrinkle up. I did not kill the parakeet just to have her hold Benjamin more tightly—even Thomas said out loud that there was something strange in them dying. But the wisps of thought that had leaked from her consciousness smelled too much like fear, too little like sorrow.

 I think of all the times she has dreamed of me, and woken up choking on her tears, and then sat up all night awake rather than wake Thomas and remember me together. Her mind is more permeable by far, but her will is out of my reach—she takes quick, ice cold showers to avoid seeing shapes flicker behind the fog, she cracks her shins on furniture rather than put out night-lights which might cast shadows, she holds Benjamin so close it almost smothers him, as if breathing open air would be too dangerous—she fights off thoughts of me, as if I would go away and fade just because of that.

But when I was dying, she must have said *stay with me, don’t leave me*. She said *you don’t need to cry. Momma’s here. Momma’s got you*. She said *you will always be my little girl. I’ll see you in the air if I can’t hold you in my arms. You’ll be right with me.*

Or, if she did not say these things, she wishes she had, because she dreams them, time and time again.

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For at least two days, I hovered back and forth against the wall behind the bureau. Rearranged and transplanted furniture have blocked and scuffed a power outlet and scraped the open airplane, and the distorted texture fit perfectly with my hazy and furious state. The accidentally ruined passenger’s painted pink arms stretched outwards with painted glee. A giant painted mass of auburn hair flown backwards out of her painted helmet. I like to think it was supposed to be me. It is hard to tell, with her face scraped off and peeled sideways, and I do not think I could stand to know for certain either way.

Two hazy days, which I would call feverish and drunk if I trusted the way Ellie described that muffling of the consciousness. I mulled and mulled on the hand-painted walls, the bureau and lamp and sofa, the birdcage and the mother in the small bedroom. They should all have been mine, but now they belong to Benjamin. The errant objects that had once been Thomas and Marceline’s own playthings and had lain in the drawer: a sad-eyed Peter Rabbit and a hand-knitted onesie, a miniature hat embroidered with watches and a dozen cardboard stories. The things, every last one piece of this inheritance, my parents have given to Benjamin. Soon they will be crinkled, stained, and they will smell like Benjamin.

Benjamin was home, precisely as alive as I had feared. I wondered what I would have felt on seeing him if I were not what I am: would it be the warm sensation of watching the lady parakeet bob amidst the shells of sunflower seeds? Ellie had tried to describe love as a warm thing, like the burning feeling when too much light wrecked the edge of your presence, like traveling loops through a heating element but without minding it. With that, I got a sick sensation again, right in the middle of me, only this time I knew the word for it: I felt murderous.

After two murderous, feverish days, I poke a tendril of shade from under the bureau. I look out into a crystal midnight. The two living humans did not stir under my survey:

Before me, half all of a family, frozen in place from sleep, while I jitter and stir. Before me, a woman, Marceline Crease, slumped forward with exhaustion. A discarded, deflated doll in a speckled dress, with one hand draped through the curtain of the bassinet like an anchor. Lace, patterned like frost. I creep closer through the stillness until I could see a small peach face, squashed sideways on fresh linen bedding: Benjamin Crease. A chubby fist by his face, the imprint of a hospital band still ripe along his wrist.

For an instant, I sympathize with Ellie’s willingness to fade. The sheer gross powerless feeling of watching objects move in the wrong directions and not being able to do anything, it is enough to make any Shadow so insane as to sink away. I am different now, I remind myself, as I pull my tendril back and swell in size behind the bureau. I can cause things. For a moment, I wonder whether I could have convinced Ellie to stay, had I known this then…*only bitterness*, I remind myself. It is too late for that.

Perhaps, if I had known that Benjamin would never have been born, I would have taken Ellie’s advice—and tried to win them back with kindness, with dreams of a small smiling face that loved them still. But I can’t want to, now. Not after watching my parents guard my mother’s swollen stomach as if it were a balloon in a nest of tacks. Not after hearing them skirt around my name—as if by speaking it, they would curse him.

 A part of me whispers that it wasn’t *Benjamin* who had hurt me, so it wasn’t *Benjamin* who I should hurt. But in the end his mind is too small, too irritating, for me to worry about it, not when I know that it was only with him dead too, when they could no longer lose the child, that they would dare think of both their children. I steep in the murderous feeling, the anger and the haze, and the image of Mrs. Budgerigar-Darling’s beak keel upwards like a steeple before she fell.

