

Suffocating in the Shadows

Any given day of school she'd be there; quietly hidden in the corner. In all her years of school she hadn't missed a single day. Her grades showed that she wasn't dumb but it didn't stop her from feeling that way. She often had an opinion on topics but still opted not to participate in the classroom discussions. Who would listen anyway? So instead she said nothing and just blended in. Acting like an elaborate trimming for dust to settle on. She was there all right but if you asked her no one else noticed and certainly no one cared.

She went to school every day not because she enjoyed it but rather because there wasn't much else to do. If she stayed home no one would be there. She didn't really have a group of friends that she looked forward to hanging out with in or out of school. She just never felt she fit in to any of the cliques around her. She wasn't bullied. She wasn't taunted. No one ever physically harmed her. Instead she went hours without having to speak because she went hours without being spoken to. Her teachers thought she was just quiet, maybe even shy. But she wasn't shy. She just didn't feel like putting herself out there to a group of people who wouldn't accept her. She was different than them. She knew that but more importantly she felt that they knew it so even if she tried there was no doubt in her mind that she'd ultimately just fail.

She couldn't hang with the popular girls because she didn't bleach her hair or go tanning. Instead of beautiful blues her eyes were a muddled mixture of green and brown. The jocks didn't notice her because although she was probably athletic she was too self-conscious to participate in school sports so they never knew her potential. She didn't fit in with the creative kids because she didn't possess any artistic talents. Drama couldn't be her forte due to her crippling stage fright and even the

band room wasn't where she belonged; she tried to play the clarinet but she could only produce sounds that resembled dying birds. She didn't even belong with the burnouts because she coughed too much when she smoked. She didn't seem to be like anyone else so she never felt apart of anything.

As time crept on she was thankful it was her last day here. She would never have to return to this school, see these people or pretend to be listening ever again. This idea made her think about smiling. But she didn't because she never smiled. She would have to feel something to smile and that didn't happen very often anymore. Instead she was surrounded by a shadow that felt as if it was slowly suffocating her. But the thought of this being the end made a small spark somewhere deep in the gloomy dark of her chest. A spark that almost ignited a response from her face. But a spark was all it was, gone just as quick as it came. So she let the heavy shadows settle down around her and went back to her typical black, stagnate state of mind and continued to trudge through the rest of the monotonous day.

Unlike most of the kids in school she hated lockers. She really thought they were useless. But she also hated backpacks so at the end of the school year she found herself cleaning out her locker with the rest of the robots. As she collected her state issued textbooks so they could be given out to the next mindless generation she thought about her disdain for organized education. She felt textbooks were just words that teachers were forced to force teenagers to memorize when they were forced to come to school. That's not how learning should be. The thought made the shadows push her further into the blackness, igniting a fury of anger and resentment. She should just throw them away; make the school eat the cost of her irritation. But she knew it wouldn't matter in the long run, especially coming from her. She saw herself as the one grotesque weed growing in a garden of flowers. No one wanted her there, this isn't where she belonged. She rolled her eyes and cursed them all with a sigh and once again sought comfort in the idea of the end.

As she made her way out of school for the last time she glanced at the library door. It was in the long halls of shelved books that she had preferred to pass her time. She had been isolated on the outside of the majority all these years but she had no problems making friends with the literary characters in that room. She thought back to all the tears that were shed crouched in the shadows of the historical section. And the lunches she shared with herself in the midst of the encyclopedias. She had read every novel of the romantic, dramatic and non-fiction sections. But it was the genre of fantasy that she enjoyed the most. She viewed each of these books as portals to lives she could never live. With a turn of the page she would be transported to lands more beautiful than we could think of. All of them heavily decorated with colors puny human eyes couldn't even see. They were the opposite of the veiled darkness she felt on a day to day basis and without them she knew she never would've made it this long. As an homage to her fictitious comrades she let the spark in her chest ignite again and this time she felt the tiniest upward movement of the corner of her lips before it was extinguished once more.

She decided to take the bus home that day. Although it was loud, smelly and the seats were almost always covered in some mysterious sticky substance she didn't have another way home. She never understood why people in the back of the bus thought they were so cool. It's a little ironic that not even a century ago the back of the bus was deemed lesser than the front of the bus. People fought hard to not have to sit in the back of the bus, now kids fight hard to be cool enough to get there. The whole idea annoyed her. She looked up and by chance made eye contact with a smiling girl that she thought was in her English class. She quickly averted her eyes as her cheeks burned red. Before she did this though she couldn't help but notice the girl was wearing her favorite band's t shirt. The shadows loosened their grip just enough to let her think that maybe she wasn't as alone as she felt. They almost immediately crashed back down around her when a fist fight broke out slamming some scrawny underclassmen's elbow in her face. Rage coursed through her body as she threw him off her and turned her back to the girl with the t-shirt and the rest of the people she didn't connect with.

