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A Shadow on the Sun

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Extract

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NEVADA, 1960

On her seventeenth birthday they took her to see Sinatra at the Sands. He sang a song for her. He sang, 'It was a very good year'. And he dedicated the song 'to my beautiful Polak niece', which sent a polite ripple of uncomprehending laughter spreading through the crowded tables. The dedication was inaccurate and insulting and funny and sweet and typical, she thought, of his wilful contradictions. The lyrics of the song told a story that was melancholy and inappropriate, ardent as it was with longing for lost youth. But it was a song she loved and of course he sang it beautifully and she was very flattered.

'Did you prompt him?' she asked her mother at the interval. Her mother shook her head.

'Bill?' she asked her godfather.

Bill smiled. 'No.'

Afterwards they went to see him in his dressing room and the man she had called Uncle Frank since as long as she could remember took a single bloom from a bouquet and gave it to her and said, 'Happy birthday, kiddo', and she

twirled the flower in her fingers as the short walk to their waiting limousine leached life and moisture from its petals in the desert night.

And seated between Bill and her mother, aware of the heavy Martini smell on Bill's breath and the weight of him, and her mother's perfumed aura of Joy and French tobacco, she had to chide herself for thinking the thought that none of this was real.

Before air conditioning turned the interior of the car cooler, she was able to smell the residue of dry-cleaning fluid in Bill's tuxedo and the starch in the white shirt underneath. The lights of the strip went by through the limousine windows in flashing stutters of chattery neon. The smells inside the car grew fainter as its air grew cold.

And none of it was real.

There were no pedestrians on the street. There were no children in the city. There were no dogs or bicycles or paper boys or picket fences bordering suburban homes. Climate was something you controlled with the flick of a switch on an electronic console on your desk or dashboard or in your hotel room on a panel between twin beds. Las Vegas was not a place. It was a conceit. And she chided herself for conspiring with that conceit, for sharing it, on this day, on this specific night of celebration. But it was only one night, after all. And all American kids celebrated their birthdays as a celebration, really, for their folks. That was the American way, wasn't it? And she was still, technically, a kid, wasn't she? Even if she had been obliged

to grow up more swiftly than she suspected most American children were obliged to do.

At a machine in a casino lobby she put the silver dollar Bill had given her for the purpose in the slot and pulled the handle, and watched the symbols giddy on the reels until they stopped and coins bucketed out of its metal belly in a heaving, glittery flood. Casino staff, dressed like minor functionaries from some Ruritanian principality, stooped and gathered the coins in plastic pails from the carpet and guided her to a teller behind brass bars in a glass cage who stacked the coins in cylinders and then carefully counted out five one-hundred dollar bills and placed them in a gold envelope for her.

'Quite a night,' Bill said, his face flushed with whiskey and collusion as he tipped the teller an indiscreet wink.

'Yes,' she said. She was flushed herself, thrilled by the criminality of it. She was gambling in Nevada four years below the age at which the law entitled her to. Under Bill's protection, in the kingdom of Las Vegas, she could do pretty much as she pleased. She put the envelope into her purse. And in the glass of the teller's booth she saw her mother's reflection as her mother stood, studying her.

Back at their hotel, after nightcaps, an hour later, she discovered what her mother had been thinking, then.

'You've grown so beautiful,' her mother said. And her mother's smile seemed almost doubtful with the conflict of pride and nervousness in her face, her eyes. 'So beautiful, 'Tasha.'

Her mother almost never used anymore the tender contraction Natasha remembered from childhood. Now, hearing it brought the sharp sting of tears. She was a child no longer; today she had taken another symbolic step towards responsibility, towards the nowhere to hide accountability of adulthood. She had embarked upon her eighteenth year.

'I've had a lovely time,' she said. She looked at her mother's face, at the fierce loveliness under the subtle lines time was imposing across her mother's forehead and at the sides of her mouth. She knew that her mother had her hair expensively coloured once a month. She knew that under the salon dye, Julia Smollen's hair had turned, with time and whatever torment she concealed, entirely grey.

'I hope so,' her mother said. 'I hope you have.'

She suspected the grey hair would look magnificent, framing the bones of her mother's face, a pale contrast to her brilliant green eyes. But she knew it didn't do to age conspicuously. Not in her mother's profession, it didn't. Not in her mother's world.

She lay in bed for a long time without sleep. She fancied she could hear Bill snoring boozily across the hall, but knew this was nothing more than spite or imagination. Bill and her mother did not share a bed. And anyway, Bill didn't really sleep. He would be at the casino, settling the bill for that neat jackpot trick with the one-armed bandit. Or he would be in Sinatra's suite, the tobacco-coloured air lush with stories about Liston and Brando and West Coast and

East Coast wise guys and Kentucky bloodstock and some hot new European broad off the boat from Naples or the plane from Rome and maybe the young senator from Massachusetts bidding for the presidency. But more likely he would be alone in a bar, playing out his own suicide song.