I creep on closer, filled with a distilled sort of resolve. I turn it over within me, unused to its sharp presence: it stings, like being made out of hot blind filaments. I can cause things, after all this watching, and I will. Soft snores rock my brother and mother and Mr. Budgerigar-Darling through the golden pre-dawn minute. Orange beams from a smiling-moon night-light glow off the pair of them like twin statues. Glint off the scales and delicate eyes of the dragons and dragonflies on the wall, and cast inanimate shadows on the wall by the parakeet cage.

I slip through the drapes of the bassinet; I dangle weightless from the frost-lace, close enough to see the stains of infant drool on Marceline’s sweater sleeve, caking the face of her watch. Her gently wrinkled hand, snowy with eczema, lies limp with sleep on a thick forest green fleece amidst spiky knots of my brother’s hardened spittle. It is a passed-down blanket. And it should have been mine. Right then, I would kill for just a square inch of the fabric.

 I tear my gaze from the blanket, towards the blandness of infant dreams. Soft orange and glowing, like the room. The bird dangly-mobile on the ceiling wheels through the putty surface of his mind. The rainbow beaks speak gibberish in a voice that tastes like Marceline’s.

 I let myself flicker through the nightlight, and, blinded by it, cast my singeing edges into shapes, which I think might scare him. An illuminated skeleton, reaching out and then sinking down to dust, perhaps. A dash of hulking beast. He would probably not be all that different from the parakeet once it came down to the lizard brain.

I trace out dark shapes, and I whisper out bad dreams. Dreams of how this warm fleshy peachy blob, so covered in their love that he hardly needed a blanket, could end up a Shadow like me. With so little left to lose he too would murder. I conjure up the peeled back paint where what could have been my face used to be. The dangling cobwebs that grew from the scrap. How I am the only one grieving now, thanks to him—but how perhaps I will not be for long.

Normally, I create a dream with care. I listen, and I observe what the creature is thinking. Then I twist it, right where it hurts. Now, I am not so careful. I don’t know who he is, or what he thinks, so I just reach, and pull, and poke, at the unlucky orange wisps.

 In the midst of all my rage, a strange thought struck me: would he become a Shadow. Would he know I was to blame, or could I teach him the things I have learned, and glow in his eyes as clear as deep sea—last not for a week or a year but for the whole span of time until I myself faded. Would he be strong enough to take after his sister, and not yet another Ellie. I throw nightmare images recklessly in the direction of the bassinet, my efforts to kill Benjamin now as much a prayer to him as a blow.

I moved out of the circuit wire straight into the burning light on the lacy bassinet curtain, and I willed him to see me, to see what it was to be a Shadow, and to choose it over being nothing at all.

“Look at me now,” I shout, in the voice that no waking mind ever answers. “This is what I am now. I won’t ever grow up, and I have no body—but I know how to hurt you.”

The light behind me slams a shocking pain against the curtain, and I drift downwards, my anger spent. I hear the sound of Benjamin snoring; his dreams are soft and orange and glowing, Small perfect bubbles; they look as undisturbed as if I had not haunted there at all.

A part of me wonders if I imagined the parakeets dead, if perhaps I had a dream of my own. It is too good to be true that I would be able to shape the world to hold me. I do not understand until Marceline sat upright clutching her chest, and a wayward foot cracks against the legs of the bassinet. It was a sturdy piece of furniture, and the white fabric swung at its top—but it holds Benjamin in place.

Marceline thrashes, and the leftward leaning rocking chair keels over beneath her. It hits the bureau with a tremendous sound, and the bureau rocks sideways. The cage with Mr. Budgerigar-Darling tipped over, but remains on top of the bureau. The bendable lamp slides off, and flies through the air in an orbit bound by its cord. It glancs off of Marceline’s watch hand, smashing the dial, before coming to rest at the foot of the bureau. She struggles to sit up from the fallen chair, her breath coming in ragged strokes. Her heartbeat has shot through the roof. Her brain is frying its circuits.

I watch in horror. Uselessly, I want a strong hand with which to lift her up, or a loud voice to call for help. *This* must be the despair Ellie felt, as the dark Naghasset ocean lapped over her human head for the final time…

 *Preety bird, preeeeety bird*, Mr. B-D squawked, from a world turned on its side.

 “I’m so sorry,” I say, in a voice that no one answers.

The mobile overhead spun lazily as Marceline clutches the carpet with one hand and her chest with the other. Small threads tear out of the floor, and her necklace snaps off. I catch the wisps of thoughts fading from her mind: they are orange and shadowy and *hurt* and sorrow, they are *Benjamin* and Thomas and a Shadow on a bassinet curtain, twisting upwards from the hollow where her baby lies. They are a disorganized mess from a blend of layers in her mind—like the objects one would find by crushing the room and then pulling out wires and nails and limbs, and fragments of furniture.

