

A Stranger in the Shadow

“You only are what you believe”
–Phil Ochs

He lay curled on the living room couch in fetal position, while a giant yellow bird sang the alphabet on the television set. He was watching, sure, but it didn't matter what was on the screen. In fact, he'd seen hundreds of shows in the past few months, none of which he could remember.

He wore an old white t-shirt and gray, unwashed sweatpants. There were holes in his socks. His black hair, once slicked back in an Elvis-style pompadour, now hung shaggily over his eyes.

There were four pill bottles on the coffee table amongst the scattered playing cards. For when he wasn't watching TV like a sick horse, he played poker and war with his nephews. The cards, like the old guitar in the corner, were ornamental. He didn't feel like playing anymore.

“Phil, have you taken your pills today?” called a hoarse voice from the kitchen.

Phil did not hear his sister's voice.

A moment later she appeared in the doorway, wearing an apron over a yellow flower dress, there was flour smudged below her lip and on the frail hands that she now ran over the lap of her apron.

“Phil! Wake up,” Sonny said, thinking he was asleep.

He was not asleep, though.

She rounded the couch and shook him by the leg. “Phil, please. You know you have to take your medicine.”

“I did,” he snarled, lowering his arm to look up at his sister's frightened eyes.

“You took both pills?”

“Yes, mother. I took both pills, like a good little boy.”

“Thank you,” she said, ignoring the sour attitude.

After all she was used to it by now. Between his gloomy silent spells and his more ornery moods, she had grown to prefer the latter, because it at least made him seem alive, and she could sort of tell what he was thinking. But when he was quiet she began to worry, unable to imagine what dark currents of thought he was lost in.

All in all he was much better off now than he had been four months before. He was safe under her roof where she could keep an eye on him. She knew he was eating, and not drinking too much. It was a small comfort.

The doctor had told her that she should try and keep up a dialogue with him. He said to try and get Phil to play music again, to take an interest in life somehow through games or little activities. A few nights prior she'd thought she heard him singing in his room, but she couldn't be sure.

The trouble was always there. Though in the past year he'd gotten worse. He had begun to remind Sonny of their father, Jack, who was a deeply depressed physician. He'd been distant and confused throughout their childhood in Columbus, Ohio, always lost in a

fog of depression. The doctors had called it Bipolar Disorder before he died. And now they were saying that Phil had this condition as well.

After this verdict she began to think of biology as a kind of death sentence. She often wondered if her own children might not succumb to the same fate, and she would wring her hands at the thought of it.

“Are you hungry or anything?” she asked, trying to get her brother talking.

“No...”

“You sure? I could fix you a sandwich or something...”

“No, damn it! I’m a 35 year-old man! I think I know my own body by now. If I was hungry I’d say so, wouldn’t I?”

“Don’t talk to me like that, Phil! It’s unfair, and you know it! I’m just trying to help —” She cut herself off, knowing that the word *help* would probably trigger his anger and injure his fragile self-image. But it was too late. She’d already said it.

“Help?” cried Phil, bringing himself up to a sitting position, his pale arms hanging between his thighs. “I’m just sick and helpless, is that it? If I wanted a sandwich I’d get up and make it my own damn self! I’m not a child, Sonny! When are you going to get that through your head? You think just cause —”

He stopped shouting when he saw that his sister was crying. They were the worst kind of tears, in Phil’s opinion: the silent tears of a heartbroken martyr, the tears that were loudest and stung deepest: tears without a voice.

“Ah, fuck me, Sonny, I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t mean to yell at you. Honest. It’s just that it can get sort of — what am I saying? ...Listen, I’m really sorry. I’m just a dumb asshole. I know you were only trying to help. And here I go, spouting off to the one person that gives a damn about me anymore.”

“That’s not true, Phil. Lots of people care about you. Lots of people!”

He wiped a strand of hair behind his ear.

“I know, I know,” he said, placating her. “I’m truly so, so sorry —”

Sonny couldn’t help but recall several events from the recent past, as she stared at her brother. And how seven months earlier Phil had been drinking heavily when his life bottomed out. His delusions of conspiracy had reached their peak, and his music career seemed finished.

She’d heard rumors that at one point, he’d even created an alter ego by the name of John Butler Train. According to a small circle of friends, Train was a violent, heavy drinking Republican persona that was the counter-piece to Phil’s liberal extremism. Phil in his delusional state soon assumed the role of Train fully, and even claimed that he’d murdered Phil, whom he considered a weak, too-nice failure of an artist after the beliefs of his long music career had met with a dull apathy from the world at large.

