

BWR Chapbook Series



Shadow Memories
from *Desire: A Haunting*

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Mother did something to herself after what she did to Grandmother and I will never speak of it but after I saw it happen I went out back beneath the falling cherry blossoms and attempted to bury myself in them

when the authorities came that's where they found me

going only on my appearance someone suggested I might be rabid so
a noose was thrown and I was caught around the neck and taken
away on a long pole and soon subjected to certain needles
administered in segments over several weeks

it is a wonder that given these events I am able to handle any sharp
objects at all

Mother said it was an accident and a woman from the state became established in the cottage

the woman from the state took care of Mother and I was not allowed to stay so had to learn to love her from afar

Mother said some things to the woman from the state and the woman from the state said some things to some other people who contacted the tea house and as soon as certain papers were signed you came for me

you took me back to the tea house where I spent most of my time
alone in the attic

what I remembered best was the last light of that day and how it
spread out behind me as I opened the door to go inside and how it
caused my body to cast a violet shadow over her chest and how I
could not get to her in time and how my throat was raw for weeks
after because I had screamed so long and hard and loud that ever
since I have been able to speak in only a whisper

in the tea house attic my mouth tasted constantly of metal and I cried
until I could not cry anymore

in the mornings when you were foraging for wildflowers you left me
with your aging father

he would look after me you said

you said his name was Sam and that I could trust him just as Mother
had trusted you

at first he tried to feed me candied oranges but I bit him and put an
end to that

I was afraid for him to touch me

I wanted him to be afraid to touch me

every night in the tea house attic when I should have been sleeping I
plotted my return to Mother by way of hills and town and forest

for a long time I believed she was getting better and that she would
be waiting for me at the sea still standing tall and proud

just as she had been before

as if to show me I too could square up tall and proud

so even if it is true she never wanted me and regarded me as a mongrel and a boy mongrel at that there is always a different version and mine is this

in all our coming and going there was only one constant I was used to and that was the warmth from my own body trapped between us as we made our way on trains and in circuses and in the care of perfect strangers

we were bound

if not by love

together always at the leash

least

we visited her on two occasions

on the first I brought her boiled peanuts in paper bags that you helped me make

on the second I made her grilled cheese sandwiches

but my visits seemed only to upset her in her darkness

still she was as beautiful to me in her red cloak as I could remember her ever having been and I whispered to her before we left that I loved her always and frosted her cheeks as slowly as I could with tears and kisses and never saw her again

the woman from the state stood beside you and dabbed her eyes and murmured TRAGEDY and SHAME

I remembered how she had shaved me bald one summer when I was very young

there had been someone else with us in that house but we had no choice and left because it was filled with bats and what I remember most is that they flapped and fell around us because their wings were torn

sometimes there is no choice but to leave

we went by sea

a captain who recognized Mother and called her by name took pity
on me and gave me a coconut to play with

a few days later he took it back abruptly and broke it and bent down
to hand me back the useless pieces

they were wet inside and lined with what I thought was white soap
curved into rounds

some weeks later we docked at last and found ourselves inside the
Statue of Liberty and for the first time I saw Mother cry

she patted my head

which was also a first

and seemed to be even sadder at the sight of me

I thought maybe I should have used more soap

we made our way to Central Park and I marveled at all the people
dressed in so many shadow hues

I tried to point them out but Mother said DO NOT SPEAK UNTIL
YOU ARE SPOKEN TO so I did not speak for years

you tried to get me to speak to you but I was afraid because you had taken me from Mother and I was afraid of what I might say

anyway there were always chores to be done at the tea house so I did them

I had decided to make myself useful

and for the first time I also went to church and over time found grace

every day I crept inside before the sun and made my way along the
aisle to the first row of pews where I prayed for Mother

I did not look at the crown of thorns above me because it reminded
me of being inside the Statue of Liberty

back at the tea house I mended fences

I shined gentlemen's splats

I played the piano for the ladies having lunch

I learned they did not like me to play the staccato pieces

I dried dishes and kept out of the way and never opened my mouth

I don't know how many months passed for me like this but at some point after all my chores were done for the day I developed the habit of leaving the tea house and going into the bad parts of town to walk down dark alleys at night to feel the thrill of fear and courage