Thomas’s heavy footfall resounds through their bedroom, the dining room, and the kitchen. He didn’t yet know what I could sense immediately: Marceline Crease is dying. The pulse in her chest stalls at zero long before my father reaches the room. The consciousness which I had haunted grows dim and dull and fades away from her body.

Benjamin Crease parts his eyelids as our father’s footsteps pounded louder through the floor. He looks directly me. His irises are so very dark that I can’t distinguish them from the pupils. He begins to laugh, a loud baby cackle, at the same time as gooey tears slide from the corners of his eyes and join the general mess which things had become.

I make my way back to the circuit behind the bureau. I stare at the paint while Thomas screams and his mind frothed and his hands somehow made their way to a phone. I wait behind the bureau as the ambulance comes; I wonder if they would be able to jump-start Marceline’s heart, or if I am truly capable of killing someone without meaning to. I think of Benjamin, the orange putty-bubble globe of his mind. I wish it were him, not Marceline, who curls still and fetal on the floor. And I wonder how Benjamin will remember this first sight of his older sister.

## Chapter 3: Hell of a Woman

I am there in the engine of the ambulance as it pulls out of the driveway. I dart among the greasy clouds of exhaust which the pistons huff out of their thin necks. Spark after spark lights the small metal chamber which powers my family down the road. Their legs could not carry them that fast, and I, who could have reached the hospital long before, am differently trapped.

I am listening over the slap and chunk of metal for the tones of their voices and the timbres of their thoughts. My father and the paramedics are leaking apprehension—not grief—so thickly that I can barely detect the softer consciousness of Benjamin Crease. Their fear must mean that they don’t know what will happen to Marceline. So I must wait and fear alongside them if I want two questions answered: *will she die* and *will she leave a shadow?*

Normally, others’ fear is a comfortable atmosphere. It is a sign I am in control. Humans open doors with keys that fit or a lock-pick and I work at minds the same way. What’s inside is almost always the same--no matter how I break in, through what shape or size a pore in their consciousness. Scared people, who do not want to face the intruder of their mind: they will give me any gem, tell me anything, to keep me from hurting them. They will even acknowledge my presence. In Marceline’s case, apparently, they will die. I do not want that now; I am glad to be unseen. I make out enough mumbles of voices and equipment in the cabin of the ambulance to know the paramedics are attributing my mistake to natural causes—and feel a sharp fraying along the edges of my presence. The time in the car feels slower the faster it goes.

Ellie would have said—but she isn’t here, there is no one but myself who—hidden in the shadows of the engine sparks, who knows what I have done. Sleep tugs, with a damp whispering voice at the edges of my presence: it tells me to rest, because there’s nothing I can do; I have already done more than I should. If I could detect even a shred of my mother’s consciousness, I would beg it to hold still, hold on, and not be so afraid of me. If she leaves, and no longer remembers me, and no longer carries a small bundle close to her chest in her dreams and lets it reach for her hair and miss, I will be much less than I was.

Thomas asks if they are planning to pump out her stomach in case she had misunderstood the dose on the Percocet. *Will she die?* I try not my existence just a week ago, when Benjamin was just a swollen belly and I was still in the thoughts of two living parents. I do not even know what a Shadow of Marceline will be like, whether it would still worry and weep over the world, over itself, over Thomas, over me. I can hardly imagine her emotions without the human expressions, the wide grin which slowly fades around the edges, the nervous way of tracing the old scars on her belly and dent behind her ear. *Will she leave a Shadow?*

I follow my family right up to the hospital doors, in the shadow of the gurney on the concrete ramp. And then I pull back: I know from experience not to enter the building through the door. It is almost impossible to find a dark corridor, out of the hall lights, examination lights, the waiting room televisions, in this building which never sleeps. So I listen to the shopping-cart clatter of the cart carrying Marceline and the paramedics’ rush of words, to my brother’s weak little gurgles, and to Thomas’s heavy footfall and the massive heartbeat thump of his fear.

From the automatic doors, I trace a path through the wiring, and follow a maddening circuit through monitors and gauges till I locate the ER stall where they have parked my mother and father and brother. I slide myself through the cooling system into the air vent. I look down through the slanted slat of metal and plastic.

