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SOUL SHADOWS

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Curious
Fox **F**

one

Estelle Grant stood at the white picket gate of the cottage and stared out across the meadow. The late afternoon light lay on the warm, summer air like pale wine – heady and sweet. A breeze ruffled the green expanse. She wanted to run through it, feel the silken grass and buttercups against her feet. She wanted to run until she collapsed, out of breath, in its long, welcoming fronds. Yet she held fast to the gate, awed like a long-caged rabbit suddenly offered a garden to play in. The silence was unsettling. Estelle was from the city. Her ears had been acclimatised since babyhood to the hum of crowds and traffic. In her life, grass was something you found in public parks, full of screaming kids, cigarette ends and rubbish.

But it wasn't just culture shock. There was something else about the scene that disturbed her – something not quite right. The light was strange, wasn't it? Almost nauseating, as though a photographer had gone mad with his filters. Then there was the wood. The trees rose out of the horizon on the far side of the meadow like a dark, menacing army. The area closest to the wood lay in deep

shadow. The wood cast its shadow over the breezy, playful grass like a warning.

The shadow, now she looked at it, made no sense. The sun was behind her. It was in completely the wrong part of the sky to create the shadow. So what was producing it? A cloud? But there were no clouds today, just a smoky brown haze at the horizon where the sky met a line of metal towers – grain silos she assumed – way off across the fields to her right. The shadow on the meadow was a mystery. She began to worry that she was hallucinating – a side-effect of her medication. She would have called Dr Kirby, only she didn't want to sound even more deranged than she already was. Less than a day she'd been here. What would he think if she called him up now and started raving about a rogue shadow on the meadow? He'd send for the men in white coats. She'd be back in hospital before sunset. No, she had to make a go of this. It was kind of Dr Kirby to lend her his cottage for a week, and sweet of him to have such faith in her. She was determined to repay him by getting through this stage of her treatment without fuss or complaint.

Estelle went back inside the cottage, relieved to be away from all that peculiar light and shadow. She examined herself in the hallway mirror. The usual round, pale face with its thin lips and big rodent eyes stared back at her. There was a touch of pink around her nostrils – a result of an earlier hayfever-induced sneezing fit – but otherwise she looked no madder than usual.

"I recommend that Estelle spends a week entirely on her own," Dr Kirby had said to Aunt Lucy, her guardian. "It's called exposure therapy and it's the next step in her

treatment." Aunt Lucy had agreed, and so had Estelle. If she was ever to get over the trauma of being locked in an attic by her mad mother for weeks on end when she was fourteen, then she had to find the courage to face that kind of loneliness again. And what lonelier spot could there be north of the Sahara and south of the Arctic than this cottage in the middle of nowhere, with just the meadow, the creepy wood and those distant silos for company? Dr Kirby had stocked it up with enough food for the week, so there was no need for any shopping trips to the local village – no need, in fact, for any human contact whatsoever.

"If you're feeling desperate, just call," Dr Kirby had said – her phone, which fitted so snugly in her jacket pocket, was her tenuous link to the outside world – "but do try to get through this on your own, Estelle." She was determined to try.

Psychology textbooks littered the sofa in the cosy front room. Guiltily she shoved some of them aside and sat down. She had promised to use this time to catch up on her studies, but what she really wanted to catch up on right now was one of the daytime soaps she had become mildly addicted to while in hospital. She switched on the television and was soon immersed in the love lives of healthy, bronzed teens – they were her friends, sort of. If only they'd been there for her when she was in the attic.

After the soap, she watched the early evening news. Then she made herself a herbal tea – lemon grass – and sent a text to Aunt Lucy. No mention of light and shadows, just a cheery description of the cottage, supplemented by photos of the front room, kitchen and bedroom. Text message sent, and not yet hungry enough for food, she tried to settle

to some work. But concentration was difficult. The quiet bothered her – it seeped into her bones like damp. She tried playing some music – Adele, Eminem, Rihanna – at background volume, but her mind kept wandering down avenues suggested by the lyrics. “Not Afraid” by Eminem took her back to darker times when she’d listened to it almost incessantly. In those hospital days, listening to that track, she’d dreamed of her old friend Sandor Watts, and hoped that he might, once again, come to her rescue.

