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The Shadow Year

Written by Hannah Richell

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The Shadow Year

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LILA



July

Lila sits at one end of a deserted picnic bench with a takeaway coffee cup before her. Although it's warm out – the warmest it's been for a while – the park is half empty; it is that strange, quiet hour when workers have retreated back to their offices after lunch but the schools are yet to spill children out of their doors. From where she sits Lila can see through the picture window of the park café where a woman restocks the drinks fridge, and a little further away to where a council worker bends over a bed of ragged marigolds. An empty can clatters past him, caught in the breeze. Closer, in the shade of a tall plane tree, stands a pram.

There is a baby asleep inside. Lila can just make out the curve of her face above a pale pink blanket. Her cheeks are rosy and one dark tuft of hair escapes from beneath her cotton hat. Lila watches, fascinated, as the infant grimaces in her sleep, her eyelashes fluttering once, twice before falling still again. The baby's mother is over by the paddling pool. She has taken off her shoes and socks and is splashing through the shallows with a young boy of about two or three. Lila sits on the bench and watches them from behind dark sunglasses, twisting her coffee cup in her hands.

'Look, Mummy, a bee.' The boy points to something in the water and his mother approaches and bends down next to him. Lila takes a sip of her coffee and allows her gaze to drift back towards the pram. She knows the model. She knows that the brake is on. She

knows that to release it you have to flick that white handle up 180 degrees. She practised it only weeks ago in the shop. She swallows down the bitter coffee taste in her mouth. God, it would be so easy.

The mother and her son splash to the far side of the pool. They scramble out and head to a clump of bushes near the café and begin to search for something with which to scoop the bee from the water. The boy scampers across the concrete then cries out. He fusses over his foot and his mother moves closer, brushing the dirt off his sole, hugging him, then rerolling his already wet trousers.

A weak sun filters through the branches of the tree overhead, sending patterns of light dancing across Lila's bare arms. From far away comes the sound of a football connecting with a boot, the delighted shriek of a child being pushed on a swing, the sound of a jet plane high overhead. The mother and boy enter the café. She sees them ask for something – a paper cup. Lila eyes the pram and then stands.

She ignores the pain in her ribs and focuses instead on the thud of her heart as she moves closer. The baby's lips are pursed now, opening and closing, suckling in her sleep. A fly buzzes over the pram's canopy, then lands on the pink blanket and creeps towards the baby's face. Lila takes another step forwards, fighting the urge to swat it away. Somewhere inside she registers the cold hollow of her heart. It would be so easy.

She reaches out and allows her hand to brush against the handlebar of the pram. The plastic is warm to her touch. The baby stirs. Behind her she hears the splash of feet in the paddling pool, the little boy's giggle. 'Get it, Mummy.' Lila gazes down at the sleeping baby and shudders. She lets out a long breath then steps backwards away from the pram, away from the baby. She turns and makes her way along the path leading around the pool where the mother and son work together to fish the bee from the water.

'He's alive,' she hears the boy cry in delight.

'Don't touch,' warns his mother, 'he might sting.'

The woman glances up at Lila as she passes and throws her a smile. Lila gives the woman the slightest nod, the hot sting of her

tears hidden behind her sunglasses as she follows the path out of the park gates and makes her way over the zebra crossing and up the hill, her heart hammering loudly all the way home. Get a grip, Lila, she tells herself. Just get a bloody grip.

* * *

The man is at her front door as she enters through the gate. He stands with his back to her, dressed in motorcycle leathers and helmet, with one finger pressed insistently on the doorbell. 'I'm here,' she says.

When he turns, all she can see of his face are two dark eyes peering through the helmet visor. A walkie-talkie crackles at his lapel. 'Are you Lila Bailey?'

'Yes.'

'Delivery. You'll need to sign.'

She nods and accepts the electronic pad from his hands, scrawls her signature across the screen then hands it back to him. In return he offers her a stiff cream envelope addressed in neat handwriting. Without another word, he moves up the path to where his motorbike waits in the street. It starts with a violent roar and speeds away down the hill. Lila tucks the envelope under her arm and fumbles with her keys in the lock.