Marceline dies on a small white cot in the famous Angel Memorial Hospital. A doctor holds Benjamin as she tells Thomas Marceline that is gone, yes, it is certain. Cardiac arrest long before she reached them: there was nothing they could do, and they are so, so sorry—cerebral hemorrhage, indications of adrenal imbalance, but Benjamin is healthy, yes, and they can try their best elucidate details should he want to perform an autopsy…Thomas’s bloodless mouth shuts tighter and tighter. He sits on a chair that is much too small for him and he shakes: either shivering or weeping. And the doctor, all curled wire hair and condolences, rocks Benjamin slightly, and answers questions that Thomas hasn’t asked. She must have done this before, but her mind is genuinely troubled. A long crack of fear widens and shuts at the edges of her consciousness. I wonder why, until I notice how much she looks like Marceline.

I would guess Thomas’s mind would be torn wide open for me to read right now, unusually so, but I don’t try and scavenge for memories of myself: I am reeling. I try and wrap the room in my memory. It may be the last memory I ever have of my family all together, before Marceline is gone, and me forgotten. I try not to wonder *will she leave a Shadow?* but the question swells until I can’t see or feel or think about anything else but *will she leave a Shadow*? But there is nothing to do but wait.

The abundant white light leaves the room nearly opaque. It is murky with fluorescence. I contort my presence against the plastic air vent, searching for the best angle to see them by, and I catch the outline of two-day stubble on Thomas’s chin. His mouth is moving now. The wide grey curls of Marceline’s hair, limp and stuck to her face with sweat. The flit of Benjamin’s ink-lit eyes. The recessed corner of the shadow-box of the dust-framed print of a Naghasset Grinning Lobster—it is a crudely drawn albino spine spilling down along its clown-red carapace, and engorged white mouthparts. It clashes against the paste green walls, which in turn turn Marceline’s skin from warm sand to sour gray. It grins and grins and grins, as if it has never seen anything as cheerful as the corpse that I’ve made out of Marceline.

Eyes and stubble and paint and light, all blend together in the small section of Angel Memorial, bound by three walls and a glorified shower curtain, barred by a pair of relentless fluorescent lamps. The corners and the edges of objects flit into sight, slipping away again before I can fit them to a place. Thomas’s mind is a slow smolder. sinking dimmer—and Marceline’s is gone. I wish that I was not imprinting a light-obscured memory of my mother’s greening face into my mind, her arranged to look like she is comfortable when she never, while alive, always liked to sleep on her back. There—her forehead too smooth: without the familiar crease of worry bending the eyebrows in two, it could be anyone’s forehead. A blank stretch of skin which used to hold a consciousness. And I have destroyed it, and I can’t reach it anymore.

I squint my edges along the air vent corner to snatch anything I can see from the heavy, unforgiving light—the two artificial bars on the ceiling dim the room more thoroughly than the sun on the morning waters in the moment before it sinks behind the piers where I used to find Ellie. Ellie said that flare always reminded her of the awful nightlight in her childhood bedroom, the one which reliably made the cloth bear on the bureau into the arm of an axe murderer, and create *things* out of wires on her computer, and the piled soccer balls and cleats. I always thought that was funny, till now. I knew that light couldn’t hurt me if I stayed out of its reach. I had been so proud to kill when Mrs. Budgerigar-Darling’s blue skull crashed into her water dish. But now I know why Ellie said *murderer* with a nasty relish in the word, it is a thick sweet horror here as I am huddled against a ceiling, held back, and I can’t even see.

I wish I had not come here. I want nothing more than to leave this room. It is only the remaining question *will she leave a Shadow?*  which keeps me plastered to the dark corners of a hissing tube, looking down at my grief from above.

The building is a place full of birth and death, for both humans and Shadows alike. It is the one building in Naghasset which I normally avoid, despite the fact that I myself died there, despite the fact that I return whenever I lose my fight against exhaustion and sleep. It is hard to avoid—a huge building, with several specialty departments which, according to Ellie—whose CPR coach worked there—so renowned that they’ve put critically ill patients on international flights to reach it. Apparently, it is five times the combined size of the Naghasset middle and elementary schools. Sometimes, when I am so lonely, when I haven’t spoken and been answered in a wide expanse of time, I allow myself to be sucked in to its promise of fresh shadows from the lives its renowned staff and renowned equipment didn’t save. On those days, I have tried to convince Shadows from the cancer ward to stay, as they dribble into oblivion still wincing from chemo their flesh can no longer feel. I have watched dozens of plumes of darkness leak from ex-fishermen whose bypass surgeries fail, hear them whisper a word or two about how Naghasset isn’t like it used to be, and then I shudder as they grey into nothingness. I have spent days in the maternity ward, of course, waiting for something as wild as myself to die, emerge and greet me. Perhaps someday it will…

I remember all of these tricks which, when desperate, I play on my mind, as the darkness under Marceline’s eyes and nose and mouth begins to thicken. I tell myself that the odds are bad that it is her, that only a Shadow in three forms at all, that only a Shadow in ten lasts the day.