That was what Sinatra called them, didn't he? Suicide songs? 'Set 'em up, Joe, it's getting on time to go . . .'

Natasha Smollen stirred between immaculate cotton sheets. She could smell something spicy and sharp, the scent of the potpourri in the bathroom mingling with beeswax from her polished wooden bedhead. Her sense of smell was impossibly acute– 'A gift from your father,' her mother had more than once wrily observed. She could smell the desert too, arid and deathly beyond this extravagant refuge of refrigerated air.

He had said something to her, had Sinatra, as he presented her with the little bloom from the bouquet on his dressing-room table next to the champagne ice-bucket and the fan-spread of cigarettes in their filigreed silver box.

'Make your mother proud, sweetheart,' he said. And he winked and then gave her that look she had seen on his face when he wanted you to know that he was being sincere. Being sincere, or in close-up, his mind on an Academy Award nomination, in one of his more serious movies. It was his *Man with the Golden Arm* expression, she thought, grinning in her bed in the darkness. It was his *From Here to Eternity* face.

Unable to hold Sinatra's pale blue gaze, she had averted her eyes and glanced down at the table, at the cigarette box. She saw that it was a gift, the box, inscribed under the open lid where there was a fulsome tribute composed by the giver. She saw that the cigarette box was a present from the English playwright, Noel Coward. Truly, her uncle Frank knew everyone.

Shyness, more than evasiveness, had compelled her to look away, because she intended to try. Natasha Smollen loved her mother and would do everything she could to make her mother as proud of her as she was proud of her mother.

ONE

The life inside her didn't yet show. She was blossoming in that way he'd observed in the past that pregnant women sometimes did. But she was early in her term and thin anyway and there was no bump to speak of, no belly yet for her to fold her hands across and seek some kind of comfort from. Her condition had brought a flush of colour to her cheeks and her lips were blood-filled and her eyes were bright. But all this somehow emphasized the grief, rather than disguising it. Bill had seen grief before, was an expert in grief, had watched his first wife die amid its desolation. And despite that hectic flush above her cheekbones, he knew that Julia Smollen was desolate now.

He pushed her coffee across their table to her, pushed the bowl of brown sugar after it and watched as her thin smile briefly signalled thanks. But she didn't move to take it. So he spooned sugar into the coffee and added cream and stirred it for her.

'I don't have it white.'

'Today you do. You need the nourishment.' He nodded at where the bump would grow. 'Both of you.'

She had slid a book onto the café table as soon as they had found a table in the shade from the sun and sat down there. One hand hovered over the book with the fingers spread, and then retreated into her lap. It was something she kept doing. He noticed that the fingers trembled when she did it and that her nails were badly bitten. He suspected that the shaking was something she would have to endure, would have to live with, for a while. He wondered at the toll her condition would take on the unborn baby. He wondered, more idly, at the contents of the book on the tabletop.

She was dressed indifferently in clothes for which he had wired her the money. She sat pale-skinned in a plain white cotton shirt and black, calf-length skirt. The skirt was the bottom half of a suit and its jacket hung over the back of her chair. She had only very recently escaped the fugitive cold of occupied Europe and it was very hot here and of course she was not acclimatised yet. Unless the damp of her forehead was a symptom of nausea. She might have morning sickness, he thought. It might be the effects of the pregnancy. Certainly she had not yet touched her coffee.

'How well did you know him?' Her eyes were searching. Had been ever since they had met in the hotel lobby and walked the short, sunlit walk to the café and sat down here. Actually, he thought, her eyes were pleading.

'Well,' he said. But not well enough to do what those eyes were imploring him to do and bring his dead friend back to life.

She blinked. She tried and failed to smile. He thought her very brave. Her hand hovered over the book again, fingertips raw and quicks bitten pink, and disappeared. 'A horrible shock, his death?'

Bill thought about this. He wanted to be honest with her. It was tempting for him to slip into that easy, avuncular self who would soothe and insist she drank her sweet, creamed coffee. The role required no effort or thought and he did it all the time. But Julia Smollen merited more. He watched a tramcar take the corner outside the café. Two policemen in white gloves orchestrated limp traffic. Aboard the tramcar, Latin women in mantillas made from Spanish lace protected the skin of their shoulders and their modesty under splashes of floral silk. The European woman opposite him waited for a reply. She was really quite beautiful. She was nothing like he had imagined she would be. Mourning became her. It was a cynical observation. But it was one he couldn't avoid.

'Not a shock.' Bill took a deep breath. The loss was terrible and he did not trust himself to talk about it without tears for his dead friend betraying his true feelings. He did not know this woman, though he knew he had very probably saved her life. 'Martin flirted with death for as long as I knew him,' he said. 'He did that in the mountains, when he climbed. And then he did it more when he chose to make soldiering his career. It was combat he wanted, as a

soldier, I always believed. It wasn't ceremony. Or advancement. He was a man who invited physical risk. So I wasn't shocked when I learned of his death. Only by the manner of it.'

