

Shadows on the Wall

The Jennie Hackman Memorial Award for Short Fiction, 2nd Prize

Johannes G. Peregrine lifted a gloved hand to his face to brush the snow from his eyes. He peered into the shifting veil of whiteness and shadow before him, searching for something concrete on which to base his position. He transferred the weight of the satchel he carried from one shoulder to the other, clasping its folded cover with his other hand to make sure not one flake of wetness reached the precious contents inside.

Well, not as precious as they used to be, he thought. In his grandfather's time, the contents of the package would have been priceless, but the invention by a man who shared his name changed that. Sixty years later, the only worth many found in what he carried was the cost of its production. He shifted the satchel's weight again, balancing it against the large travelling backpack he also toted, and continued on.

Finally his urgent search was rewarded when he spied a dark crag hidden amongst the drifts of snow. A blizzard this bad could kill a man—even an experienced traveler such as he—and if that crag offered any sort of shelter he would count himself as lucky. As he approached, the dark outline and reassuring security of a cave revealed themselves. Seeing no sign of animal inhabitation—it would be a wonderful way to end his journey in between the jaws of some incensed brown bear—he ducked his head and entered.

Immediately he felt the tightness in his face and lips loosen, and the fogged breath he puffed in front of him was not swept away by wind, but drifted into oblivion with a reassuring slowness. The cave was deep, the depth of its interior lost beyond the scope of his sight. He stepped forward to enter a particularly snug-looking hollow before dropping both the satchel and his travel bag. He unbuttoned his coat and raised his hands to the ceiling, relishing the loud cracks in his back as he stretched. He glanced around, noting the ashen remains of an old fire in the center of the hollow and a pile of logs stacked in a corner, opposite to what looked like a heap of abandoned rags. He smiled.

He fished his flint out of the recesses of his pack and struck a spray of embers into the newly set wood. His fingers were clumsy

with cold, however, and he dropped the flint, sending it clattering across the floor of the cave to nestle against the heap of rags. Grunting, he went over to the mound and crouched to retrieve it.

“Blood!” He swore, falling back. He wrenched away from the small wraith’s hand that had shot out of the mound to grip his wrist. He watched in stunned stupefaction as the hand patted the ground before closing around the flint and withdrawing back into the heap of cloth. The heap shifted, and the flint rattled back toward him.

“Don’t just sit there,” the heap said. “Get the fire going. It’s cold in here.” It shifted again, the peak of the pile wobbling until it toppled to the floor. A figure of a girl emerged—dirty, pale, and bedraggled but undeniably human. His startled breathing slowed a bit. She couldn’t have been older than thirteen.

“Well, you’re useless,” she said, recovering the flint herself when he continued to stare at her. She squatted before the wood and with a deft and experienced hand lit a fire. Her composure baffled him, though he doubted he appeared too threatening with his sore ass and dumbstruck gaze. “I’m Maya,” she said, glancing at him. “What’s your name?”

Whether it was her stark lack of concern at the oddity of the situation, his fatigue from the cold, or her somehow compelling brevity, he answered her with a name he had not been called since he was her age. He had been titled a lot of things in his travels—Professeur, Lehrer, Maestro, Teacher—they all meant the same thing, and it applied to him no longer. “I’m Perry.”

“And what are you doing in my cave?”

“I—your cave?” He didn’t know whether to laugh or be annoyed. He was used to that sense of possessive self-entitlement in children, his pupils being of noble birth, but the girl dressed and spoke like a lowborn. And of all things to claim, why this hollowed nook in the middle of a forest?

“Yes, my cave. I’ve been coming here for years. When I was a little girl I wandered away from my village and got lost, and eventually, I found this place. I’ve come back sometimes ever since. I was about to leave when the snow started, so now I’m gonna wait it out here.”

Perry scowled at her. The nearest village he knew was five miles away, having passed through it to restock. She returned the frown with benign patience, awaiting his answer. “I was just traveling—” escaping, Perry thought, would be the more appropriate description; what he exactly was running from, however, was a little harder to define. “—And found myself in need of shelter. The storm hampered me as well.” He paused. “What about your parents? Do they know you’re here?” Maya chuckled.

