

Shadow of the Eclipse

by

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Hope was a thin line Garth found only in his imagination. The pain and confusion that consumed him after the accident had left him weak, like he was bleeding and bleeding, about to die. In fact, he pondered death daily, but not like his therapist thought. Dr. Johnson said he was depressed, that it was natural to feel this way after the kind of deep, sudden loss Garth had experienced.

Of course, he was depressed. The fire had destroyed his life. It took away his wife and child. It left him homeless and disfigured. No room was left in his broken heart for joy, happiness, or a loving God. He knew where he was, and he knew where he wasn't. Life was nothing but an empty prison camp.

The thing about death, depression, and disfigurement was that no one wanted to be near him, even when they said they did, he could tell they wanted to flee. Friends said what they were supposed to say, but it was obvious they'd rather be around fun people, people who were not so hard to look at. Garth didn't want to be around them either. They made him angry and even more depressed.

He tried explaining this circle of depression to Dr. Johnson during one of his sessions, but his therapist didn't actually speak much. An awkward silence was one of the techniques he used to get Garth to open up, but Garth was too smart to talk about the truth of that night. He was careful to stick to tales about being depressed and how he felt like people didn't want him around. If he started talking about what really happened, the good doctor would be obligated to turn him over to the men in white at the funny farm.

No, Garth told Dr. Johnson what he expected to hear and kept the rest to himself. At the end of the session, he lowered his left hand from his forehead, plastered a smile on his face, and said how much better he felt after talking. The reality was he wanted to get away, to run and never look back, to get in his Jeep and drive forever.

He used to pray, but not anymore, not *after*. He couldn't quite understand why he was given his life back, and he was angry at the world and at God. Everything had changed with what Garth referred to as *after*.

"You know you did everything you could that night." Dr. Johnson urged him to talk about it, but he couldn't. He was afraid that once he started talking, he'd divulge too much.

"I know," he answered. "If I could go back, I couldn't change anything." That was what the doctor wanted to hear, so that was what he said, even if it sounded superficial.

"Except unplug the toaster," he added to fill the silence. The toaster was a wedding gift, but he didn't know who had given it to them or where it had been purchased. "I don't even have a toaster anymore. I don't eat toast."

"Are you angry at the toaster for causing the fire?"

"No, of course not," he said with an offended voice. "I can't be mad at a thing."

The accident had been eight months ago, and he couldn't bring himself to name the deep hatred he had toward what destroyed him—no, it didn't destroy him. It destroyed *her*. *Them*. It took away Carlie and Madison and left him with nothing but pain, and the culprit was God. God had taken everything from him, and if He allowed this to happen when He could have prevented it, then maybe God wasn't that great after all.

There was too much in his head after therapy that day. He drove back to his apartment knowing the broken parts of him could never be fixed. When he was a kid, he used to stare at a

neighbor who had a blotchy red birthmark across her face, wondering how she could stand to look that way.

He did the same to anyone different, a man missing a leg, a balding woman, any old person. Now, his own hideous outward appearance marked him as one of them. White scars damaged his arms and legs and his stomach looked like rotten salami. That wasn't bad, though. It was his face he couldn't bear. The fire had taken his ear and placed its fingerprints on the left side of his nose and across his forehead. He'd let his hair grow to try to hide it, but that made him look even worse.

It made no sense for him to live through the fire and for them to die. Although he wouldn't have wished these burns on either of them, he ached for the company of his wife and daughter, that somehow, they could be together. He knew where they were, and he felt envy. It was a longing to visit them in that place beyond this world. His home here was built of sticks, but his real home was built of jewels in a city paved with streets of gold. How he missed it.

It was lunchtime, but Garth wasn't hungry. He decided to go for a walk to clear his mind. The Loquest Trail was not far from his apartment, but it was a popular walking path. He didn't want to see anyone—or have *them* see *him*. No. He would drive out to Plum River Road and wander along a remote trail by the river.

Carlie used to love their little nature excursions there. Her adventuresome spirit was always ready to drop everything and go. She showed him how to stop taking everything so seriously and enjoy life. She taught him how to live.

"You can drive down Plum Creek Road a million time and never see as much as you do in one afternoon of walking through here," she had said. "Let's find the white mulberry trees."

"It seems early for mulberries," he'd answered.

“But the white mulberries are amazing! They’re as big as plums and sweeter than any melon you’ve ever had.” She walked backwards, facing Garth and talking with her hands to emphasize her point. “Let’s just see if we can find them.”

“Big as plums? Really?” he teased.

“Bigger. As big as your fist!” She pushed her fist into his jaw so that he had to take a small step back.

She was spunky, but he loved her for it. The single braid of her long blond hair whapped his chest as she spun around. She grabbed his hand and pulled him along the uneven trail in search of Mulberry Eden.

They pushed on until they found the grove, an oasis of ripe fruit. The rest of the day slipped away as Garth watched Carlie pluck the small ripe berries and pop them into her mouth by the handfuls, a special treat once a year.

He should have known they’d still be there as the sun began to color the sky. It would be close to dark before they could make it back to the Jeep, but Carlie wanted to do it all.

She wanted to float down the river on a raft and pick up bullfrogs and cast deer prints. She was forever prowling for berries and flowers, pointing out turtles in the marshy weeds, and becoming spellbound over the remarkable beauty of a spider’s web. Garth would pick the flowers, make the turtles move, and marvel at the complex webs with her.