He’d been her best friend once, but they’d gone their own ways. Sandor had joined the army; she’d got sick in the head. But she’d never forgotten him. He still held a place in her heart, and if she had to summarise in one word what she felt about Sandor Watts, it was trust. She trusted him. He was the one who’d saved her. The school and the social services had believed her mum when she told them that her daughter had gone abroad to live with her father. But Sandor hadn’t. He broke into the house one night, smashed in the door to the attic, and got her out of there. He carried her in her wretchedness, in her drooling feeble-mindedness, to his caravan.

He saved her life, but he couldn’t save her mind. Sandor didn’t know how to deal with her fragile, broken spirit. She would cry for hours, threaten suicide. At other times, she’d fall into hysterical, demonic laughing fits. She made a pass at him once, which he’d gently rebuffed, and which she’d a thousand times regretted. When she did finally try and kill herself, and was sectioned, she sensed Sandor’s relief that she was no longer his responsibility. By the time she had her second breakdown last year, he was off fighting his own battles with the Taliban. She

never expected to hear from him again. But just a month ago he’d written to her, out of the blue. It was a very short letter telling her he was home on leave, living in a small town called Edgebourne. He’d included a phone number.

She couldn’t, could she?

No, Estelle. Dr Kirby would not approve. And the last thing Sandor needed was her back in his life. In his letter, he’d hinted at mental troubles of his own. He didn’t know about her second breakdown – probably assumed she was now a fully functioning human being. If she started blabbing to him about freakish light and shadows, he’d soon wish he was back in Helmand.

Gradually, the macabre light faded from the window, and the unnatural shadow on the meadow was subsumed by the all-embracing dark. Not in the mood for cooking, Estelle helped herself to some cheese and crackers, then took a bath. She smothered the silence with a combination of her iPod and her own terrible singing. Finally, she climbed into bed. The sheets, she was gratified to note, were much softer than hospital bedding.

The following morning was overcast, yet warm. Estelle took her cup of coffee out into the tiny front garden and checked the meadow. The shadow continued to darken the far side, looking strangely normal, as if it had every right to be there. It seemed a bit larger this morning, and ever so slightly closer to the cottage. She knew she ought to go and check it out: solve the mystery, put her mind at ease – *just a different shade of grass, Estelle, you idiot!* – but for some reason she recoiled from the idea.

Instead, after breakfast, she donned her walking boots and followed the road east. At length, she found a footpath,

which took her through some fields and alongside a stream. By now, the clouds had gone and the sun was shining. She found a pleasant grassy patch, where she lay down. But however much she tried to relax, her mind still buzzed and chattered with random, stupid thoughts. She tried reading the novel she'd brought. She'd found it on a shelf of mainly non-fiction books in the cottage – a copy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. But she found the old-fashioned writing style quite hard-going, and a book wasn't the same as having someone to talk to. Her nose tickled and her throat itched from hayfever. At least her ears were becoming attuned to the sounds of the country: birdsong, the lazy drone of midges, wind rustling through foliage. How had she missed those sounds yesterday?

A few hours later, as she was opening the front gate of the cottage, Estelle hesitated. How odd: here, there was no birdsong; no gentle lowing of cattle. Even the midges failed to disturb the dense silence. She realised that yesterday had been the same. It wasn't just the lack of city sounds that had bothered her: it was the lack of any sounds at all! Was everything dead around here? She didn't turn her head to check the shadow – she knew it would be there – but made straight for the cottage, closing the door quickly behind her.

She switched on the television – some trashy quiz show – and turned the volume up high. The sight of the textbooks on the sofa gave her a stab of guilt. The top one was called *Introducing Psychology*. The two "o"s in the second word became a pair of eyes that stared at her accusingly. After sweeping the books violently onto the floor, she stretched out on the sofa, placing a cushion

under her head, and let the sounds and pictures from the television wash through her.

At six, when her soap-star friends were gone for the day, she yawned, climbed to her feet and went into the kitchen. She found herself a breadboard and a sharp knife and began peeling and chopping vegetables. Cooking would relax her, and the smells it created would eventually drum up an appetite.

The soup was soon bubbling away on the stove and its aroma stirred not exactly an appetite, but memories, at least, of a warm, cosy childhood when they were still a proper family, before her dad left and her mum went crazy. She stood there in a pleasant fog of reminiscence, and the little country kitchen, with its pine fittings and shelves filled with colourful crockery and earthenware pots, felt very homely and safe.