 I will myself not to hope, as a patch free of the light spills, terribly slowly, into a motion of its own. A man in pale blue scrubs sits my father in a chair. Thomas weeps, his whole body shaking, his eyes a furious red, and he tries not to hold Benjamin too tight. But like myself, my brother is not crying—he is watching. It could be there, must be there—is there. There is no question. I shake with relief--so weak that parts of myself spill into the direct burn range of the two fluorescent lights and leave me half-stunned from the pain.

I pull myself together as the fresh Shadow pools and thickens. And then the rest of the room is forgotten.

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“Marceline?” I ask, resisting the impulse to say *Mother.*

The being lurking under the cot is delicate. I do not want to shock it. The question *will she leave a Shadow?*, is answered. This lets me see the other worse ones that I haven’t dared think about: *will the Shadow last?* and *how long?* There is *what will she think of me?* and then, there is *what if she knows it is my fault she died*.

“Marceline?” it asks. The Shadow’s voice is quiet as a heartbeat, too quiet. Its edges bleed past the dusty bar of shade beneath the cot, as if it doesn’t have the sense to tell that the light is burning it.

“Yes,” I answer. Relieved that the Shadow at least her name. A good number of them are too taken aback by pain; they start crying out about Hell or fade half-formed.

I begin moving down the plasterboard wall, convinced that is there. It is a slow procedure. Other Shadows have told me I am good at moving in the open without burning too badly; Ellie said I was like a human rock climber whenever she refused to follow me along a well-lit surface. The fact is, I am not as good at it as they think. I can’t see any better than any other shadow in the murky overload of light. The brightness doesn’t sting any less with practice.

*I am speaking to my mother*, I tell myself. *To her Shadow.* A scant day earlier, thought I would have to wait another fifty, sixty years until she and Thomas died and I could confront them for forgetting me. And as I don’t know a single Shadow who has lasted even as long as I have, I would probably fade before I have that chance.

“Marceline? Are you still there?” I ask.

“Marceline,” it repeats. Its words have the same radio-smooth tone as the voice of my mother’s mind, but it is even quieter than the first time the Shadow spoke. “Marceline, tell me—”

 “I’m not Marceline. I’m Riss,” I say. “I’m Clarissa. Clarissa Eileen Crease.”

There is a small pause. I wait for her to say *my daughter* or anything else to show that she recognizes the name.

“Tell me why—you…” it says, and then trails off. I cringe.

I look down at the space occupied by Marceline’s Shadow, and can hardly see a distortion in the light. I hurry down the gypsum board now, double-speed. *She is fading.* I wince as the light burns, not bothering to look for the weak shadows of the ICU cords and furniture to protect myself.

Once I reach the ground, II can see that she is still present. Smaller now, and less compact. Blurring at the borders of her presence, which she still does not bother to tuck in.

“Tell you what?” I ask. It does not answer for a long time, but spreads out dangerously wide, into the direct light from the ceiling.

“Start by moving into the shade,” I say. It wobbles slightly, but doesn’t move.

“Thomas!” It calls out, as if the words had a chance of reaching his ears. His mind is bland and cloudy as ash right now. I can just barely sense the din of thought reverberating in its case.

I want to tell the Shadow that I can’t move the light on the ceiling to keep it from burning us. I can’t stop Marceline’s Shadow fading if it doesn’t have the sense to stay in the dark. I can hardly *do* anything—. But I don’t want to let it know how little we are, make the Shadow hopeless from the start. It might decide to fade then. I want it to stay, and learn, and remember me.

I won’t be able to help it if the Shadow is focused on the human movements rather than listening to me. I flick a glance upwards, to see what it chose to watch instead. Almost directly above us, the doctor stares for a second at the well-lit patch of wall that I have just left, and then turns back to her clipboard with a shrug. Thomas is in the process of standing up to leave. He does not seem to have noticed the wavering light on the wall beside him, his thoughts are growing louder and full of white noise, cased in a thicker and thicker wall; his consciousness smells like burning. There is nothing Marceline’s Shadow could do about any of that, so it isn’t worth her attention, not now when she is so vulnerable. As Benjamin is lifted up and carried out through the curtained doorway, he stares down past the cot and corpse, towards the intersection of floor and Shadow. Awake, his thoughts are hardly more defined or interesting than the orange bubbles from his dreams—and the sense of them perturbs me. I itch to shut it off. There is nothing in the scene that should draw her attention. There is nothing in their minds which won’t be there later, but if Marceline’s Shadow doesn’t get ahold of itself, she won’t be seeing them much longer.