I told no one

of course

there was no one to tell

then one day I was removing cherry pits in the kitchen when your husband returned from an extended business trip and said LOOK WHO IT IS, I REMEMBER YOU

can I get you anything

GOT ANY GRAPEES

I rinsed a bowlful under water for him and put them on the table

BY THE WAY, I WAS SORRY TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR MOTHER

I looked down at my hands in my lap

WHOA, HEY

LISTEN, I'M NOT HERE TO RUIN YOUR DAY SO I'LL JUST LEAVE IT AT THIS, IF YOU NEED TO TALK I'M HERE, OKAY

I turned toward the open window at a sudden commotion from the street

HE'S BLEEDING you said HE'S REALLY BLEEDING and then people were everywhere and everyone was shouting orders and Sam rushed in and pushed my bowls off the table and cherries and grapes and pits spilled all over onto the floor and someone told me to GET UP, GET OUT OF THE WAY and they brought him in and I scrambled and pressed myself as tightly as I could into the farthest corner of the room and saw him standing above himself and staring down at his own remains on the kitchen table

he looked up then right at me and said I MEAN IT, OKAY

I nodded

okay

they buried him on a hill of wildflowers in simple pine

I had overheard you say you had no use for a cemetery the way they were made to look like gardens with all that restriction and not enough freedom it would just be another heartbreak and that you just could not endure

Sam arranged to have several doves released into the air and you covered your heart with both hands as they flew away

the dead man and I watched from the windowsill in the attic and when we saw everyone making their way back down the hill we went downstairs to greet them

I noticed Sam's substantial nose was chapped from too much blowing and he dabbed at it tenderly with a red silk cloth

THIS IS GREAT, ISN'T IT

DON'T YOU THINK IT'S WONDERFUL HOW THE LIVING COME TOGETHER TO OFFER EACH OTHER THEIR CONDOLENCES

the dead man swiveled twice on the piano bench and pretended to tap a key

LOOK, THAT LITTLE OLD WOMAN IS PICKING GRISTLE FROM HER TEETH, I'LL BET YOU ANYTHING SHE EATS IT

OH MY GOD, I CAN'T BELIEVE SHE JUST ATE THAT

I would have liked to ask him questions but I mistrusted the sound of my own voice and I thought he might object in any case so kept myself quiet and waited until he spoke to me and when he did it never seemed quite right to respond with what I thought I wanted to say and in any case I was in and out of the tea house clearing dishes and pouring tea and asking if I could do anything to make anyone more comfortable and thanking everyone for coming and for thinking of you and your family in your time of need

the entire household slept poorly that night and I joined you in the kitchen where you were unable to hold your little gold scoop steady

I reached out and lightly wrapped two fingers and my thumb around your wrist and let your hand guide mine in and out of various jars of dried flowers and herbs and other ingredients

in this way I learned the secret recipe of your personal blend

I felt your pulse under my fingers and my entire body seemed like it was on fire

the dead man looked over our proceedings and said THIS IS
MADNESS, IT'S NOT LIKE I WAS MURDERED

JUST LOOK AT ALL THESE CAKES NOBODY ATE

I had the thought that maybe I was beginning to dislike him but I
kept it to myself

you removed your hand from mine and for the first time I believe
you really saw me and seemed happy I was there

you took a tiny tin from your pocket and opened it and I saw inside
some substance that looked like pink vaseline

ROSE SALVE you said and motioned for me to sit with you at the
table where you gently took my hands in yours and massaged small
dabs of it into the skin around my fingernails one at a time and then
into my knuckles and all the way up to each of my wrists THERE
NOW, THAT FEELS BETTER DOESN'T IT