Inside, she bends carefully to retrieve the takeaway menus and bills scattered across the mat, adding them and the courier's special delivery to the growing pile of unopened mail on the hall table. It proves to be one envelope too many and the whole lot cascades to the floor in a splash of paper. She's tempted to leave everything where it has fallen until she remembers the mess will be the first thing Tom sees when he arrives home later that evening. Holding her ribs gingerly, she crouches down to gather the envelopes and restacks them onto the table in two neat piles. The last one she adds is the cream envelope from the courier. As she places it on the pile she feels a strange weight sliding and shifting within. She hesitates then shakes it. There is definitely something in there, something small but heavy rattling inside. Intrigued, she moves away from the pile, the envelope still in her hand, and carries on up the stairs.

In the bathroom Lila runs a bath, as hot as she can stand, and watches as the steam billows into the air and mists on the mirror over the sink. She breathes deeply, then reaches for her pills, swallowing two before taking up the envelope again.

The handwriting is unfamiliar and the postmark smudged and illegible. She slides her finger beneath the seal and pulls out a typed letter and several folded documents. She gives the envelope one last shake and watches as a heavy silver key drops into the palm of her hand. She stares at it for a moment then turns it over, feeling the reassuring curve of it between her fingers, and when she is ready she reaches for the letter and begins to read.

* * *

Tom arrives home an hour later. She sees his distorted face come into view through the filmy surface of the bath water. She watches his eyes widen, his mouth open in alarm, before rising up through the surface with a gasp, pushing her hair out of her face.

'Bloody hell,' exclaims Tom, one hand to his chest, 'for a second . . . I thought . . .' He shakes his head then stares at her. 'What are you *doing*?'

'What does it look like? I'm taking a bath.'

Tom runs his hands through his hair. 'Sorry, you scared me, that's all.' He takes a deep breath, loosens the knot of his tie then tries again in a steadier voice. 'How was your day?'

'Fine.' She reaches for the flannel. 'Yours?'

'Fine.' He hesitates. 'Did you get out?'

'Yes, I went to the park. It was nice.' She can't quite meet his eyes and busies herself instead with scrubbing her face.

'Good.' He smiles. 'Did you talk to Suzie about work?'

Lila nods.

'And?'

'It's pretty quiet at the moment.' The water is cooling. Lila sits up and wraps her arms around her knees, rests her chin on top of them. 'Most of our clients are cutting their budgets . . . she says I should take as long as I need.'

'That's good.' Tom looks about the bathroom, his eyes landing on the key on the sink ledge. 'What's this?' he asks, reaching for it and testing its weight in his hand.

'It came today.'

'What's it for?' He takes up the envelope and papers beside it.

'I don't know.' Lila tries not to feel annoyed that he's reading her private letter without asking permission.

'Who are Messrs Gordon & Boyd?'

'A solicitors firm, I think.'

He looks up from the typed sheet of paper. 'Is it something to do with your father's will?'

'I don't know,' she says, trying to keep her voice even. 'I don't think so. It's a different firm.'

Tom stares at her, the exact way she's seen him stare at a stranger, trying to size them up, figure out if they're friendly or hostile. He shrugs and places the key back on the edge of the sink where he found it. 'OK. I'll see you downstairs?'

'Sure,' she says, and she watches him go, waits for the door to close behind him before she twists the hot tap on again and slides once more beneath the surface of the water.

* * *

They eat dinner together in the kitchen, Lila in her pyjamas, her hair damp from the bath, Tom hunched over his plate, still wearing his crumpled work shirt and trousers. 'Did you see anyone today?' he asks at last, breaking the silence.

'No.'

'Make any plans for tomorrow?'

She shakes her head.

'Mum says she's going to give you a call. She's wondering if you fancy meeting her in town later this week?'

She eyes him carefully. 'I don't need you making arrangements for me, Tom.'

'It's not like that. She wants to see you.'

Lila raises an eyebrow before returning to the food on her plate. She's not hungry but she pushes the chicken around, tries to make it disappear by cutting it into smaller pieces.

He sighs. 'Lila, I get it. First your dad's heart attack . . . then . . .' He can't say it and she can't meet his eye. Tom clears his throat and tries again. 'I just don't think it's healthy for you to shut yourself away all day. You're grieving, yes, but you might feel better if you got out and about, if you saw a few friends.'

She shakes her head. 'I'm fine. I told you, I went to the park.'

