

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN SLUMBER AND SUNRISE,
SHE MET HER PHANTOM.



CHASTING SHADOWS

A short story by **Justine Castellon**

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SHADOWS

1

As I sank into the plush leather chair across from Dr. Agnes Seddon, I couldn't help but fidget under the weight of my anticipation of what was about to happen. The chair, although comfortable, held an intimidating presence that mirrored my anxiety. My gaze involuntarily shifted to the side, catching a glimpse of my reflection in the ornate mirror hung on the wall.

My auburn hair, straight and cascading just below my shoulders, was a bold contrast against the navy blazer that clung loosely to my slightly thinner frame. The recent bouts of stress and sleepless nights had whittled away at my usual athletic build, leaving me feeling incongruously small within the room's grandeur. My hazel eyes were sad like someone sucked the happiness out of me. Despite all these, my fitted jeans and simple grey T-shirt made me look at least decent.

Dr. Seddon's office was a sanctuary of calm amidst the chaos of life. It was tastefully decorated with muted tones and soft lighting, creating an atmosphere of tranquility. Bookshelves lined one wall, filled with volumes on human psychology and therapy techniques. A large, inviting sofa sat against another wall while her desk occupied the center of the room, cluttered with notes and patient files for the day. Probably one of them was mine.

I returned my gaze to her. She was a vision of elegance and poise. In her early fifties, she radiated a timeless beauty, her black suit accentuating her slender figure and blond hair. The red stilettos added a dash of boldness. Her keen green eyes studied me with an

understanding only years of experience could bring.

"Megan," Dr. Seddon initiated our session, her tone carrying a blend of gentleness and firmness uniquely hers. "Tell me about your day."

Drawing a deep breath, I sought to steady my nerves before releasing it slowly. "My day began just like any other at the gallery," I started, my gaze absently wandering over to a painting that hung on the wall. "I was working on a new painting, but my focus kept eluding me. It felt like my mind had detached itself from my body, aimlessly floating in an endless desert. I felt tired. I was awake the entire night. I badly wanted to sleep, but my mind refused to shut down." I confessed, my voice barely more than a whisper, "I'm losing control, Dr. Seddon."

The therapist leaned forward, her gaze never leaving me. "How does this loss of control make you feel, Megan?" she probed.

"Lost," I admitted the word escaping my lips in a mere whisper. "I feel like I'm chasing shadows; the more I chase, the further they slip away."

With a thoughtful nod, Dr. Seddon began jotting down notes on her pad. "Acknowledging these feelings and being here to discuss them is a commendable first step, Megan," she reassured, her voice carrying an undertone of warmth. "Remember, asking for help when you need it is perfectly okay."

How could I tell her that my visits here were more of an attempt to appease my mother than a genuine quest for help? I couldn't bear to add to her burdens, not when she grappled with so much. Last year, my father divorced her to marry his co-teacher, forcing us to uproot our lives from the upscale neighborhood of Santa Monica to the rural charm of Oak Glen, nestled in Southern California. The real estate here was significantly cheaper than in Los Angeles, making it a necessary move. I chose to accompany her, trading the city's bustle for the quiet simplicity of this small town. I managed to secure a job at a quaint little gallery situated along Yucaipa Boulevard, just a few minutes drive from Oak Glen.

"Dr. Seddon," I began, clearing my throat to quell the unease that threatened to choke my words, "Could we perhaps alter my

prescription? The usual mix of medications doesn't seem to be effective anymore."

Her gaze met mine as she asked, "What seems to be disturbing your sleep, Megan?"

I found myself pouring out my fears and anxieties, detailing how the relentless sleepless nights were exacting a heavy toll on me, leaving me feeling drained and hollow. Within the comforting confines of Dr. Seddon's office, I felt a strange readiness to confront my demons. Perhaps this was a beginning after all, however small.

As our session drew to a close, Dr. Seddon extended her hand, and handed me a new prescription. "This revised combination," she explained, "is designed to help you regain your focus during the day and find the elusive peace of sleep at night."

"Thank you," I responded. I looked at the paper bearing my name: *Megan Holmes, 25 years old.*

"I'll see you next Tuesday, same time," she informed me, her tone carrying an encouraging note.

