Yesterday's Shadow

P.J. Murphy

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Contains excerpts from the New Testament, King James Version.

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Foreword

It wasn't my intention to publish my novels in reverse order. *Troubleshot* (my fourth novel) preceded *Dead Letters* (my third), and you hold in your hands my second. For a long time, I didn't plan to publish *Yesterday's Shadow* at all. I sent it off to a few agents after finishing it back in 2007, but I quickly abandoned that attempt. Although it was fiction, the novel was too personal, and I worried that parts of it could be misinterpreted.

Yesterday's Shadow was a bit of a reaction against trends in contemporary literature. Every book I picked up was about another culture or period, something inherently different and more interesting than life in the country I lived in. I wanted to write something about the ordinary – or our individual versions of the ordinary, and what happens when they intersect. I didn't want to fashion the plot around the hero's journey, either. I wanted my protagonist to be relatively passive throughout the story. One of the novel's themes is the consequences of inaction and how that's a choice in itself.

It was hardly likely to set the publishing world alight.

When *Dead Letters* did well for itself, I mentioned to a few readers that I had two further unpublished novels knocking around. I teased *Yesterday's Shadow* in December 2022, publishing an extract of the New Year's party section on my blog. It garnered a lot of interest. Eventually, I agreed to share the novel to get a second opinion about whether it was worth doing anything more with – but only after I had brushed it up a little first. I approached this with some reluctance. I wanted to move forward with my writing, not look backwards.

Returning to *Yesterday's Shadow* was like revisiting my adolescence. There is so much of me in it: my (non) relationship with my father, my exploration of Christianity and its history, and my experiences trying to make sense of the world around the turn of the millennium. Pretty quickly, it had its hooks in me again. I wanted to improve the writing, but more than that, I became overwhelmed by the melancholy of nostalgia. I've always had a weakness for it. I realised, too, that I didn't want to consign those parts of me I had invested in this novel to purgatory on a dusty hard drive.

I hope that reading *Yesterday's Shadow* brings you something near the same level of experience that it brought me. At the very least, it's a record of the early steps of a writer finding his voice. Maybe now, I can step out of its shadow.

P.J. Murphy, August 2023

Chapter 1

Act Like a Man

They fought most nights. I lay in bed, not moving, barely breathing. My father's voice rattled the doorframe, sometimes deep and threatening but most often sharp and violent. Mum rarely spoke. When she did, her voice was so fragile that I could barely hear it.

For a long time, I tried not to think about what was happening in the living room below. I closed my eyes and pretended it was just the TV. Ours wasn't the warmest of families, but I was sure my mother and father loved each other. It couldn't be them fighting like that.

I stopped trying to fool myself after I noticed Mum's bruises. I must have been fourteen at the time, in the spring of 1998. Mum usually wore long-sleeved tops, even when it was boiling hot outside, but every now and then, she got careless. She rolled up her sleeves once to do the washing up, and there were purple finger marks just below her elbows. Another time, she winced when I hugged her around the waist. Whenever I questioned her, she found something else to talk about. I soon grew accustomed to following her lead. She was a brick wall to me when it came

to that. She would never let me in, never admit weakness or accept my help.

We carried on like that for well over a year.

Over the years, I've thought a lot about why I played along with all this. I don't have a good answer. A teenage growth spurt meant that I could look my father level in the eye, but I was nowhere near feeling able to challenge him. I feel as much a culprit now as he was. It wasn't fear or apathy that stopped me from acting; it was etiquette. My father saved his outbursts until nighttime. The violence was contained, separated from family life. To bring it up during a family dinner, however chilly, seemed somehow terribly wrong. Our culture equips us only for comfortable, regular little routines. I couldn't find a way into that tumultuous private life of theirs.

But I worried. I would lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, imagining what was happening below. A big part of me wanted to go down there and tell them to stop it, but whenever I pulled back the covers, I was overcome with shivers, as though an arctic breeze had squeezed through the window. Eventually, I stopped trying to get to sleep while my parents were up. I turned on my bedside lamp and tucked into a book. I read for hours, often well past midnight, until I could hear my father snoring. During those years, I gained my interest in science fiction: in the novels of Philip K Dick, Frank Herbert and Douglas Adams, to name a few. I read to escape my world. The earth became only one planet in trillions. Its concerns were insignificant.

Life continued like that for shamefully long. The days' routine of school, homework, and then TV ran parallel to my parents' regular arguments. Life was so rhythmic, so predictable. It felt like it would go on this way forever. The

beatings my mother endured seemed hardly to matter. They were accepted; they were mundane.

Then, on 29th October 1999, everything changed.

* * *

It was a Friday night. Other kids my age were hanging around on street corners or trying out their fake IDs with bouncers at *Wetherspoons*. I had just given up on my homework. Mum had a rule that I wasn't allowed to play on the computer or go out with friends until I had finished, and since I was in the second year of my GCSEs – an exam year – I rarely got to do much else. My brain was on overload. I couldn't face another textbook, so I headed downstairs, where my parents were watching TV. They spent whole evenings doing that, even when there was nothing decent on. I think just being able to focus on moving images helped them to avoid arguing with each other. Relations between them only became strained when the TV was switched off.