But then, for some reason, the wooden spoon in her hand stopped stirring. Had she felt something? Hesitantly, she continued to move the spoon through the thick, yellow-green liquid. The happy, homey feeling had gone. The soup was now the colour and texture of a slimy, stagnant pond. It reminded her of the pale, queasy late afternoon light she'd seen yesterday on the meadow. She was crazy, wasn't she? How could her mood, her vision, just change like that? There did seem to be an unusually yellow cast to the light. Could the bulb be faulty? Or was it her eyesight? She thought about calling Dr Kirby. A few words in his reassuring brogue would do the trick, then she'd be fine. Her heart was visibly palpitating beneath her shirt. She considered taking her meds, even though it wasn't yet time.

She took a deep breath and wiped an itchy trickle of sweat from her forehead. "You can do this," she said out loud, and she forced herself to try some of the soup. Mmm! Not bad. Just plain old leek and potato, but not bad. A pinch of salt and a sprig of parsley and it would be perfect. At least her tastebuds weren't failing her!

A sound made her hand freeze in the act of reaching for the salt. It was like a breath. She spun around. The kitchen was hazy in the yellow light. Had there been a flicker of movement at the window? She turned back to the soup. Just pour in the salt, she told herself.

No! Check the window!

The air felt heavy around her feet, as if a thick flood of the soup had overflowed onto the floor. She dragged herself unwillingly across the room and peered out of the window. Nothing. Just the outline of a shivering hedge and the faint gleam of the lonely road twisting off into the distance. The sound must have been the pipes: perhaps the boiler coming on. She wasn't used to this cottage yet, or its noises. She took a few deep breaths and waited for the shaking to stop.

The slurping sounds she made while drinking the soup, and the clink of the spoon against the bowl, sounded abnormally loud. She scooped it into her mouth as fast as she could, barely tasting it, just wanting to finish so she could get out of the kitchen. When the bowl was empty, she scraped back her chair and carried bowl and spoon to the sink. Even though it was still early, her only desire was to go to bed.

The curtain in her room was too thin to shut out the

summer evening light, and that madness before, in the kitchen, had left her too wired for sleep. So she lay there, book open, her eyes taking in nothing, for maybe an hour, thinking about her mum and dad in the good old days, and Zac, her beloved King Charles Spaniel. Eventually, she must have nodded off, for she found herself in her local park, walking Zac and smiling at the little children on the swings. But then the busy park became an empty meadow, and a worn track led to a wood of tall trees. The light in the wood was sallow and unhealthy. It made her stomach churn. She called for her dog, who had disappeared from view. She wanted to leave, but she had to look for him. Then she realised that Zac was dead anyway, and she was lost. A sound drifted out of the trees, a forceful, whispering respiration, almost a sigh.

Her eyes flipped open. She was fully awake, and hot beneath the thick covers. The night was silent as a tomb, but the sound remained like a ghostly memory in her ears. Had she really heard it?

Moonlight glowed through the curtain and pooled on the bedspread – bloodless, waxen, ash grey, the colour of death.

What was that?!

Her fingers tightened on the damp sheets.

A slow exhalation of breath. It sounded close.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Her lips emitted a faint moan as she tried to press herself further down into the bed. "Go away!" she murmured into her pillow.

She waited, her body in a paralysed kind of flinch, unbreathing, mouth shaped like a cry for help. A minute went by like this – and as the period of silence lengthened,

gradually her muscles started to relax. Her eyes opened a fraction and her fingers unclamped themselves from the sheet.

She had to get out of here.

Estelle turned very slowly in her bed. The moonlight looked normal again. No dark shapes were lurking in the corners of her room or silhouetted behind the curtain. She reached for her jacket and her phone. Her thumb was on Dr Kirby's number, about to press, when she hesitated. It was 2.14 in the morning. He lived in the city – two hours away. He would try and talk her into waiting it out till morning. Worse, she might be persuaded!

Then she thought of Sandor.

Edgebourne was less than an hour away.

His phone number was in the letter.

The letter was in her bag.