With a nod of acknowledgment, I rose from the comfortable leather chair, my movements punctuating the end of our session. I exited the room, leaving behind the sanctuary of Dr. Seddon's office,

2

After picking up my new prescription, I found myself driving back to our new home. As I navigated the roads, I couldn't help but compare the bustling cityscape of Los Angeles with the rustic charm of Oak Glen. The houses here bore a raw, underdeveloped aesthetic, a stark contrast to the polished residences of our former neighborhood. This area was once dominated by trailer parks, but with the recent surge in real estate prices, those temporary dwellings had been replaced by permanent homes.

As I continued my drive through this new neighborhood, the architectural style shifted, evolving into something reminiscent of a ranch-style community. The houses grew larger, complete with barns and expansive yards. Our own three-bedroom house was relatively new, boasting a small porch that overlooked a well-manicured lawn.

Upon reaching home, I parked in front of our house and headed straight to the kitchen. As usual, the garage was vacant — I will be home alone — my mother's relentless work schedule at her second job. Despite her hectic schedule, she meticulously prepared meals for the week, each labeled by day in the uniformed canisters. I reached for the container marked 'Tuesday' and placed it in the microwave without bothering to check its contents. When the digital timer chimed, signaling that my meal was ready, I discovered it was lasagna. I ate alone, cleaning up afterward before retrieving my new medication from my bag and swallowing the prescribed assortment of pills.

Retreating to my room, I chose the smaller one, with its bathroom

located just across the hallway. Mom had claimed the larger room, equipped with a built-in closet and an en-suite bathroom. My room was modest, furnished with a double bed draped in crisp white sheets and a blue comforter, accompanied by matching pillows. Across from the wide window, which provided ample natural light for my sketching and painting sessions, was my study table.

I lay on my bed, my gaze fixated on the glow-in-the-dark stars that adorned my ceiling. They flickered, mimicking the celestial dance of real stars, as I began to ponder the alternate reality of my life had I chosen to stay in Los Angeles. My life was littered with '*what ifs.*' My battle with depression had been a constant companion since grade school, casting me as the perennially unhappy child. I yearned to be the 'normal,' cheerful kid, but the effort required seemed insurmountable. Sometimes, I blamed myself for my parents' divorce — it wasn't easy to have a kid struggling with mental health. As these thoughts swirled in my mind, my eyelids grew heavy and I surrendered to sleep.

3

The door creaked open, and I stepped into the dimly lit Irish pub. The room was filled with the sweet aroma of aged whiskey, the distant chatter of patrons, and the soulful melody of a live band. The pub was a beautiful blend of rustic charm and modern flair. Dark oak beams crisscrossed the ceiling, while vintage posters adorned the stone walls. The counter stretched across one side, boasting an impressive array of bottles, their colors glinting in the soft light.

"Where am I?" A vacant table near the corner caught my eye. It was almost at the front, offering a perfect view of the stage. I navigated through the crowd, the murmur of conversations washing over me, and took a seat. The worn-out leather chair was surprisingly comfortable, adding to the pub's cozy atmosphere.

As I settled in, my gaze was drawn to the stage. A band was playing a cover of *'It's Only Life'* by The Shins, one of my favorite songs. The haunting melody filled the room, echoing off the walls and stirring something deep within me. But it was the lead guitarist singing that truly caught my attention.

He was dressed in tattered jeans and a black t-shirt, his muscular shoulders straining against the fabric. His hair was a wild cascade of curls falling just past his shoulders, complemented by a pair of cross earrings that glinted under the stage lights. He looked like he was in his early 30s. A mask partially concealed his face — the left side. But the visible half was ruggedly handsome. And his eyes, a striking shade of grey, seemed to pierce through the dim lighting, meeting mine with

an intensity that took my breath away instantly.

I could feel a connection forming, an invisible thread pulling us closer. It was as if he was singing just for me. Each note he played, each word he sang, resonated with me, sending shivers down my spine. The beer sat untouched on the table, I didn't notice it was served to me. Its cool condensation was forgotten against the warmth spreading through me.

I was hyper-aware of everything around me, the buzz of the pub fading into a blur. It was surreal, almost dreamlike. I couldn't remember how I ended up here, but the pull towards him was undeniable. His magnetism was overpowering, unlike anything I had ever experienced.

