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SHADOWS

(The Peddler)

By

Brian Keith Day

The Peddler was right; Star's sojourn inside of the Hollow beech tree was not restful. She did not sleep. The tree squeezed her relentlessly as if she were a sliver infecting its flesh. Its sap roared up and down the cambium bare inches away, threatening to burn with the sunlight's energy that it carried. Roots murmured their contempt beneath her, for a thing that refused to rot and nourish.

Someone else's nightmares crept into her mind; scenes much like the abomination which she had enacted with the great oaf who had released her from the first confinement. Visions of feasting on the blood of children burst in upon any thought she might have mustered of her own. She seemed forced to piggy-back onto the memories of some furtive, yet fearsome, abhorrent creature, as it crept into a bedroom where a pre-pubescent girl and an infant boy slept. The ghoul exuded vapors of smothering, chilling cold terror to paralyze its victims. Star could feel the same stifling breath of horror rising within her own breast as she shared the vision with the creature. The eyes moved in the frozen faces and watched as the creature snuggled to each child's throat in turn. It was a bald head of a small man that bit down tentatively on the blue veins beneath the fragile chins. Silken cheeks glazed to blue china as the blood flowed out – blue cheeks to mirror the pale blue eyes that measured the ebbing away of life. At the first shiver of death, the first hint of the soul rending free of the flesh, the Peddler ceased his feasting. These

children were not drained of life on this night, nor on other terror filled nights to come. They were husbanded like cattle, but never fed to restoration. At last the beds were empty of all but sorrow. A lost woman named Estela yearned to weep for the children. Star's mouth watered for the feast; her stomach snarled.

In the vision, Curtiss turned to face her with innocent blood upon his chin, his once watery eyes hard and cold as lake ice, his congenial brow a ridge of stone. She lurched forward to claw his eyes out. He smiled, laughed, and shoved her to the ground. She rolled to evade his grasp and found herself again imprisoned in the Beech tree. "You will find these for me," the Peddler's voice hissed in her brain, "And their mothers for Cudgel. The fathers you may lure to your own feasting, as you lured them to your bed before. We are your masters in all. We take what we want of all your conquests whenever we choose. You will step aside until our thirst is slacked."

Star knew there could be no refusal. Chains of guilt, chains of doom cinched ever tighter around her, binding tighter than the tree. What had she done that had been so wrong to justify this living death? She had slept with a man or two beyond her husband. Some of them had wives and families whom they had secretly betrayed. But was not that betrayal their sin, and not hers? Stanley had suspected but not known for sure. Estela had wounded him and continually stabbing him afresh with her obscure absences and delays. But these were common sins. This was normal life in an imperfect world inhabited by mortal sinners. Stanley would cease his grieving and move on to another love. He was still young and vital – a man of property. Many a plump, cow-herd's daughter would already be maneuvering to take her place at the Tuttle farmstead.

Perhaps there would be children. Curtiss's blood-smeared face leered back into her mind. He laughed.

Star writhed within the confines of the tree at the vision of Curtiss drinking the life away from Stanley's offspring as she helplessly watched. Children she would be forced to enchant for him.

"Do not despair the lives of unborn children, Star," the Peddler's voice chided. "Your widower is accused of your murder for all your past indiscretions. The gentleman who left you standing in the cold dark, the night that *I* found you, covets Tuttle's farm to add to his own holdings. That man accuses. That man will make certain Stanley Tuttle hangs."

Despair tightened the chains of doom about Star. She had brought this fate upon her husband; a man hopelessly devoted to her, a man who would have forgiven all. She would be bathed in his innocent blood.

"Foolish Star!" Curtiss chided. "These are common sins committed by mortal sinners. You are not mortal. You are Nosferatu! Sin is a judgment that no longer applies to you. Whether you have fallen below, or risen above that mark is a concept which you will soon loose completely - much to your relief. Comfort – no! Comfort is something else you will soon have no memory of as well. We are all doomed to the hunger, the hunger alone. My thoughts of a past life are as if I were reading from a faded book which had lost more than half its pages. The hunger burns through me like a fever. The Cudgel no longer reads memories at all. You are lucky *he* did not make you vampire. At least I can still conjure up my own ghosts to help you know what you are. Memories are not a pleasant exercise for us. I despise you for this burden, but Cudgel demands it of me. The

sooner you learn, the sooner you can hunt for us – so learn quickly! I warn you. I was a selfish, little, man. Now I will be a tyrant of a teacher!” With that declaration, Curtiss left her mind to sulk inside his own timber prison.

But a shadow of his past remained with her, a tattler of his mortal life. The shade led her down darkened alleys of a city where orphaned waifs hid amongst the garbage of tenements. The somber silhouette of Curtiss hunted the wild children of the gutter for his profane pleasures, trapping them in dead-end alleys and top floors of abandoned buildings. He preferred the smallest – quicker to catch, easier to subdue. Murder would have been kinder to them than the scarring of their souls from the defilements he had inflicted. Always, the shadow looked over its shoulder as if something spied upon it. Pale blue patches, the color of a bruise, flashed incessantly in the egg of a head where eyes might be. After several chases, Star began to realize that it was she whom the wraith feared.