I wiggled my fingers and smiled

they looked like little pink worms quite strange to me but the pain
was gone and I could not remember when I had ever been so happy

the others went to bed and even the dead man left us alone in the kitchen

DO YOU REMEMBER ME you wanted to know

I nodded *yes*

DO YOU REMEMBER THE WEDDING

yes

WOULD MIND TELLING IT TO ME THE WAY IT WAS FOR YOU

so it all spilled out that many years ago when we had first come to the tea house as guests Mother had earned her keep and mine by making your wedding dress and for that special occasion she for the first time also made me a dress because I had been given the job of throwing petals from a basket and Sam had told me it was an important job and I was the only one big enough to do it and that I would be the first one anyone saw from the wedding party but because I had never been to a party I was very nervous about it and I was still so sorry that I had tripped and spilled all the petals on the steps but that it had been really nice of you bend down in your big dress that I thought looked like a beautiful golden cloud to help me scoop them back up into my basket and what I remembered most was that you said DON'T CRY

LOOK, EVERYONE IS SO HAPPY TO SEE YOU

GO ON, THEY'RE ALL WAITING JUST FOR YOU

and then later at the dancing part I had overheard someone talking with Sam who said WITH ANY LUCK THE STORK WILL SOON BE MAKING A DELIVERY and for as long as Mother and I had continued to live there I kept watch out the window for that stork in case anyone needed to be there to sign his paper clipboard

I stopped talking then and you nodded and said MY HUSBAND DID NOT WANT CHILDREN, SO WE DID NOT HAVE THEM

WHEN I HEARD ABOUT YOUR MOTHER I KNEW I WANTED YOU TO
COME, BUT IT WAS STILL SO SAD FOR ME BECAUSE OF THAT, DO
YOU UNDERSTAND

I told you everything

how I kept with me the memory of the warmth and smell of your
delicious stews you only made on rainy days when you had the time
to let them cook and cook because on all the other day you were out
with the wildflowers every morning

how I loved and had always remembered the tall white pitchers you
filled with elaborate arrangements that you seemed able to make like
magic from simple decisions of this wildflower or that wildflower and
I told you that I remembered thinking the very rooms and the
wildflowers in them were even happier when you were in them too

I told you I remembered how you had sat at the piano with me every
evening after dinner to teach me the songs my fingers never forgot

not even after so many years away

and I said it was strange to think about how the body holds
memories in its parts and that I wondered what other memories my
body held without my even knowing it

we were silent for a time and then you confessed that for many years
your husband had been having an affair with a woman named Zepha
but then Zepha had died from esophageal cancer and your husband
had been very sad for many weeks until finally doing what he did

you said that on the one hand his death was a tragedy and for that
reason you were in mourning but on the other hand you felt very
numb to it all because your had never really loved him

you said you felt guilty more than anything because you had always
considered it a convenience that he traveled so much for business

you asked me then if I would give you a few minutes alone if you
went upstairs to bed and in a little while would I bring up a glass of
water

when I went upstairs I saw you had taken off your dress and were
sitting on the edge of your bed in only a gray silk slip

I tried to hand you the water but you asked me to put it on the table
and when I bent to do it you kissed me on the mouth

I heard the water glass fall and break

I felt your tongue on my tongue

I felt your sharp nails press into the undersides of my hands

I smelled vanilla and smoke in your hair from Sam's evening pipe

a habit he said he picked up once in a jungle

I thought of all I had ever heard about lovers and tried to understand
what it meant to be in someone's bedroom and at the same time still
feel as if I were somewhere else

you slid your hands around my waist and I rested my own hands on
your shoulders and when the straps of your slip fell away you began
to sob and fell back onto the bed and waved your hand at me to leave
the room