I knelt beside the sofa and whispered 'goodnight' into Mum's ear. I dared not disturb my father from whatever rubbish he was watching. I crept back upstairs, brushed my teeth and got into bed.

The heating was still on, and the boiler was working overtime because Cambridge feels its winters hard. I tucked myself in, hermetically sealing the edges from drafts. I was so tired that I didn't reach for the novel I was reading; I just turned the light out and closed my eyes.

Before long, my thoughts stopped buzzing, and I began to drift off.

I snapped open my eyes. Time had passed, but I had no idea how much. It was still dark. It wasn't morning.

'What the hell is that supposed to mean?'

My father's voice was impossibly loud.

I slipped an arm from under the sheets and reached for my bedside lamp. Something stopped me from turning it on. Maybe I didn't want to acknowledge that I had heard anything; maybe I thought that whatever it was would blow over if I stayed there in the dark, breathing shallowly. But my father was so close. The landing light was on. I could see his feet breaking the strip of light between the door and the floor, just like in horror films when the killer is about to grab the handle.

'Well, what do you want me to do?' my father shouted again. I couldn't make out what Mum had said to him. She must have been at the bottom of the stairs. 'No, I will not come back down. This is my house!'

Then, a few seconds later: 'Don't tell me what to do, Angela!'

I closed my eyes, but it continued. I heard Mum climb the stairs. She was tiptoeing, trying not to wake me. My father thundered across the landing.

A minute later, something thudded against the wall. One of the pictures I had arranged on my bookshelf fell and cracked against the corner of my desk.

Another thud. Plaster crumbled, falling as dust. This house seemed flimsy, pitted against my father's rage.

Mum squeaked, and something dropped to the ground.

This was it. I had to do something. I threw off my sheets, marched to the door and flung it open.

The build-up to this moment had lasted years, but it still didn't prepare me for what I saw.

My parents were at the top of the stairs, in front of the airing cupboard. My father towered above Mum, who lay in a heap against the wall. Her face was pale, streaked with

tears, and her body was crumpled, but her gaze was firm. She was almost scowling at him, a hardness I had not seen in her before, although her bottom lip quivered. I'll never forget that image: him there, nostrils flaring, all beast and sinew, with victory in his bloodshot eyes; her so vulnerable and yet defiant. His fists were clenched. Muscles flexed beneath his skin.

Muted, second-hand violence had become brutal reality. There was no hiding from it now.

Mum was the first to spot me. Her eyes lowered from my father and turned to me.

'Look at me when I'm talking to you!' my father shouted.

'Go to bed, Nick,' Mum told me.

My father wheeled around to face me. 'Listen to your mother. This is none of your business.'

I took a step back, overwhelmed by his size and sheer ferocity. There was no way I could face him. I had seen plenty of violence on TV, but that wasn't real. It was certainly nothing like this.

But I had to do something. I couldn't pretend I hadn't seen this. I glanced at my mother. She was shaking her head. Her eyes pleaded for me to go back into my room. But I couldn't move. I was rooted to the spot. Whether through bravery or cowardice, I was a part of this now.

I opened my mouth, but I didn't know what to say. I wanted to tell him to stop. I wanted to tell him to leave us alone, that he was a monster, but those words were heavy; they came from so deep within that my tongue hadn't the strength to handle them. My throat constricted. I knew what was coming next. My breaths had already started to shallow to sobs.

'What are you doing?' my father said, advancing on me.

'I thought you were a man. You're sixteen, for Christ's sake! Act like a man!'

I wanted to; I really did. I didn't understand why I was crying, but I couldn't stop now. I began to retreat back into my room, but my father caught me by the arm.

'Where do you think you're going? You can't even stand up for yourself. Look at me when I'm talking to you!'

My father grabbed me by the chin and forced me to face him.

'Let go of him!' screamed Mum.

My father looked at me with disgust and tossed me aside. I don't think he cared where he threw me. My mouth smacked against the door frame as I fell. The impact turned it numb at first, but I tasted blood. I touched my lip with my fingers, and sure enough, I was bleeding. My head started to spin.

For a few seconds, nothing happened.

My father loomed above me. I looked up at him fearfully, anticipating the next blow, intentional this time. But his bearing had softened. His eyes were wide, and his lips formed vowels. Explanations. Excuses. He didn't object when Mum pushed past.

'Nick,' she said desperately. 'Nick, are you all right?'

I nodded groggily.

'Come on,' she said, helping me to my feet. 'Let's get some ice on that.'

Mum barely said a word whilst she nursed me. She put me to bed and fetched some frozen peas, which she wrapped in a towel and pressed onto my face. She told me my teeth were all okay and that I would heal. I didn't say anything, didn't complain that I was at risk of being suffocated by vegetables. I just wanted to go to sleep.