“Naw, I’m not much in their story anymore,” she said, glancing down into the growing flame. The dancing light drew odd contrasts across her face. Despite her paleness and frailty, there was something strongly elemental about her features. It was a face one would expect to see on a pagan prayer statue, or some mythical oread—not on a village peasant. Though strange, it was not an unattractive face.

He rose stiffly to his feet and peered out the entrance of the cave. The snow was still pelting down with smothering implacability. He turned back to the fire. “Would you mind sharing your cave with me, just until the snow stops? I don’t relish the thought of going back out in that tempest.” She cocked an eyebrow.

“You got food?” He chuckled and dug into his pack, handing to her what she requested. He watched as she devoured her portion with an almost comic frenzy. He consumed his portion with a bit more dignity.

“You like stories, then?” He asked when they both had finished. He had always had a knack for divining a child’s particular interest, a knack that inspired his original desire to teach and which had pleased his father very much. It wasn’t so hard, really. One only had to look at a child as a fellow human being—something many adults found surprisingly difficult. His intuition once again proved on the mark.

“Oh, yes!” Maya exclaimed, her expression brightening. “I love stories. That’s usually what I do when I come up here. When things—” she hesitated, seeming to withdraw into herself. She hugged her knees close to her chest. “When I don’t like my story, I come here and make up new ones. Sometimes, when the fire’s burning, I can pretend so hard my shadow looks like somebody else. They could be a hero one night, a villain the next, maybe even a dragon after that...” She dropped off at his look of delighted incredulity. “What?” He smiled.

“Old habits die hard, I suppose. Look.” He dragged his satchel towards him and opened it, fishing through it for a moment before extracting a set of bound papers. He hesitated, however, and studied the girl. “I don’t suppose you can read?” She stuck out her jaw.

“I can write my name.”

“Well...okay, here, just look at this.” He extracted from the bound pages (most of which were covered in text) one bearing an illustration. He handed it across to her so that she could peer at the image by firelight.

“What is it?” She asked, running her finger across the runic script inscribed along the top.

“The text’s called Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. My grandfather

used to own an authentic Arabic translation. This one's just a copy, but the illustration you hold I drew myself." He didn't notice that his jaw was jutted quite like hers had been moments before. She scrutinized the drawing and, encouraged by her look of wonderment, he went on to explain the respective figures in the drawing and what they meant. When he was finished she switched her gaze from the paper to him, her eyes moist and shiny. A faint crease touched her brow. This look of determined concentration aroused in him such a strong reaction of endearment for her that he was caught off-guard. Her countenance was so unlike the apathetic, haughty faces of the children he used to teach. It was the deadened look in their eyes that he fled from. Sixty years before a man had invented a way to give the gift Perry carried in his satchel to anyone, but, as Perry had discovered, very few had the ability to appreciate his gift's true worth, beyond the cost of ink and paper.

"I don't understand," she said, frowning. "In your picture the people are chained." She pointed at the captive miniatures. "Why? Don't they like the shadows?"

"I'd imagine they are content, for they don't know anything else. But they're not real. The people don't know the truth."

"But my stories are true!" She exclaimed, shoving the paper back into his hands. Something about it had enraged her. "I mean, I know they're not actually real—no magic and dragons and demons—but they're truer than the world out there. They're truer than my parents, and the people of the village. See, in my stories, there's a hero, and he's good, and being good is true. And there's a villain, and he's evil, and being evil is true. They're both being. Even if the good guy does something bad, he's on something's side, at least. Regular people though, they aren't anything. They're just in-between." She gazed at him, her eyes shiny and imploring. "You understand, right?" He nodded.

"I think so." He refolded the paper and tucked it back into his satchel. He selected another log and placed it on the fire. He smiled. "Why don't you tell me one, then?"