“What are you watching?” I ask it, once our family has left the room and I think I have the new Shadow’s attention. “They can’t hear you. If you just move out of the light, I will teach you how to haunt them.”

“I’m that one, aren’t I,” it says, extending a wisp towards the cot. “The body.”

The corpse is the only human left in the room. Still with the strangely relieved expression on its face, which my living mother never would have worn—I wonder how she can recognize herself in it. The body is still studded with needles and monitors, as if those could still do any good. It is an uncomfortable object to share the room with, since it just lies there to remind Marceline’s Shadow and I how much more substantial she was that short span of time ago before I stopped her heart. And, while I am sure the equipment is for the post-mortem, at least they could have turned the lights off when they left.

“You were that, yes. You are a Shadow now,” I say. The words are familiar to me, and some of the strange taste of the situation wears off as I begin the spiel that I would give to any ordinary Shadow:

“You are a distortion in their consciousness. Nothing more, nothing less. You will learn how to use that. I didn’t know any more than you did when I myself died—that was just three years ago—so I had to learn fast, and mostly by myself. You are lucky that I’m here. I’m the only Shadow I know who’s gone on this long, so if you listen to me you can stay with them longer.

“Step one: you move out of the light. Now.”

She shifts and shimmers, at last tucking herself into the dark band at the foot of the cot.

“You are scared, and startled, and everything hurts. I know that because I am also a Shadow, and I remember—I think I remember—what it was like to form. You’ll always be in their world but not a part of it. You’ll learn to use that. You can see more of their minds than they want you too. I will teach you how to alter their dreams.

“Marceline? Are you listening? You can stay here on earth, in Naghasset, here, or 84 Arch Street, with Thomas and with…Benjamin…and with Clarissa.”

“Clarissa…” it repeats, compressing into a smaller area.

“But first you need to promise me you’ll stay.”

“It’s all inside out,” Marceline’s Shadow says.

“I know.”

Marceline’s Shadow leaks back out of its pool of safety, but now it has a shape. It shouldn’t yet. Grainy as TV snow, there is a blot the shape of Marceline Crease on the floor—or almost the shape of Marceline. I’ve seen it before. It’s how she looks in her own dreams. The outline of her hair reaches her feet; she is smaller and her limbs narrower than the body on the cot. There are empty spots instead of eyes, and long streaks of softer shadow where my mother thought she had wrinkles. Slowly, laboriously, it pulls one arm-shape towards the face, and it examines the handiwork of its mind.

“I feel like…I am dreaming,” it says.

“Forget that you are tired. You can’t sleep—you shouldn’t, especially not yet. You won’t wake up alive, trust me.”

I force myself into a human outline, only to comfort it. I focus on the painting from my room—now Benjamin’s room—at 84 Arch Street, the gleeful bend of the elbows, the ripple of air along an outline of clothing. As soon as I have filled out the shape, the other Shadow shudders and dims:

“If I’m not dreaming, why are you here?” it asks, its mouth an ‘o’ of horror. “Clarissa…”

“Mom, I—”

“This isn’t just another nightmare.”

“No.”

She quivering at the edges. “I thought that if Thomas knew that I saw *shapes*…had all those dreams…no, it was what I thought that worried me, you know, I always thought I was sick. But you were really there?”

“Of course I was.”

“You were that *thing* on the curtain?” she asks. “When I…when I died?”

I am silent, as I watch my mother’s Shadow grow dimmer. *How long has she had it figured out?* I wish I could sense her mind as a Shadow as well as while she was alive. I remember small things, instead of summoning the words to confess my guilt and try and keep her here. Like the sixth month after my death, when she refused to eat for days, and the nearly sunny warmth her mind exuded when she saw how much her suffering bothered Thomas. It never struck me before that he could have been as unsure as I am now, moving blind because we are not sure whether it is her attack or defense that we are facing.

“Yes,” I say.

“I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry if I turned you into *that*,” she says, the words laid out flat and unforgiving like flagstones on a bright day. “Although, if my nightmares have been your doing, I don’t know whether I can trust this feeling of guilt.”

“I can show you how they work,” I try. “Even Thomas, his brain is less permeable—but we’ll crack it, and he will miss you, and then we will all be together.”

“I would rather…fade away,” she says. “It feels like everything is going quiet. There’s a dark wide room, but this one little patch is so clean and quiet…so bright I can’t see…”

 “But I would miss you,” I say at last. It doesn’t even sound convincing to me. I am no longer waiting for her to recognize me, and say aloud how much she missed me, and how much more she should have missed me. How Benjamin was a terrible idea, but now that she was more like me she realized that I had stayed with them all along and couldn’t be replaced by any blob of flesh that breathes.

