

SHADOWS OF A CHILD'S PAST

Ashley Blanton

Fiction

I remember the black iron fence beyond the castle garden. I would squeeze past the bushes to peek into the little town. I watched as the citizens laughed and whistled that morning unaware of the shadow that was casted upon my home. I found myself cursing them in childish curses for being so happy when it had always been said that the world turns grey when someone you love is dying. So why were the shadows only on my side? Behind my black iron fence, I remember thinking how cold and cruel those strangers were to be so happy when my mother could barely move. Honestly, I think I just felt guilty for my lack of action in being able to ease her pain. I just wanted it all to end and for everyone else to understand.

Lunch time would soon arrive as I found myself remaining in the garden most of that morning. I didn't eat because my stomach felt queasy and something just didn't sit right with me. I don't know if you can predict death, but it felt like today was the day and I found myself willing my mind away from such thoughts.

Alexander soon came to retrieve me. He, like myself, had been raised in the castle. He was a butler, more specifically mine. He was the one that found me upon the doorstep that fateful night about 18 years or so ago and had been my support as I grew up. He was still sometimes a nuisance.

"Your dress is a disaster. The seamstress made it especially for you," he commented.

He said it lightly not like his usual judging tone of a princess should be like this or a princess shouldn't do that. It was strange for him to watch his tone as if he was stepping on shards of glass. I must of took it negatively because I was quick to give a snarky remark.

"Well your suit isn't messy enough," I said having stuck my tongue out and made a troll face for effect.

I was so childish at that age, but I felt so proud at my comeback and the uneasiness in my stomach settled.

He had made a clicking noise, but provided me with a soft smile as he dusted of the loose dirt on my mint colored dress. He gestured for me to follow him as he finished and I remember it took me a second.

I looked towards the giant, oak doors and thought about the contents beyond them. I'd rather have stayed in the garden where the birds kept my mind occupied but I followed him.

He guided me like a child as he held my hand to lead me through the corridor. I knew where we were going and even today I can remember the short but agonizing trek to get there. It was usually mid-afternoon when we would take these treks and the corridor would be bathed in rainbow shadows from the patch-worked windows.

I remember happier times of running up and down as the rainbows would stain my clothes in many beautiful colors. Alexander would chase me, his normally composed face, red with frustration. I much preferred that face than the one I saw.

He wasn't very old, just 25 years but his face looked so cracked and aged. Vainly, I thought his weary face was because of me. I was always doing the opposite of what he told me, still he stood by my side and chose to stay there. Sometimes, I feel as if I took advantage of his kindness.

I watched my sandals become dyed by the shadows on the wooden floor. I hadn't bothered to watch where we were going and just allowed myself to be pulled along at Alexander's side. We soon came to a stop in which I noticed another pair of nicely dressed feet in front of the door. Though the shoes were nice, they were untied and had a few scuffs upon them.

The man that wore them was not much better and I watched as his hand shook while reaching out for the crystal knob before him. He never touched, but simply stood there with his hand only inches from it. It felt like minutes as he finally pulled his hand away and brushed through his hair. The peppery strains looked as if he had spent the night before running through it backwards.

"Your Majesty," Alexander bowed, but I just continued to stare up at him with curious, unknowing eyes.

Now that I think about it, I should've spoke up for the man that had been a good father to me for some time. If I had spoken up, I wonder if he would love me now. Deep down, I think I still love him. I cannot think of that man as a father when he so obsessively blamed me for my mother's death, though he deserves the blame more.

He turned, shocked at the sound of Alexander's voice, but he did

not look at him. The man's dull brown gaze peered down at mine and they searched within them for something. Whatever it had been, he didn't find it as he sighed and gritted his teeth in a way that seemed like he was crushing words between them.

"Father?" I called to the man out of concern, "we can open the door for you. She would be very happy to see you."

It was so innocent, but he walked off without speaking a word and I remember feeling angry and rejected. I couldn't consider that this gesture would be the first of many.

"Come, Princess," Alexander said as he quickly grabbed my forearm to prevent my escape.

I wanted to chase after him, to yell that mother needed him, but Alexander's grip tightened and his dark eyes pleaded with me. I wanted to at least know why. I knew I would get no answer and I doubted it mattered anyways.

With ease, Alexander turned the crystal knob that the heartless man had been unable to even reach and I remember thinking that it was a win for me against him.

The light from the large bay window bathed us as we entered. The curtains were pulled back and warmth filled the small room. It wasn't mother's room but the doctor and the man who called himself my father had put her in there. The doctor went on and on about how the brightly lit room would be good for her health even though it had felt more like they were hiding her. How dare they shove her into a storage closet. It may have been nice but it wasn't hers.

I forced a large toothy grin, something I had never had to do up until then. I had always been a rather cheerful child that was filled with energy and mischief but during that time I only thought about what I hadn't done.