"Okay," she said, wiping her eyes with grimy fists. She glanced at her shadow on the wall behind her, and started to speak. What began as polite interest on Perry's part soon turned into fascination. Her stories contained all that she had promised: magic and dragons and demons, heroes and villains, desperate fights for a desperate cause. What compelled him so, however, was watching the nuance of her shadow against the cavern wall. When she spoke of the hero, he saw her shadow grow in stature, the chin push out and upward, with a defiant arch to its shoulders. When she spoke of the villain—yes, he could see that disdainful tilt of the neck, the way its head

fell back when it laughed. Maya wasn't so much telling a story as channeling the spirits of these characters that, to her, were quite real. He was mesmerized.

"So what did you think?" She asked when she finished, a trace of fear in her voice. Perry shook himself to gather his thoughts. It was like emerging from a trance. He bowed his head and chuckled. She went rigid. "Well, if you thought it was that bad you could've asked me to stop, you bastard, you—"

"No, no, Maya," he said, holding up his hands to ease her. "I thought it was very good. Really."

"...really?"

"Yes ma'am." They sat in silence for several minutes. Finally, Maya muttered something under her breath.

"What?" said Perry. She shrugged.

"Thanks, and..."

"Sorry, I didn't catch that last bit. What?"

"Thanks, and...I'm sorry I called you a bastard."

He laughed. "That's quite all right."

And so it became a ritual between them. The long bleak hours of the day and the chilling darkness of night were thus filled up. Maya would tell him stories, and in return Perry would read her passages from his collection in the satchel. He had been carrying a fair amount of Greek literature, and she made a wonderful audience. She groaned and winced in sympathy at Oedipus's downfall, cheered on Odysseus's trickery, and laughed with delight over the events of Lysistrata, though he was hesitant at first to read that one to her at her age. After rolling around on the floor for several minutes, she wiped tears from her streaming eyes and said, "You know, that's not a bad idea. Too bad it would never work."

Their mutual exclusion of the outside could not last, however. Though the storm had abated somewhat after several days, the wind gusted up such curtains of ice into the air as to make travelling absurd. One might as well attempt to traverse blindfolded. The frigid temperatures, however, demanded that they venture beyond their enclave to gather more fuel for the fire.

"Tie this around your waist," Perry instructed Maya after she insisted on helping, handing her a rope. He secured the other end about his own waist and looped the middle around a tree just outside their cave. "That way we won't get lost. I'll go left, you right. Look as quickly as you can. Pull the rope if you need help." He smiled at her and stepped out of their little haven, her close behind. They both set out in their respective directions.

The snow was deep enough in places to reach Perry's mid-thigh. He burrowed his way through, stopping to collect branches

downed by the blizzard. The whistling roar of the wind blotted out all other sound, and he squinted his eyes against the sharp crystals of ice that pelted him. He was traveling in a colorless void, without place or time. He readjusted the rope circling his waste, grateful for the anchorage it provided. Then, ever so slightly, he felt a tug.

He paused, waiting to see if the tug would repeat itself. It did, harder this time, and urgent. He turned around, but as he took a step forward the rope pulled so hard that it knocked him off his feet. He rolled up, every muscle tensed, the wood he had collected lying forgotten on the ground. He didn't think that Maya could have done that on her own. He sprinted back to the cave, hooked his end of the rope around the tree, and followed Maya's length into the oppressive emptiness. He ran it through his hands, fearing to find her caught in a crevasse or trapped beneath a fallen drift. What he did find, however, was infinitely worse. The frayed end of the rope, cut by some unknown force, slithered through his snow-caked glove and fell to the ground, useless. He bent down and retrieved it, his last connection, and held it close to him.

"Maya!" He called into the whistling void. "MAYA!" He heard something cry out in the white vacuity, so distant yet present and undeniable.

"Oh, Perry! Help me please!" Then, beneath the high shrillness of the wind, the deep and gruff timbre of an alien voice—a male one.

"MAYA!" Perry rushed forward, making out in the darkness the little silhouette of his friend and the bear-shaped outline of a man.