Hurriedly she rose, got dressed and ran downstairs to the front room. Scrabbling frantically in her bag, she found the letter and pressed the numbers carefully into her phone. It rang for a long time. She imagined him sprawled asleep in a cramped space, surrounded by a mess of clothing and dirty pots and pans – even though she knew he'd sold the caravan years ago. Still his phone rang. Perhaps he was out with his parents – or a girlfriend? Her heart sank at the thought. At last, to her huge relief, his tired voice answered.

"Sandor," she blurted. "It's me. Estelle."

"Hullo, Es," he croaked, and she pictured him rubbing his eyes, trying to wake himself up.

"Sandor, I'm sorry, I know it's late. I need your help." Her words came in a flood. She found herself rambling,

telling him about the shadow and the noises before she'd even said where she was. Eventually, he interrupted, asking for the cottage's address. She gave him the name of the local village, Delhaven, and how to find the cottage from there. She didn't mention why she was there and he didn't ask. As she expected, he didn't ask anything, just told her to lock all the doors and windows, shut the curtains and wait for him. He'd be as quick as he could.

After he'd rung off, the silence crept up on her again, like a sinister cat. She tried to ignore it as she carried out a quick tour of the cottage, checking handles and locks, closing curtains. But when she curled up under a blanket on the sofa, the silence curled up with her. She would have relished the bark of a dog, the hoot of an owl, a chorus of crickets – anything that declared the normal functioning of nature out there in the big dark. But it seemed the only living thing for miles around was her.

Sandor, please be quick!

She remembered the quiet, dusty gloom of the attic that had been her prison cell for twelve long weeks, and how she'd got through the days by talking to herself, as if she were two people – one mature and brave, the other younger, more fearful. In these conversations, she tried to reassure herself that things would be OK – they'd survive.

"And we'll do it again, little one," she heard herself whisper. "Just keep believing it'll be OK, and it will be." But she wasn't as good at this as she'd been at fourteen – couldn't quite picture herself as anything other than one lonely and very scared person. And the silence, that big, horrible feline presence, kept muscling in on her attempts

at conversation. The silence was amplifying things that weren't normally heard – things that shouldn't be heard, like the sounds of her own body. Soft thumps and gurgles of digestion and blood circulation were becoming gradually, horribly audible. It revolted her – she was nothing but a sack of frightened flesh and fluids.

Her internal symphony was smothered by a sudden sound: a loud sigh that erupted out of nowhere. It sent freezing nails of fear into her neck and back.

She pressed the cushion to her face.

What was that noise? Who or what caused it?

The minutes crawled by. Estelle didn't move a muscle. Faintly, the chorus for "Not Afraid" played through her stunned brain.

"It's going to be alright," she whispered eventually. "Don't be scared. Sandor will be here very soon, I promise."

And if he isn't? It was over an hour since she'd called him. He should have been here by now. Maybe he hadn't believed her. He'd witnessed her delusions before.

She should call the police. Dammit, why didn't she do that before? They were paid to respond to loonies.

Quickly, she withdrew the phone from her pocket and pressed out the three-digit number.

The female operator answered: "Emergency. Which service, please?"

"Police," croaked Estelle.

"I'm sorry?"

"Give me the police."

There was a longish wait, and a man's voice came on the line.

"Hello. Sergeant Wilson here. How can I be of service?"

"I –"

The phone went dead.

Frantically, Estelle redialled. Nothing.

The screen on her phone indicated "No Service".

Something had happened. The phone had been working fine, and then... nothing.

She was completely cut off.

Something groaned.

This time, Estelle screamed. Before her eyes closed, she thought she saw a shape silhouetted against the curtains, darker than the night, framed in the anaemic gleam of the moon. She lay there, frozen, waiting for what was bound to follow: the sounds of breakage and entry, the horror of the thing revealed, finally, dripping its evil on the rug, on her textbooks. Meanwhile, an insane, terrified voice bellowed curses at the room. It was some seconds before she realised that it was her own voice and she worried that she may have flipped again.

Almost immediately after that came the sound of gravel popping and the wall above the fireplace shone with the twin beams of a big car pulling up outside.

Estelle leapt from the sofa and ran to the door. She pulled Sandor's tall figure towards her, crying with relief as she embraced him.

"Es," he whispered into her hair. He smelled faintly of leather and engine oil.

"You were ages!" she cursed him. "What took you?"