I passed the dead man on my way out and he said HOW LONG HAS
THIS BEEN GOING ON

I ran away

I ran through the streets until I couldn't run anymore

then turned back because I had nowhere to go

not even church

and it was not until early the next day that I was able to finally fall asleep but no one at the tea house disturbed me and when I woke that afternoon and made my way downstairs to the kitchen where I found my lunch waiting I saw that someone else had performed my morning chores

the next few days were hot and clouded and the air felt gritty on my skin

the dead man trailed me wherever I went so eventually I said *whatever it is you need to say just say it*

he said WILL YOU TELL HER SOMETHING FOR ME, WILL YOU TELL HER I REGRET THAT I WAS NOT A VERY GOOD HUSBAND AND I'M SORRY

why did you marry her

he made a suck sound with his tongue on a tooth and said I LOVED HER

but then you didn't anymore

SOMETHING LIKE THAT

LET ME ASK YOU SOMETHING, WHY DO YOU SUPPOSE YOU CAN SEE AND HEAR ME WHEN NOBODY ELSE CAN

I don't know

DID YOU EVER THINK THAT MAYBE YOU'VE GOT A GIFT AND YOU SHOULD DO SOMETHING WITH IT

I hadn't thought about it

MAYBE YOU SHOULD START

and then he said WE GOT MARRIED FOR ALL THE WRONG REASONS

BECAUSE I LOVED HER MY HEART WENT OUT TO HER FOR HER SUFFERING AND I CONFUSED THAT WITH THINKING WE SHOULD NEVER BE APART, WHICH IS NOT TO SAY THAT SAM WASN'T ALSO PUTTING SOME PRESSURE ON, SO I PROPOSED AND SHE SAID YES AND THAT WAS THAT

I never knew it could be so simple

WELL, IT WAS

AND THEN OF COURSE IT WASN'T, WAS IT

because there had been so many family members in attendance at the funeral you took the opportunity to gather your remaining living relatives into small groups and snap some pictures

in every photograph I happened to be caught in the image of me was always beside a sunburst the shape of the dead man

when you presented me with the evidence you said IT'S CERTAINLY ODD, DON'T YOU THINK

Sam wondered aloud if I had a chemical imbalance

I felt a tickling sensation crawl up my back to my ears and knew if I told the truth there might be consequences and even though I thought it cruel to keep them from the knowledge of the dead man's presence in their lives and particularly of his regret I stirred my tea leaves and said I didn't understand what you were getting at

you looked into my eyes and when I looked away you stood and left the room

THAT WAS YOUR OPENING the dead man said YOU JUST BLEW IT

I tried to explain but as the days and weeks went by we forgot all about it until one Sunday when we were closed for spring cleaning

we were covered in a thin layer of filth but we were happy and you were singing and everything beyond the windows was blossoms and blankets of sunshine and sky and that's when a tall woman arrived and said her name was Zepha

Zepha's here I said

ZEPHA'S DEAD

I know, but still, we should let her in, she's been wandering a long time

so we invited Zepha inside and because she looked hungry I put down a plate of cookies for her and she pretended to help herself

you held my hand in your lap and said WHY ARE YOU HERE, WHAT DO YOU WANT

Zepha said DO YOU MIND IF I SMOKE, I HATE THE TASTE BUT IT HELPS MY NERVES

I told her to go ahead and she pretended to light a pretend cigarette and pretended to smoke and said I JUST WANT HER TO KNOW THAT I LOVED HIM, I STILL DO, AND I THOUGHT MAYBE WE COULD TALK

HE TOLD ME YOU WOULD HELP ME

I HAD THE CRAZY IDEA THAT MAYBE I WOULD COME HERE AND TRY TO EXPLAIN

you chewed slowly on a cookie as I relayed the message and said LISTEN, I HAVE TO TELL YOU, OUR MARRIAGE WAS JUST ONE OF THOSE THINGS, LIKE A BAD HABIT YOU CAN'T GET RID OF

WE WEREN'T HAPPY

I'M NOT EVEN SURE I DID LOVE HIM ALL THAT MUCH

Zepha finished her cigarette and said WELL, IF YOU WANT TO KNOW THE TRUTH, THAT MAN AND ALL HIS COMING AND GOING WORE ME OUT