"Let me go!" She cried, beating him with her tiny fists. He tightened his grip on the back of her neck and hurled her to the ground, making her cough and sputter as her mouth filled with snow. He yanked her back to her feet.

"Oh no, deary, yer coming with me," he wheezed in a voice slurred by drink. "I know who ye are. I'm a friend of yer father, I am, and I know he's been a-wanting you back." He paused, a wolfish grin spreading across his face to reveal several missing teeth. Those that remained were the same dusky yellow as his eyes. "I know what you two get up to, and he a-promised to...share his happiness with the one who brought you back." Maya bucked, letting loose a bloodcurdling scream that put the wind to shame.

"Perry! Perry, please!" Perry lunged forward, tackling the man from behind and wrapping around his throat the only thing he had on hand: the rope. It didn't take long for the man to stop moving. He wasn't particularly strong anyway, and he was sick with the poison in his liver and mind. He must have been half-mad and desperate to venture out in this weather. Finally, Perry crawled off him, feeling nauseous and sweaty beneath all his clothes. Maya gaped at the

man on the ground with dumbstruck eyes.

“Did...did you kill him?” she asked. Perry shook his head and bent to examine him.

“I don’t think so. He’s just unconscious.” He uncoiled the rope from around his fists, feeling bruises there. Whether or not he survives lying there in this temperature is another story, he thought. “Come on back, Maya,” he said, straightening to look at her. Her expression was blank. “Maya?” She didn’t respond. He took a step towards her, and was only just in time to catch her as her eyes rolled back into her head and she fainted.

“Perry?” she whispered, shaking her head softly side to side. “Perry, is that you?”

“Ah! She’s awake!” Perry said, smiling. He helped her sit up, she leaning heavily against him, and handed her a mug of some steaming liquid. The fire was warm and strong against the two of them, casting their shadows against the cave’s wall. She was shaking so badly that some of the drink slopped over the sides of the cup, so he placed his hand over hers to steady it. She lowered her eyes, but he could still make out miniscule crystals of tears slide down her cheek and alight on his bruised knuckles.

“Perry?” she said. “Perry? Do you think there can be a hero without a villain?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, in order for someone to be a hero there has to be a villain, otherwise he’d just be an ordinary person.”

“I suppose that’s true.” She turned toward him, pressing her forehead into his chest. The tears were flowing freely now. When she next spoke her voice was muffled, so he had to lean in to hear her.

“I think, though, that I want there to be villains, because otherwise there’d be no heroes. I really don’t mind him much, the villain. At least when he does something evil, it’s for a reason. To prove something, or to make the hero do something. In a story, there’s always a reason. There has to be a reason.” She looked up at him. “In real life, though, do you think there is a reason?” He bit his lip, struggling to meet her gaze.

“I don’t know, my child. I’m sorry.” She nodded, unsurprised.

“That’s okay.” She nestled against him, the mug rolling from her fingers to the floor, ignored. “Goodnight, Perry.”

“Goodnight, Maya.”

“Would you look at that, Maya!” Perry exclaimed several days later. He stretched and walked out of the cave, raising his head. “The sun’s returned! I’d almost forgotten what he looked like!” He blinked, looking rather comic as the brilliant reflections off the

snow dazzled him. Maya, however, did not share his enthusiasm. She huddled back into the shadows of the cave, pulling a blanket around her shoulders. Perry frowned, returning to sit down beside her.

"How about a story?" He asked. She had been telling quite a lot of stories lately, with an increased passion, while his readings had abated. He would not have thought that possible before. What she told him, too, was darker now, the shadows denser, and the villains gained power and presence in her tales. Even her heroes emerged with a certain shade to them. When she was not telling a story, however, she barely spoke. She didn't respond, so he shrugged and moved about the cave, gathering all the odds and ends that had been scattered about since their confinement. Maya glanced at him.

"What are you doing?"

"Packing. I think we can leave today." Her eyes widened.

"What?"