I didn't listen to Alexander and his lessons, I didn't help my little sister and I had left the castle when I wasn't supposed to the day my mother grew sick. She slowly turned and smiled back.

"Hello mother," my voice squeaked as I quickly ran to the side of her bed.

I reached out for her hand and grasped it hard in my own. It was frail and I felt that if I held it tight enough the warmth from my own would help hers to bloom again. I think I just spent too much time looking at flowers. Her greying blue eyes turned to take me in as her wheat colored hair fell over her face. I used my other hand to brush them

away and remember her hair reminding me of an overused brush with the wiry feel to it as well. I tried to think of ways to comfort her but the only thing I could think of was the piano.

My mother and I had always been close even though I wasn't her real daughter. When I first appeared on the doorstep as a newborn baby, she had been unable to conceive. Five years after I arrived, she would conceive my sister. Even after that we had always had a strong bond. One of the ways we had bonded was through music.

In the corner sat a piano that looked stained with age due to its off-white color. I was lectured many times about the color by Alexander and he would say it was made of ivory and was not dirty.

Mother would always laugh at our exchange as if it never got old. We would practice together most nights and it was the one interest that only she and I shared. I think she was always worried about me feeling like I wouldn't belong after she had my sister. I had always felt like I belonged with her. I loved her and she was my only mother.

I made my way to the piano not far from her bedside. As I situated myself, I turned to look at her noticing the shimmering in her eyes. This was something that I could do for her.

"What would you like me to play?" I asked as my hands found their place upon the keys.

I watched her mouth open, but sound failed to follow as she mouthed the words. I noticed her expression drop as if defeated by her inability to communicate with me. I tried to think quickly as I turned away and started to play. I picked her favorite song. It was a solemn tune about a girl unable to touch the world. I still don't understand why she liked such sad things. Her face lit up as if I made the right choice, so I started to sing:

*Little shadows dancing around my feet
I hold so dearly so close to me
A silent creature with in the night
Falling into a grave
Out of sight.
Shall you scream
No one hears
The deathly cries
Of one so near
I hold no heart*

*A soul to part
For I am timeless dear*

My voice at nine probably didn't do the song justice, but my mother listened with smiles in her eyes. I watched as her mouth curved upwards and cracked. I watched the shimmers in her eyes fall as she wet her lips. I had thought I had done something wrong and quickly stopped out of concern. I started to walk back to her side to help her clear the tears from her eyes.

"Mother? Please don't cry. I can play you a different song, a happier one."

As I was in thought, she had slowly lifted her hand towards me. I kneeled beside her as she caressed my face like she had done many times before. I felt my own eyes shimmer in reaction to her eyes which continued to water. Even though they still appeared full of tears they had stopped falling. I leaned into her touch and remembered thinking how her hand was just as cold as the iron fence.

Alexander rushed over and quickly placed a finger on her other wrist. I know now that he was checking her pulse but she waved him away. He bowed politely. I remember hearing him exit the room. I should have known something was wrong. I should have done something.

She pulled her hand from my cheek and I heard her let out a weak breath as she turned her head to the ceiling. I wanted her to be able to tell me it was okay or to at least say I love you but I would never hear her voice again. Smiling towards the ceiling, she turned her head back and seemed to be asking me to continue playing. I nodded and returned to the piano. The piano seemed to bring her peace and it was the only real thing I could do at such a young age.

The song poured out of my mouth. I watched her and remember my mind willing her to die, though the word die wasn't as clear, I feel like it meant the same. I just wanted her to have peace to leave this place and the people that pushed her away in her time of need.

My hands stopped playing as I felt a need to be near her. I reached for her hand as I sang the notes in a voice that reminded me of when she would sing me lullabies. Her eyes slowly shut as I held her hand to my chest and felt tears streak my face. Her hand went limp as I kneeled beside her and continued to sing. I did not need a self-proclaimed doctor to tell me she was gone and I continued to sing as if trying to hide the fact from myself. She looked so peaceful laying there and as the last words left my mouth I heard the door open.

Alexander had rushed in with the doctor on his heels. He quickly pulled me away and gave me a somber smile as he turned back to my mother. Not wanting to stay, I walked out the door as my sister rushed past me. I could hear her wails as she heard the doctor's cold words.

"She's left us," the doctor said.

I was now halfway down the corridor unable to hear Alexander's reply. I don't know why I just walked.

I walked towards the man that had refused to be there. He looked out the stained-glass windows as if he couldn't hear the wails down the hall. My eyes found his as he turned towards me.

"She is happier now," I told him and I watched as his face turned dark.

He must have been appalled by my smile with tears still staining my face. I think he would have preferred if I was wailing like my sister but mother was at peace. She was no longer in pain and no longer had to be pushed away like storage. I don't regret the words I said or the way I said them. All I wanted was for her to be happy and for the man to feel her pain. I remember the black iron fence beyond the garden and I remember the man's painful gaze.