BUT I DID, I LOVED HIM, AND NOW I WOULD LIKE TO TAKE HIM WITH ME, AWAY FROM HERE IF YOU DON'T MIND

that night we walked up the hill to the dead man's grave

it felt strange to have my secret exposed

to have it believed

but after Zepha left I explained in fuller detail about the buzz and static in the air that I could feel and how I did not think there was any real mystery to death and that it seemed strange to me to think of it as something beyond life because to me it was still life but just very different

maybe like what it might be like to live a new life after having made a great escape from a bank robbery

but I saw that I was causing confusion so I complimented you on how nice you looked in your gray slip and said that I remembered you wore it after the funeral and you turned to me and said I'M SORRY

FOR THAT NIGHT I MEAN, I SHOULD NOT HAVE KISSED YOU LIKE THAT

I DON'T KNOW WHAT CAME OVER ME BUT IT WAS WRONG

I WAS WRONG, NOT YOU, YOU DID NOTHING WRONG

I told you I had thought nothing of it

the wind picked up then and your hair blew around in the air and you said WHERE DO THEY SLEEP

I said *anywhere they can make a bed, I think, and I'm not sure if they do sleep or if they just pretend to be sleeping because it reminds them of what it was like before*

the moon above us was round as a coin and after we stayed at the grave for a while the wind settled back down and we knew then that the dead man was no longer your husband but Zepha's and so we made our way back home

the years passed us quietly by but our routines remained steady as ever

every spring we cleaned and in the summers we chased the flies from our stove and every autumn we prepared the house for winter

which is when I was invited to learn the secrets of your recipes

it seemed we could fill the entire house with scent and steam and soon I was able to seal the sachets with just the precise quantities of leaves and herbs and flowers almost as well as even your mother and grandmother

still I grew weary and occasionally found myself at the attic window staring out onto the white hills dreaming of stepping out in a fine dress from the tallest of all tall buildings onto a busy street where people parted ways for me to walk cleanly through

and sometimes I dreamed of the sea and how it rises in a storm and raises up the smells of the earth

all of this was to escape the fact that Sam had become incapable and you could hardly bear it so I had added the tending of his body to my list of chores

still I dreamed of leaving

I dreamed one day I ran away

and on my 18th birthday it rained late into the night and into the next morning and after several days the basement flooded up to its ceiling and you worried for the rest of the house but then the sun returned and the world was bright and newly shined and we discovered on the porch some dozen wooden crates screwed tight and addressed to me

I worked at the screws and the wet wooden sides fell away from their black frames

their inner walls were lined with thickly padded red crushed velvet

one after another they revealed over three hundred dresses hanging in individually wrapped garment bags

beside me you gasped

I found a note that simply said

AFTER MANY YEARS I HAVE COLLECTED
THEM ALL, WITH ONLY TWO EXCEPTIONS,
A GOLDEN NEEDLE LACE WEDDING DRESS
IN THE ATTIC OF THE HOUSE YOU RESIDE IN
CURRENTLY, AND A RED CLOAK IN THE CLOSET
OF THE COTTAGE YOU NOW OWN, WHICH YOU
ARE FREE TO RETURN TO AT ANY TIME

YOUR MOTHER'S FRIEND,
CHARLOTTE

I went home

but I was unprepared for the open ache that fell on top of me as I
made the long walk down Prynne Street

it was even worse when I unlocked the cottage door

I was so lonely

lonely for you and lonely all over again for Mother

haunted by the absences of everyone I had ever loved and all the
empty space they could have filled

that first night in the cottage I made a cup of your blend from the ribbon-wrapped bundle of sachets you had pressed into my palms before I left

the cottage was so empty that all my aching erupted to the surface and I remembered that day all over again

I was out back

the cherry blossoms were in bloom

I stepped out from under them to look up at the sky and in an instant I was drenched

the rain came and went like that and the sky turned a deep dark violet

I took myself inside to change out of my wet clothes

I cast a shadow over her chest and could not get to her in time

all I could do was scream

I screamed as I held her in my arms and when I couldn't scream anymore I ran away back outside and back into the safety of the cherry blossoms where I clutched and clawed at my broken throat convinced that I had lost my mind