"The sun's come out, and I think this is the best chance we're going to get. Besides, I'm almost out of food." He chuckled. "I hadn't realized I'd be feeding two." She rose to her feet, but when she looked at him her eyes were deadly serious.

"I don't want to leave."

"...what?"

"I don't want to leave."

"What do you mean, you don't want to leave? You can't stay here." He took a step toward her, but she retreated, her back pressing against the wall of the cave. Her lips were trembling as she shook her head.

"I can't go back. I can't go back to the outside things. I won't."

"Maya..." he took another step forward. When she didn't move, he continued: "Maya, I've been thinking about what you asked me a few nights ago, about there being a reason... for the bad things...and I think that, maybe, your stories are the reason."

"To hell with my stories!" She cried, openly sobbing now. She turned to press her head against the cave wall. "You know what my stories are? They're parasites. Every time I tell one it takes a little part of me with it. That's what makes them real, because there's a piece of my heart inside each. I think my soul was broken a long time ago and instead of putting it back together, I've been sealing the bits inside stories so that they wouldn't cut me anymore." She faced him once again, her tiny fists clenched. "I...will not...go back."

Perry looked away for a moment, but when he returned his gaze he did not falter. "Maya...come with me."

"What?"

"Come with me. You can travel with me. I'll take care of you, and you won't have to go back to your village." She shook her head violently.

“No!” She cried. “It’s not just my village. It’s everywhere. Your story about the cave isn’t true. There’s no light outside the cave. It’s just more shadows.”

“Maya, you can’t stay here. You’ll die.”

“No, I won’t. I can take care of myself, get wood and food from the forest. I’ll survive.” Perry approached yet another step, a faint trace of anger entering his voice. He reached out to grab her wrist.

“Don’t be absurd. You couldn’t possibly—”

“Don’t you dare make me!” She screamed, wrenching her arm from him. “I am my own person, and you will not make me.” He drew his hand back as if burned.

“Maya, I’m sorry, I would never make you. I’m sorry.” She nodded, flinging tears.

“That’s okay.” She paused. Her breathing pumped hard and fast, like a wounded animal. “You... you could stay here.”

“What do you mean? Neither of us can stay here.”

“But we could!” She fell to her knees, taking his hand and pressing against her damp and feverish face. “Please! You could stay here with me, just the two of us. Together we’d make it. We could tell each other stories, and we’d never have to leave!”

“Maya, I can’t...”

“Please! I’m begging you!”

“Don’t do this, Maya. Don’t ask me...” Tears now flowed, unchecked from his own eyes. “I would give anything for you, but this...this would be pointless.” She bowed her head, defeated.

“If you think that’s the best ending,” she said, stiff and formal. She rose to her feet.

“I’m so sorry, Maya.” She would not respond. If I stay, he thought, she’ll never leave, and we’ll both starve. Maybe... “Well,” he said, swinging his repacked bag onto his back. “I couldn’t leave my friend without a parting gift.” He took up his satchel and handed it to her. She gasped.

“But that’s your...” He smiled and the genuine gesture surprised him.

“Don’t worry. It’s not as precious as it used to be.” He drew her to him in a strong embrace. She resisted at first, but soon acquiesced, returning in full force. “You sure you don’t want to come with me?” He asked as they broke apart, both wiping their eyes. She shook her head.

“I’ll never leave.” He nodded, stepping out of the cave into the world beyond.

“Goodbye, Maya. The offer will always be open.”

“Goodbye, Perry.”

As he walked away, he turned once more to look at their little

abode. She stood just inside it, her shadow stretching back to the wall of the cavern, her face hidden by the light. She was wrong when she said she would never leave. He knew that. Stories must be told. Whether through the laborious art of calligraphy, the mechanical transcription of a printing press, or the impassioned voice of an author, a story must be told. She would emerge one day, to tell. Her shadows needed an audience, demanded one. What she called parasites hungered for more than just their own reflection. She would leave.

“Yes; she’ll leave. And I’ll be waiting.”

He continued on.