His eyes misted with the realization that this sharing was gone now. He parked the Jeep and made his way through the tall grass to the trail near the river. He would have to check his body for ticks after going home.

Home, he thought *to the apartment*. His real home was with Carlie and Madison. He should be happy for them, but the ache of their absence was powerful. He’d never even taken

Madison out here. She was only four. He had thought she was too little to go on a trail this close to the river.

Carlie. He talked to her in his head because he knew she still existed. Maybe she could hear him. *I breathe in. I breathe out. I go to work. I pay my bills. I guess that makes me alive, but this life is nothing compare to before.*

When Carlie and Madison were alive, there was a house to fix and a lawn to mow. He'd planted flowers along the fence. Irises were her favorite. He liked the lilies. Bold colors. Tall study plants. What must that yard look like now? The house was gone. What wasn't burned was scraped away and deposited in the dump. He didn't want to see the empty lot. He didn't want anything to do with *after*.

After made him sick.

I still do the things I'm supposed to do, Carlie. I had lunch with JR on Friday. We talked about his kids, the food, Turner's art show at the Vernon Gallery. He asked about my music. I'm not composing. It's a struggle to even listen to music. Every song seems to be tied up in you, and if I so much as think about children's music, I see Madison's smile with her little baby teeth. It's so unfair that she never got to grow up!

Here it was again. More pain. More disappointment. He tried to block those feelings and retrieve the message lodged in the far corner of his brain, the one that told him to stop this self-pity. That message made him press on. *God granted you something big when He gave you your life back*, it said, *so stop wishing for a little life. It may feel like the wrong direction, but you're headed to that place where you need to be.*

Eight months had passed since he'd lost Carlie and Madison, and never had the tears flowed as liberally as they did today. He stumbled into the grass along the side of the trail,

rolling in it and ripping handfuls from the soil. He sobbed with animal-like grunts, rubbing the grass into his face, needing to feel something, to smell something.

His eyes opened to see the broken green blades lying against the scars on his hands. In that moment, he wished he was as little and insignificant as a single blade of grass. Yet, it was each blade that made the whole green landscape around him. A handful of grass would never be missed, but if all the blades died, there would be nothing left. He picked a random blade here and there.

What difference does it make which blade I kill, for I am the god of the grass!

He wiped his hands against his jeans and lay back, ashamed of his thinking.

The sun shot flames of light through the branches of the cottonwood tree above him. After his emotions settled, Garth's senses turned to the sounds of the birds. They chirped incessantly, continuing life as normal without Carlie and Madison in the world. *How could they?* he thought.

His stomach was empty, and he was exhausted and depleted, yet he longed for neither food nor sleep. As the air cooled around him and the light dimmed, he remembered that today was the day of the eclipse. People had been talking about it for weeks, getting special eclipse glasses and making plans to travel to a good viewing area.

He hadn't given it a thought, but now that the air began to cool and the birds ceased their chirping, he realized he would be in the path of direct totality.

Carlie, are you going to watch this with me? He reached for her, his imagination clicking into the other world where she was alive and nestled against his side. He could almost feel her body there, remember the indent of her waistline and the roundness of her hip as she wrapped her

leg around his. There they lay in the grass, waiting for darkness, so they could look directly at the eclipse.

It's amazing. Isn't it? I'm so glad you're here with me.

Talking to her was his comfort. Nights were spent hugging his pillow, telling Carlie about his piano students and listening to her chatter about her adventures. In his mind, he showed her around the apartment. She cleaned the corners of the cupboards and hung family photographs on the wall. Madison's perfect little fingers decorated the front of the refrigerator with wrinkled paintings of happy stick people. She would tell him little stories about cats or leaves or fuzzy slippers, and they would both laugh.

He wasn't burned in these fantasies, or if he was, it didn't matter because Carlie loved him no matter what. This invention of a continued life with his wife and little girl was the only way he could get through the long, sleepless nights. Something had to fill the gaping hole that tore apart his insides, wounding him more deeply than the flames from the fire ever could. The pain of his burns was nothing compared to the dagger that knifed through his chest, dissecting his heart into a million fragments.

The fantasies helped him process the pain. It was how he got through day by day, hour by hour, and sometimes minute by minute. He continued to breathe, knowing each breath was the passage of time, and time would heal, but never in his life had it moved so slowly. Holding onto Carlie and Madison like this kept the other thoughts away, the horrible ones where they burned to death in a fire.

As he lay in the grass along the Plum River and the eclipse darkened the sky, Carlie melted away, and he became truly alone. Like the eclipse itself, he thought of himself as a shadow. He was this thing that only followed and disappeared in the full sunlight of others. He

was a second-rate musician—good, not great—always behind someone better. Others bands got traveling gigs, played in clubs. *JR and the Boys* was lucky to get a gig at the local bar, and now that their keyboard player looked like a troll, there wasn't much hope of ever doing better.

When the darkness was complete, and he saw nothing but the corona of the sun hiding behind the moon, the wildness of night swirled through cool air. A cricket chirped and the grass rustled as though an animal crept through its depths. With this perfect alignment of sun, moon, Earth, and Garth, he felt the power of the shadow.

There were people not far from him, lying in this same darkness at this very moment, and he felt somehow connected. He was one blade of grass among many that God didn't pick. The shadow of the eclipse—like life, like every life and every blade of grass—had revealed to him a vast and wondrous power.