“Benjamin needs you,” I try, quenching the disgust that builds up through my form at the words.

“No one could blame me,” Marceline whispers. She is so faint at the borders that I can’t tell where Shadow ends and the shining floor tile begins. “No one could tell me I should stick like a nightmare in their minds, or watch my other child grow up without being able to hold it. Not when right here is so small…and quiet…”

I search my mind for all the sentences, words and nouns that I’d hoarded up to say. Phrases from her dreams that I was waiting to turn against her. Questions about the life that I barely recall, and my death, which I don’t remember. Nothing comes, and she dwindles down and down until there’s barely more than a voice and the outline of wrinkles and bone-thin limbs.

“Benjamin—” I try again. “and Thomas—”

“Promise me you will take care of Benjamin,” the Shadow says, in the lilting radio tones I know I’ll miss. “Everything…feels so slow, and quiet.”

*I will if you don’t fade*: I can’t summon the words to tell her that. A wave of grief, like the ash cloud in Thomas’s mind, swells around my presence. I feel time slow as I too slip, exhausted, and it is all I can do to keep myself from fading altogether. It would be easier—I would not have to miss my mother—or face what I’ve done—or pay for it.

“Yes,” I promise her, and she says *I am tired,* and she says *Clarissa, don’t haunt this dream*, and the light shining off the floor all around me overwhelms me, and I lie there alone in the thin sliver of dark at the foot of the cot, the one conscious presence in an empty room full off light, too much light, much too much to remember.

I promise myself to do what I told her I would, even though it is ten to one there wasn’t enough of her left in the world to hear it. Though it is the last thing in the world on which I want to waste what little I have hoarded of an existence. They may forget me, but as long as I can bear it, I will still remember us.

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Marceline is gone.

The world begins to race around me. It starts with a rapid rush of footsteps in the hallway, and at first I think the nurses must be in a hurry to attach some patient to the taps and drains of the ICU. I only realize that *I* have slowed down when the light starts flickering in the window. Terrified, I look up from the floor to the window; I see the sun arcing back and forth like a pendulum over the water. In what feels like an hour, two days pass.

Patients are rushed in and out of the room, and by the time I’ve registered their faces they are gone. I stay under the cot, knowing that I need to leave, but held in place as firmly as if I were pinned by gravity. And the world flickers. I lose awareness at the far edges of my presence, constantly. The sensation brought memories of a single word, circling my mind in Ellie’s voice. The word was *glove*. I can’t remember what *glove* meant to her, but I wondered if I had *glove* it would help. At a certain point, I stop caring what causes the pain: all that matters is that it is there.

*Glove*, I say, and the word glove a container. *Glove* holds onto the floor, even as I lose track of what is upside down and right side up. I can hardly remember why I was sad; something about my mother and something about Ellie, something about Benjamin, about a promise, about a parakeet. Feet fly through the hallway, and the wheels of gurneys shriek. Life and death at the Angel Memorial hospital runs on, and I slow down to a crawl. *Glove*. I repeat the word just to hear myself talk.

I teeter on the verge of sleep, and find myself wailing from the pain of organs I no longer possess. For an instant, I am small and I am hurting. I have something sharp in the crook of my elbow, and a ball of flesh where there shouldn’t be any, pressing out from my stomach towards my chest. It takes me a long time to realize that I don’t have a stomach, and they are not why I am crying out. It takes me a long time to realize that Marceline and Thomas won’t come running if I cry: they are not here right now, and one is gone for good. It takes me a long time to remember who I am, and then I wish I had forgotten. But I have woken up, and I do remember now. I promised Marceline I would take care of Benjamin.

I promised my mother I would take care of my brother. I could break the promise in a million ways. I have almost no reason not to: my mother faded, and so she will never know what I do. If she had wanted to make sure I would take care of him, she should have stayed here, because now I am not responsible to her.

If she had stayed, she could have blamed herself, or at least I could have tried to convince her I am blameless. Instead, she left, without telling me whether or not she knows I killed her. Or whether she still loves her first child, despite what I have had to become to survive in the three years since I lay screaming in the Angel Memorial hospital. I need someone to talk to, and neither she nor Ellie nor any other Shadow is here for me. If I am not going to fade, I need someone to talk to, and only one surprising name surfaces: Benjamin.

By the time I make it home, nine months passed.