She let him guide her to the kitchen. Sandor prowled the room, his big hands opening cupboards and unscrewing jars in the search for coffee. The years of army service had left their mark on him – in both obvious and subtle

ways. His long, dark, shaggy locks had fallen victim to the military buzz cut. His eyes were darker than she remembered – haunted, perhaps, by battlefield memories, and his face seemed harder and more chiselled in its lines, as if engraved by sharper tools.

As he moved about the kitchen, he questioned her: “Any further noises?”

“I heard something just before you arrived,” she said.

He broke off what he was doing and shifted to the window, parting the curtain slightly so he could see out. “Same kind of sound as before?”

“Sort of,” she replied.

“How come you’re here on your own?” he asked, still keeping watch at the window.

“Therapy!” she laughed.

He frowned at her. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“Exposure therapy,” she explained. “I had another breakdown last year. I’ve been in hospital. I’ve been getting better, but my psychotherapist decided I needed to spend some time alone, so he sent me here. This is his cottage.”

“That’s the maddest thing I ever heard,” cried Sandor. “You had three months of solitary confinement and he reckoned the best way of treating you was to give you more of the same! He’s crazier than you are!”

“I was doing well,” she said a little defensively. “I wasn’t clingy or anxious like before. I wasn’t throwing myself at men,” she added with a smile, hoping to convince him once again that her long-ago pass at him had merely been a symptom of her illness. “I wanted to do this. I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it.”

“Fair enough,” he grunted – Sandor knew all

about setting and passing personal challenges. “Still, I don’t blame you for going nuts out here. It’s a bit bloody... quiet!”

Estelle laughed again. But then she reconsidered his words and felt hurt by them. “I’m not nuts, Sandor. Well, maybe I am. But I didn’t imagine those noises. Or that shadow.”

“I know you didn’t,” he said, and he pulled a gun out of his pocket and placed it on the table. Clean-lined and functional with a gleaming black surface, the sight of it lying there next to the salt and pepper was a little shocking – but also gratifying. It was a mark of his faith in her.

The kettle began to whistle and Sandor poured himself a cup of strong black coffee. “Want some?” he offered.

She shook her head.

“I nearly drove off the road a couple of times on the way here,” he muttered. “Haven’t slept properly in a while... Tried calling you to let you know I was on my way, but your phone was dead.”

“I know,” she said. “When you didn’t show, I called the police – it cut out before I could tell them where I was.”

“Didn’t trust me, eh?” smirked Sandor.

“I was scared, you idiot!”

He checked his own phone, and frowned. “That’s strange. Now mine’s not working either. Phone must be down.” He took a slurp of his drink. “Ah well, we’ll soon be out of this crazy place. How soon can you get your stuff together?”

“Give me five minutes,” said Estelle.

She was rising to go when the air was ripped by a

bone-juddering howl. It came from the front of the cottage – rising then falling, like a yell of anger declining into anguish. She screamed.

Sandor became a blur of movement. Before she knew what was happening, he'd already picked up the gun and was rushing to the door. Without hesitating, he charged into the night.

Estelle ran as far as the entrance hall and was stopped short by a loud thump and a clatter of metal on gravel. She couldn't see Sandor through the half-open door, only the dull gleam of his gun where it had fallen on the path.

"Get the gun, Es!" she heard him cry. His voice was a breathless croak, as if he'd been punched hard in the gullet.

The gun was just a few metres from where she stood, but the thought of going out there and retrieving it terrified her. Whatever had Sandor would get her, too, and then they'd both be done for. Instead she ran to the kitchen, where the large chopping knife she'd used earlier still lay on the board. As she picked up the knife, her eyes were caught by a flash in the window: another pair of headlights was slowly approaching along the road that led past the cottage. With the knife in her hand, she ran back to the entrance hall. The front door was now closed.

"Sandor!" she cried.

She pushed open the letterbox and pressed her ear to it. She could hear his breath whistling.

"Don't... come... out... here."

"Sandor, please, what's going on?"

She wished she could see him – the tremor in his voice scared her almost more than anything. She wanted to open the door, but her hands had gone numb.

There was a bump, like a heavy sack falling to the ground. The front door shuddered.

She heard him give another wheezing, throaty cry. "Don't... come... out... here. Stay... inside." His voice was going up and down, no longer controlled. "Es!" he shouted, and then, in a whisper that was worse than any scream: "It's... it's... horrible."