He was silent a moment. They both were.

'And the means by which I came to learn of it.'

He had met Martin Hamer on the Riviera one summer, honeymooning with his wife, Lillian. Bill had been with his own wife, Lucy. Actually he and Lucy had met Lillian first, plimsolls kicking over the red clay of the tennis courts where they encountered one another as the opening, halting, half-stalled sentences were exchanged, in the breeze from the sea, under the hot July sun. They had asked Lillian to bring her new husband for a day aboard the boat they had rented to fish. It had been Lucy's typically impulsive, generous invitation.

'They don't know anybody on the Côte,' his wife had said to Bill by way of justification. 'They're here because they've read a novel about it, for God's sake.'

He had gotten to know Martin Hamer over beers cooled in a tub of ice on the deck as the skin of their shoulders burnt on the stern and the lines from their rods hung redundantly before them. That was after he had gotten over what Martin Hamer looked like. If you ever did. As if anyone ever could.

Lillian and Lucy were both dead, now. And Hamer was dead, too. If the woman in front of him was to be believed, she carried Martin's child in her belly. Bill did believe her. Had believed her from the first. He watched her as she tried

to cope with the heat and the light of the southern hemisphere at a table outside a Mexican café. And her grief, of course. The heat and the light and the insurmountable obstacle of grief. He believed her. But in spite of what he'd just said to her, it was barely credible to him to think of Martin Hamer dead.

He'd known for almost two weeks now.

'What's the book about?'

'The what?'

'The book on the table. The one you keep almost touching. But never do, quite.'

'Oh,' she said, 'it's nothing. Of no significance.'

She smiled down at the book. She was nauseous, he saw, or feeling the heat. A trickle of sweat ran from her hairline at the temple down the side of her face. It was tear-sized. Smaller than a tear. She would never, he knew, acclimatize to Mexico. But she would not need to.

'The book?'

'*The Pilgrim's Progress*.' She picked it up. It was cloth covered, a cheap, mass-produced edition. He saw now from the title on the spine that the book was written in French. 'I stole it from the public library in Lucerne. I needed a vehicle, to transport something.' She allowed the book to fall open in her palm and took from where it parted a sealed envelope. When she held the envelope out, he saw his name on it, written in blue ink in a once familiar hand. He hadn't received a letter from Martin Hamer since the letter of condolence sent to him and Lucy after their daughter's

death from scarlet fever. The war had interrupted their friendship, severed their correspondence.

'Dear Christ,' Bill said. 'Oh, Jesus.' It was true, then. Martin Hamer was dead. All their cherished history together was gone. He swallowed.

'Take it,' Julia Smollen said.

Bill took the letter and put it into a pocket. Julia snapped shut the book and put it back on the table. But there was something else between its pages, some faint troubling at the book's centre. He reached for the book and opened it and a wild flower fell, dusty, ochre with pollen, onto the sun-bleached table-cloth.

'I prised that from his palm in the meadow where he died,' Julia Smollen said, looking down at the flower. 'I took it from him before I took the money and maps and papers and the wristwatch from his corpse.'

Breath shuddered out of Bill and a motorcycle backfired and birds flapped from balcony rails on the corner buildings around the café and took, black and reluctant, to the sky.

She unbuttoned her cuff and folded back the sleeve. Bill recognized the shockproof watch Martin had saved for and bought for his failed attempt in the Alps, on the Eigerwand. Shockproof, all right. It had apparently survived the Blitzkrieg assault on the East. Martin had campaigned in Russia, had been wounded and decorated there, according to the woman in front of him. Had fought through the cellars and street rubble and survived the battle of Stalingrad. Had played some crucial role in the German

army's counter-offensive with the Dnepre River at their backs after the trudged, frozen retreat. The strap of the watch wore a fresh and clumsy puncture wound where the woman had pierced the leather so that the watch would buckle around her own narrow wrist.

Bill sat back in his chair. He gestured vaguely for the tab and blinked against the sunlight. The birds had settled again under tarry feathers on balcony rails and roof gutterings and even vacant tables all around the square. Guitar music squawked from somewhere, flamenco, distorted by amplification on a wireless, playing from the café kitchen.

'You looted his corpse?'

Julia Smollen smiled. 'He told me you were a lawyer.'

'Martin was my friend.' There was nothing avuncular, now, in Bill's tone. 'You looted his corpse?'

'I took nothing he did not give me, sir. He gave me everything. And then he died.'

Bill knew now that driving here had been a mistake. He could have, should have chartered a plane to Guadalajara or Mexico City itself. But he hadn't known how much danger Julia Smollen might still face from vindictive pursuers. Their communication had been cryptic, distant and necessarily brief. Three or four intimate and shockingly redolent phrases had served, over a long-distance telephone line, as proof of her intimacy with his dead friend. She had given her location and spelled out her predicament in stark telegraphese. He had then applied the lawyerly part of his mind to plotting the painstaking logistics of her escape.