'Yes, but just drifting around on your own isn't—'

'Tom,' she warns, 'stop trying to organise my life. Stop trying to *fix* me.'

He throws up his hands and they both turn back to their plates, nothing but the occasional scrape of cutlery to break the silence.

'So what are you going to do about that letter?' he asks eventually. 'Seems very odd, if you ask me.'

Lila nods. 'I know. Why would someone leave me a piece of land?'

'It could be part of the settlement of your dad's estate?'

She shakes her head. 'I don't think so. That was all wrapped up a few weeks ago. I received some money but there was no mention of any land. Besides, the letter says this is an *anonymous* gift.'

Tom frowns. 'Did you look at the map? It's a sizeable plot. Do you know the area?'

'No. It looks very remote . . . up on the edge of the Peak District. I've never even been to the Peak District before and I certainly don't know anyone from around there.'

The furrows in Tom's brow deepen. 'You should call the solicitors' office tomorrow – try to find out a bit more. They must be able to tell you *something*.'

'Yes.' She scrapes the remains of her uneaten dinner to the side of her plate then lays her cutlery carefully in the centre. 'I suppose if that fails I could just head up there and take a look for myself.'

Tom's hands fall still, his knife and fork hovering over his plate.

'Why do you look so surprised? I've got the map and that key. What would be the harm?'

Tom purses his lips. 'It all just seems a bit odd.'

'We could go together,' she tries. 'This weekend . . . or the next. It would be good to get away, even for just a little while.'

Tom hesitates. She can see that he is surprised by her sudden desire to *do* something and knows it must seem strange when she has spent the last couple of weeks holed-up at home, doing very little of anything besides sleeping and crying and wandering aimlessly around the house. But somewhere new and remote . . . somewhere no one knows them . . . somewhere where no one knows what's happened is strangely appealing.

But he shakes his head. 'I can't go anywhere – not until I've had my latest design passed.'

'Well,' she says, dropping her gaze to the table, 'I can always go on my own.'

'No,' says Tom quickly. 'I'd like to come. Give me a week or two and I'll come with you.' He pushes his plate away and smiles at her. 'You're right, it might be fun. A complete change of scene . . . an adventure.'

'OK,' agrees Lila. 'I'll wait. A week or two.' She reaches across for his plate, stacks it on top of her own and then carries them over to the bin where she dumps the remains of their uneaten dinner into the rubbish. Neither of them, it seems, is terribly hungry.

* * *

Later, in bed, Tom reaches for her and tries to pull her close. His fingers connect with the bruises on her ribs and she inhales sharply. 'Sorry,' he says, 'does it still hurt?'

'Yes.' She rolls away from him and stares into the darkness. Of course it still hurts. She is afraid it will always hurt, that the pain lodged in her chest is never going to go away.

'Sorry,' he murmurs again.

She can feel him shift on the mattress and knows that he is lying on his back staring up at the ceiling. They are only inches apart, but somehow the distance between them feels immense. There is still so much they haven't talked about – so much they haven't faced. Words

and scenes arrive unwanted in her head. She pushes them away and tries to focus instead on the gradual slowing of Tom's breath.

She knows she won't sleep. Her body is wired, her limbs restless, her mind galloping, but there is fear too – fear of sleep; fear of that sensation of tipping over the edge into darkness; fear of falling into oblivion. She waits until Tom is snoring gently, then slides silently out from between the sheets and tiptoes into the bathroom.

The bottle of pills is half full. The doctor has been generous with her prescription; she'd suggested she might stop taking them after a week or so, when the anxiety had begun to ease, but Lila's growing accustomed to that slow softening sensation that creeps up and dulls the pain, that blurs the sharp edges of her mind, and so she twists the lid off the bottle and swallows another two pills with water gulped straight from the tap.

Downstairs, the letter from earlier still lies on the dining table, the key glinting beside it in the glow of a street lamp. As she waits for the drugs to do their work she pulls out a chair and reaches for the key, holding it carefully in the centre of her palm. Sounds of the city echo around her – a distant siren, high heels clicking quickly down pavement, the faraway bark of a dog – and as the darkest shadows inside her head begin to soften and fade, she finds herself wondering about the mysterious key – and about the lock it will fit into – and about what might lie behind the door it opens.