The third and smallest bedroom is vacant. The bassinet is gone, and so is the birdcage. The room smells stale and wrong. It is evening, and the wind is high outside, blowing in off the ocean to the open window of the master bedroom. The scattered moonbeams leave plentiful Shadows for me to move unseen around the room. But the master bedroom is as empty as mine. The queen-sized bed in the center is too perfectly made. In the adjacent bathroom, Thomas’s toiletries are missing, although Marceline’s are untouched.

The whole place smells like grief, stale grief, so strongly that I begin to itch at the edges. Humans mark their territory like cats, even if they don’t use urine. Flakes of dander, phlegm from an accidental cough, sweat in fingerprints: there is enough of it here that I know the room has been visited a lot and recently, and so much that at first I thought I had sensed Thomas within.

In fact, he is in the guest room. I wedge into the middle door hinge, to avoid the worst of the overpowering odor he is giving off. I look in, and see my balloon of a brother laughing hysterically from his cradle as Thomas sits on a bedsheet crumpled on the sofa cushion, and reads from a picture book. He looks exactly the same as he did before, but somehow gives the appearance of being even taller, even wider at the shoulder, with even less flesh suspended from the scarecrow frame. *What are you reading, Thomas? Did you read that story to me?*

My father raises the book towards the cradle as if to show Benjamin an illustration and then brings it back down and flips to the final page, a picture of the ocean—without seeming to notice, the whole time, it is upside-down.

Benjamin points at the book with one hand and sucks his other fist. He swings the pointing hand in the direction of the door, flexing the fingers towards me. His mind is still a consortium of bubbles, like I remembered it, bound in a rough sphere by an orange haze. But the surface of the bubbles are clearer, and they are speckled. On closer examination, I notice the speckles are moving. On even closer examination, I see that they are small figures, trees, cars, Shadows, and illustrations from the picture book Thomas reads him. Like snow-globes, he shakes the tiny worlds around with each gurgle, bumping and folding the thoughts into brand new shapes and colors within the chaos of containers

I bury myself further inside of the door hinge, tucking loose edges even out of the half-light, filled from my center out with a rush of hate.

 “Ever after,” Thomas finishes, and shuts the cardboard covers together with a *whumph*. I try and eavesdrop on his thoughts, but recoil at the sense of grime.

Benjamin keeps laughing, and punches the wooden frame of the bassinet. He looks at his hand, and his mouth makes an *o* of dismay, as if he had not expected it to hurt. Tears well up.

“Ben, stop it. It’s time for goodnight.”

Thomas stands up and straightens the sheet on the sofa. He switches on a small nightlight shaped like the crescent moon, and then switches off the main light. A pleasant halo of shadows spreads through the room, and I drift in through the room, stretching along the walls. Thomas closes his eyes, and Benjamin begins to make mouth noises. Nasty smacking sounds.

Thomas stares straight ahead at the wall, and his cheeks clench but he says nothing. Minutes pass, and my brother keeps going, trying to get his attention. A small reddish firework thuds inside my father’s clouded mind, sending up more grime to float and then settle. After a while, Benjamin stops making sounds deliberately, and begins to snore. The whirl of his thoughts accelerate, and keep going, till I worry that I am slowing down in time again. Then, as suddenly, they are nearly absent. Just a whisper where a second ago there was a gale. He is strange, somewhat repulsive, and I have not forgiven him.

Thomas’s dreams fill the gap. It is soft and dusty, a dream he has had a hundred times before back when Marceline was alive: it pours out of the tiny pores in the surface of his mind, as if he were saying *We will always be reminded of her*, as if daring me to break into his mind and cut the story off or alter it.

He dreams that he found Marcy sitting in a room with a titled roof like the attic at 84 Arch Street, filled, like the attic, with cardboard boxes. Unlike the attic, it is bigger than a warehouse and darker than a tomb. Marcy is barely visible in the ruin of a spilt box. She hums a tune too soft for him to hear, as she pushes a sewing needle into her cheek and then draws it out again, stitching folds into her face, but not where wrinkles normally draw their trenches. The thread is long and doubled over, and she draws the needle down as far as her waist every time she pulls a stitch. She declares that she is becoming corrugated.

Thomas wakes and stares at the room. His eyes pass quickly over the cradle and the diaper genie machine, a small brown trash can and an even smaller recycling bin, Thomas’s briefcase and a small mound of his clothes, a squat dresser with its drawers slightly ajar, and clothes, which were mine and now are Benjamin’s, neatly folded within.

“She was a hell of a woman,” he says aloud. He turns briefly to face the wall behind the sofa, and then turns back and stares at his hands.

“Thomas?” I ask. But he is not looking at me—or at Benjamin, or at the room.

“She would have been a hell of a woman,” he says.

I leave the room.