With this knowledge came a sense of anomaly, some exception to the strict rules of her new existence had been made. Some of Curtiss’s declamations may not be true. Perhaps he was not her Master in all things. Star already felt the dread of sin slipping away from her judgment of deeds. If such was the case with her so soon, would not lying, the earliest of sins, be deeply engrained in the substance of the Peddler? Could he even tell the truth anymore? How would *she* know what was real about her new existence? Isolation, bottomless loneliness would be real: of that she was ever more certain.

Curtiss the mortal shared one final adventure with his unknown observer. In a flash, Star found herself following the phantom peddler down familiar lanes from her mortal life. She perched upon the load of goods in his peddler’s cart with all the significance of

a horse fly, as he trundled up a track she had known as Mulberry Run. Star, or rather the mortal woman Estela, had never been up this discrete thoroughfare in her wanderings. She had passed the turn from the more traveled Slocum's Way once or twice and had wondered who might have business up that brooding cove.

The path began as two faint wheel ruts ascending a narrow, steep-sided, hallow, but soon deteriorated to a mere dirt path woven amongst the ancient hardwoods. Conifers replaced the deciduous wood a mile or so up the steep grade. Thickets of bramble and thorn brush replaced the pines as the cart crested the ridge at the hollow's head. A hard-scrabble dwelling materialized from behind one of the thorn bush snarls to answer the mystery of the tract's destination. The stone building could not be defined as either barn or house, obviously serving as a mixture of both. It rested in a bench of hard packed dirt just beneath the crest of the hill. Children and chickens pecked about in the dirt in front of the inhabitation. Two lean boned dogs paced back and forth at the end of ropes tethered to a fence post. Two lumps of man and woman sat in chairs on a porch at the front of the dwelling. Only facial hair and a hat, instead of a soiled head rag, distinguished the man from the wife.

"Thank you for tying up the dogs," Star's shadow guide spoke to the lumps.

Man-lump grunted acknowledgement and lurched down off of the porch casually. He began opening the various compartments and drawers of Curtiss's cart as if he owned it, when the Peddler came to a halt parallel to the porch. Soon, Mother-lump joined her partner-in-procreation in raffling through the cart's contents. Each tossed items to the edge of the porch, or to the ground, if the object took their fancy. Curtiss stepped down from the cat seat and stretched his little frame. He climbed a few steps up the stairs of the

porch so that he might survey the couples' choices more effectively. Dusk began to slide up the walls of the hollow rapidly as the Sun dropped behind the shrouding ridge behind the homestead.

"Go into the hayloft, Jenny," Man-lump growled to the dirt patch without looking up from his shopping. A tiny, skinny, brown-haired girl looked up from her littler sister and stood in shivers of terror. "Blake, help your sister remember where the loft is," Man-lump bellowed. A teen-age boy strode from a black doorway in the stable section of the building to snatch the arm of the frozen girl. Curtiss plucked a roll of bright fabric and a handful of glass buttons from the edge of the porch. "Tish, go with your sister," Mother-lump directed to the tinier waif. Tish sprang from the dirt to follow her sister obediently, the childish trust radiating from her soiled face sickening Star where she sat - but a fly does not shirk at such things. "Put up the Peddler's horse, Blake. He'll be staying the night," Mother-lump commanded. Tossing the fabric and buttons back onto the porch, Curtiss circled the wagon, closing the drawers and fastening up the bundles. Pulling his satchel of clothing and personals from beneath the wagon seat, he followed the path of the children into the barn. Star followed along as though leashed with spider's silk.

She would have prayed to go blind that night, to have gone deaf as the center of the earth, but prayer was no longer a privilege afforded her kind. She craved the numbness of sin, loathed the vestige curse of mortal morality. This little ghoul's deeds in the dark, smothering, hay scalded her bosom where a heart should have been. Curtiss had promised her forgetfulness and he had lied. She would not forget! Like an owl, she perched and watched in the blackness of the barn. Each muffled scream and whimper burned into her

mind through hearing as acute as a bat's. Finally, Curtiss tired of his sport and slept. Star wondered if those little girls would ever sleep again.

Curtiss harnessed his own horse that morning. No one stirred in the human part of the inhabitation, as he gathered his belongings and tucked the satchel back under the wagon seat. Star assumed her invisible perch at the top of the load again. Chickens again pecked at the dirt of the yard with indifference to fates of anything other than themselves. The dogs eyed him warily, their leads drawn taut against the post. Star saw one dog turn its gaze toward the barn as the cart creaked away down Mulberry Run. The shadow of the older sister limped out of the forever-dark barn door and stumbled toward the porch, clutching the rough masonry of the building as she went. Star knew now, with devastating certainty, the little sister would never exit the loft again.