I'm not sure where my father went, but I didn't see him

again the rest of the night, except in my head, in that grotesque pose looming above my crumpled mother. I couldn't get away from it. That image would come to haunt me. Even now, years later, if I let my thoughts stray, I find myself back there, a useless boy stupefied by reality.

* * *

I was born with a heart condition called *aortic stenosis*, where the valve between the left side of the heart and the aorta is narrowed, making it difficult for my heart to pump blood out to the rest of my body. If I hadn't had surgery when I was younger, I would probably have the heart of an old man by now and would be practically guaranteed to have a heart attack before the age of thirty. Even at sixteen, I had to monitor what I did. I shouldn't really have pushed myself as hard as I did sometimes. Although the valve opening has been widened, it's still deformed. In time, I might need an artificial valve.

Pretty crap, really.

There are some benefits, though. I have a cool scar that earned me serious respect at school. Plus, I got to skip sports and spend the free period in the library. If I'd have wanted to, I could probably have got all of my homework done during school hours, but I tended to get hooked on one book or another and spent the bulk of my spare time reading. I got through David Eddings' epic, *Belgariad*, in a matter of days (an achievement I still recall with pride).

My heart condition was one of the main reasons my parents stayed together as long as they did. It gave them something other than work to talk about. This was no bad thing considering that my father hated his job, and that his eyes used to flash nastily whenever Mum mentioned hers (it

was always a sore point that hers paid the higher wage). My condition gave my mother something to worry about every time I lost colour, and this, I imagine, gave her something else to dwell on than her own predicament.

She was sitting beside my bed when I woke. Her hand held mine limply, but this became uncomfortable with time. I gathered the will to move my fingers, hoping she would get the hint and let me go. Nothing happened.

I opened my eyes, peeling my lashes apart. The clock on my dressing table read 8:35 a.m. Mum's head hung forward. The chain earrings she wore brushed against her cheeks.

The house was silent except for my mother's breathing. Not a car passed by outside. It seemed as though the world was waiting for something. Even the birds didn't dare to sing.

That's how I knew that everything was about to change.

I pulled my hand away. Mum woke.

'Nick.' She lifted her head and massaged her neck. 'You're awake.'

'So are you,' I said.

I was a teenager, remember? She was lucky to get that much out of me.

'How are you doing?' She grabbed my hand again.

'Okay.' I fidgeted. My bones clicked.

Mum leaned forward to examine my lip. The wound was superficial, hardly noticeable, with the blood wiped away. Mum's eyes were puffy. She wore yesterday's clothing, and her dark hair, still tied back, had begun to prise itself loose.

'Where's Dad?' I asked.

'In bed, last time I checked,' Mum said.

'Listen, Mum,' I said, 'I was going to go out later. Sam's invited us over for war-gaming. Is that okay?'

I've thought a lot about why I changed the subject like that. Stranger things happened in the following days, but I believe it requires explanation. I put it down to the part of me that wanted to forget all about what had happened and carry on as normal. I was fully aware that this would not be possible, but this didn't stop me from trying.

If I could relive that moment, I would probably say something different because it set the tone for my relationship with my mother.

'Hmm.'

Mum was miles away. She got up and walked to the window, looking out at the morning. I watched her for a while. With the light behind her, I could see my mother as she would have appeared when she'd been my age. She seemed so pensive, so unsure of herself, like someone just setting out in the world. Gone was her confidence. For the first time – just for an instant – I think I understood her, conceived of her as someone for whom marriage and motherhood were simply a period of life. She had been called Angela far longer than she'd been called Mum. The family life I had always taken for granted was just an era for her that was drawing inexorably to an end.

'Why do I have to do this?' Her back was still turned to me.

I had no answer.

Mum came and knelt beside my bed. She clasped both of her hands around mine and lowered her head.

'I don't want to do this now,' she whispered. 'Not right after last night. I wish there were another way.'

'What is it, Mum?' I said softly.

'Your father and I have been growing apart for some time,' she said, more loudly now. Her words were rehearsed. 'Sometimes, when people live with each other every day for

years, they get used to each other. Being together becomes less special.'

'You're getting a divorce?'

Mum nodded but couldn't speak.

'This is because he hurt me, isn't it?'

A panicked expression shot across Mum's face. 'No, Nick, no. This isn't anything to do with you. You can't blame yourself for this.'

But that wasn't my concern. I was already well ahead of her:

'Who am I going to live with?'

'It's up to you,' Mum replied.

'Are you going to keep the house, or is Dad?'

'I don't know, Nick. We haven't discussed that yet.'

Mum turned away. It was then that I realised.

'You haven't told him?'

'Well, no. I wanted to talk to you first. I wanted to make sure you'd be okay with it.'

Would I be okay with it? Why wouldn't I be? Was she expecting me to cry or something? I had no feelings for my father. For that matter, I had no discernible feelings about anything whatsoever. Everything seemed distant. Why wasn't I upset? Love, hate and pain, these were all emotions experienced by other people, not me.

'I'll be fine, Mum,' I said.