Some of his friends had also told her in strictest confidence that they believed his sense of spiritual and vocational death first came about when Phil was singing at a Democratic National Convention in Africa — an event she shuddered to remember — because after the show a group of thugs had strangled her brother in the street. The attack had left his vocal cords severely damaged. And later Phil told her that he couldn’t sing as well as he once had, and that he felt his life and career as a singer were over. After this incident, the strange behavior began to intensify.

Apparently trapped in the guise of John Butler Train, Phil suffered from the nagging idea that people from the CIA and FBI were out to kill him. These paranoid

feelings were so real that she was told he wandered the streets at night, carrying a hammer or a lead pipe, sometimes even a knife. Then he would get rowdy at bars and start fights: a kind of thing that flew grossly in the face of all that Phil had once stood for as an artist and an American.

Eventually he was living on the streets, sleeping in alleys and in doorways. It wasn't until January that she'd gotten the phone call and came to rescue him, and put him up at her house in Far Rockaway, where she got him psychiatric help and took care of him...

"Well, thank you for taking them. I know it's hard for you," said Sonny, drying her eyes and putting on a smile that caused Phil to hurt for its transparency. "I'm going to the store now to get some things for dinner. Would you like to come along?"

Phil appeared to consider it.

"No. I think I'll just stay here. I can't stand to see people right now. It would make me too sad, I think."

"Suit yourself. Do you need anything at the store? Maybe some cigars or some newspapers?"

"Nah, I think I'm fine."

"All right. Just take it easy then. I'm going to make pot roast for dinner. You like that," she almost insisted. "Well, I need to run a few other errands, too. So I'll be back in about an hour."

"Mmm, pot roast. Now that sounds good," Phil lied, doing his best to grin as he used to. "Okay, sis. I'll see you soon."

"See you later," Sonny said, hoping that she would. And though worried to leave her brother alone like this, she assumed a semblance of dutiful cheer and forced herself out of the front door, locking it behind her when she'd reached the steps.

Alone now, Phil just stared at the door. There were tears streaming down his cheeks, as he looked on in silence. A commercial for tires flashed on the screen, as he glanced at the acoustic guitar leaning against the windowsill in the corner of the room. He looked at the pill bottles on the coffee table. Then he fixated on the Joker card, then the Queen of Hearts, and then his eyes traveled back to the Joker. He'd never felt so defeated before, so heavy and hopeless.

Yet he managed to get to his feet and went shuffling across the carpet to the hall. In the dimness of the hallway, he stopped and opened a door. With heavy footfalls, he descended the steps into the musty dark of the basement.

Cobwebs clung to the rafters and shelves of cherished oddments. A pale light filtered in through the smoky, dust-caked window illuminating a rectangle on the cement floor between two pillars.

Phil approached the workbench in a mechanical stride.

He placed his palms flat on the dusty surface, just staring vacantly out the window into the garden. Because of the film of grime covering the windowpane, the shrubs and sky were mere impressions of light and dark, vague shades of green and gray. He could feel his heart slipping like sand down into the hollow of his guts. There were no thoughts stirring in his head. It was just the iron black of a long-familiar abyss.

Nearly twenty minutes passed this way, Phil looking as though he'd gazed too long in the eyes of a Gorgon, now turned to stone.

So it seemed strange when he finally did lift his arms and make for a wooden locker in the corner, his every movement issuing in a staccato jerk of numbed limbs and tissue.

He pulled open the closet and scanned the contents therein. He shoved away a garden spade, an old mop, and some boxes of nails with a queer but certain knowingness.

Soon he found the rope that he had once hidden away in the bottom of the locker, and brought it up in his two open hands, as if weighing it.

A moment later he stood in the middle of the basement floor, half his body illumined in the penumbral light from the window, and awkwardly tossed the rope over the thick wooden rafter running under the floorboards of the house. A few failed attempts later, he gave the rope more slack, and then threw it over the rafter again; till the loose end swung low enough for him to catch it in his hand.

He spent a while fastidiously tying a series of knots and loops in the rope, and cinching it up to the beam.

Then carrying over an old stool over from beneath the workbench, he placed it firmly on the floor. He peeled off his ratty socks, tossing them off to the side of the room, and stood upon the stool for a moment; wobbling his arms and legs, and testing its sturdiness. Like a dark guiding voice, something deep within Phil — perhaps John Butler Train — declared that the stool would do, and continued on with its instruction.

Ten minutes passed.

The war was over.