When she got to her house she was the only one there. Just like always. It didn't use to be like this. This house was once a home filled with love and laughter. She remembers the first decade of her life with fondness. She had the perfect family. Mommy and Daddy had their first born son, bought a house and a few years later delivered a beautiful little girl. Unfortunately their little bouncing boy turned into an angry teenager who found comfort in not being sober. This ended up being the perfect foreshadowing to how the father would act when that same out of control teenager never came home after honorably deciding to serve his country. Her warm and fuzzy childhood made the current state of her family seem even harsher. Much like the egg that protects a developing baby bird; the house was now nothing more than just a lonely discarded shell of a family with nothing but shadows filling the space where life was created.

She decided she would just walk to The Stevenson Building. The structure itself was quite old. Built in the early 1900's, it continued to tower over everything else in town. When it was first constructed The Stevenson Building was considered luxurious and beautiful. Back in those days only the elite could afford to live in the extravagant apartments. But just like many of the occupants that inherited these apartments from the original tenants; the decades of life had taken their toll and slowly the Grand Stevenson Building turned into just another run down and broken structure on the main street. The ten floors of the apartments were now filled with people who were too old or oblivious to realize the quality of their surroundings or only cared about the lowest rent amount. Dingy and dirty The Stevenson Building was filled with poor families, junkies and lots of rodents. But none of that mattered to her as she approached this rotting architectural gem. She wasn't looking for a new place to live she was just going to the roof.

She opted to take the stairs because she didn't trust the elevator. If the super intendant wasn't worried about kicking out the junkies from the hallways how up to code did they keep the elevator?

Either way she turned left and found solace in the stairway. It was dark and grimy. The low wattage bare bulb lighting casted a yellow orange glow on the walls draping exaggerated black shadows over everything. The walls were thin so she could hear the contents of the apartments that lined the other side of the stair case. She found these conversations twistedly comforting as she started to climb the stairs. The lady being screamed at by her husband reminded her of when her father was still around. Nobody can instill fear in someone quiet like an angry drunken man. The elderly lady searching for her dog reminded her that even if you love something with all of your heart you can't make them stay or love you back. The partying young guys only a few years older than her reminded her of her brother, before he went into the Army; crazy, wild and high. If he hadn't escaped to basic training this black hole probably would be his home, but even if he had ended up here at least he wouldn't have had to be shipped home in a box from overseas.

As she finally reached the top of the stairs she felt the heavy presence of her own dark shadows making all of her fluttering thoughts motionless until there was nothing but the thick lurking darkness and the ringing of her numb insides. As she began to open the roof access door she felt the small flicker of the spark within her chest return and ignite. This time it was different though, she could feel the strength behind what had become a small flame. As it slowly started the long process of thawing the ice around her heart she stepped through the door and was left breathless by the site she saw.

Skylines full of lit towers like a glowing set of building blocks are widely considered beautiful. But the problem with that is the beauty is artificial. A citywide black out would swallow all of those splendid views, leaving nothing but the natural light of the night. There is something simplistically breathtaking about a darkened small town. The only thing disturbing the darkness was the moon and the stars. She couldn't have been more thankful that this was the weather for this special night. Because this was a night she had been looking forward to for many months. A night that she looked to for

strength to carry on, a night that she was putting an end to life as she knew it. She couldn't believe it was finally happening. With relief and excitement fueling the flame in her chest like gasoline, she made her way across the roof to the edge.

With a few more steps she'd be exactly where she'd been dreaming of for so long. She stopped and enjoyed the warm foreign feeling in her chest and the slight upper curls of the corners of her mouth. Is this what happiness was like? Maybe morning people weren't so crazy, maybe they felt this instead of the suffocating shadows that stalked her. As her favorite song began to ring through her ears she only hoped that from now on she felt a little more like this and a little less like she used to. With no hesitation she aligned her toes to the edge and looked out. She admired the scene below, it almost looked like it was breathing to the music she heard. She lifted her arms as she slowly turned around and with a deep breath she let herself fall.

Free falling is an incomparable feeling. The never ending pull of gravity is your only means of transport until its inevitable end by the impact of what waits for you at the bottom. As she fell she watched the stars and remembered how she was one of millions. As the warmth in her chest burned on and she once again was thankful for the lack of clouds on this special night.

The impact was expected but still came quickly. She lay with her arms and legs outstretched as the surface under her dipped and swayed. She knew she was no longer falling but continued to feel weightless. As her favorite song came to an end and another seamlessly began to play the surface under her exploded, tossing her around so the only view she could see were streaks of unidentifiable light. She could feel every individual hand that held her. Each one belonging to another person who accepted her and supported her. The flame in her chest was a full blown fire of excitement and pleasure; casting a light so bright that for the first time in a long time the smothering shadows didn't have their grip on her.

As a group of smiling people set her back down on the rooftop of The Stevenson Building she looked around and realized she was smiling with them. She couldn't help but be extremely grateful. They didn't know it but they were important to her. She had lived in the dark for so long that the crushing of the shadows and the ice in her chest had become normal. But here she felt alive, here she felt happy. After silently thanking them all she turned to go back up to the edge of the stage for another ride. As she made her way through the crowd she found herself locked eyes with the girl from the bus she had seen earlier that day. This time she didn't look away and as they shared a moment she realized that destiny didn't seem like such a foreign concept and fate was something she was starting to think she could believe in.