His gaze never left mine as he strummed the final chords of the song. The room erupted in applause, but all I could hear was the echo of his voice, the rhythm of his guitar still resonating within me. This was a dream, it had to be. But it felt so real, so tangible, that for a moment, reality seemed like a distant memory.

4

A sudden jolt awakened me, wrenching me from the clutches of my dream. The echo of my alarm clock sliced through the morning silence, its shrill 7 A.M. call serving as a harsh reminder that reality awaited. Despite having slept a full ten hours, it felt as though I had barely closed my eyes.

I released a long sigh, shaking off the tendrils of sleep as I swung my legs over the side of the bed. I padded into the bathroom, the cool tiles beneath my feet serving as another stark reminder of my wakefulness. As I stepped under the hot stream of the shower, the water cascaded over me, yet it did little to cleanse my mind of the lingering thoughts of the ghost who had visited my dreams.

Post-shower, I slipped into my work attire — a pair of comfortable jeans and a soft, cotton yellow shirt. I rolled the sleeves up to my elbows, adding a casual touch to my outfit.

"There's coffee, bacon, and toast," my mom announced when I walked to the kitchen, her attention firmly glued to her computer screen.

I snagged a piece of crispy bacon, savoring its salty crunch as I prepared my on-the-go breakfast. I grabbed a slice of toast, its crust perfectly browned, and filled my tumbler with steaming coffee. The rich aroma wafted around me, but it failed to rouse me from the dream-induced stupor that still held me captive.

As I prepared to leave, I called out a quick, "Bye, Mom." Leaning in, I

planted a soft kiss on her cheek, the habitual gesture serving as my farewell before I headed out the door, ready to face another day in the real world, all the while haunted by the specter of a dream from last night.

Damien Rice' *'Delicate'* played on car stereo. The drive to the gallery was a familiar journey, one I had made countless times before. However, today, the usual landmarks and scenery did little to divert my thoughts from the enigmatic phantom who had infiltrated my dreams. The gallery, my workplace, was a haven for artists like myself — a charming space brimming with vibrant artworks that breathed life into its quaint, rustic ambiance. Each painting, sculpture, and sketch whispered a tale, bearing silent tribute to the artist's unique narrative.

Being the first shift, I had the privilege of opening the gallery each morning. There was something truly magical about those initial two hours of solitude before my fellow artist and the gallery owner arrived. It was during this time that I felt most connected to my art, surrounded by silence and the unspoken stories encapsulated within each artwork.

My workspace was burrowed in a quiet corner of the gallery, characterized by a worn-out wooden table scattered with paint brushes and tubes of acrylic paint — tools of my trade. An old tripod stood staunchly nearby, cradling my current project: an unfinished painting of a haunted house nestled deep within a forest. As I studied the incomplete image, my mind began to wander back to the phantom from my dreams. His face, obscured by a mask, was a riddle that refused to be solved. *Who was he? What was his name?* These questions swirled around in my mind, their answers remaining tantalizingly out of reach.

Overwhelmed by a sudden compulsion to capture his image, I reached for my secret sketchbook. This was my sanctum, where I poured out my deepest thoughts and dreams. It held fragments of my soul, bound within its pages. With careful, deliberate strokes, I began to etch the phantom's face onto the paper, his mask adding an enigmatic quality to his already mysterious persona.

I meticulously shaded beneath the mask, which concealed half of his features. But the exposed portion of his face — the right side —

seemed to stare back at me from the sketch. Gently, I used the tips of my fingers to blend the shadows beneath his eyes, creating a soft transition. As I did so, it felt as though his gaze was piercing deep into my very core. "Who are you, Phantom?" I found myself whispering to the sketch, almost as if I expected it to answer.

As the sketch began to take form beneath my pencil, it was almost as if I could hear the haunting melody of his voice, accompanied by the rhythmic strumming of his guitar. The phantom was no longer just an image on paper, but a symphony that echoed into my world.

An intense, magnetic attraction towards this elusive figure began to burgeon within me. It was a pull that defied logic, an inexplicable yearning that craved for another encounter, another chance to peel back the layers of mystery shrouding him.

Every stroke of my pencil seemed to amplify these emotions, weaving them into the very fabric of my reality. Each line drawn, each shadow shaded, served to bridge the gap between the tangible world and the ethereal realm of my dreams where the phantom resided. Each stroke of my pencil only served to amplify these feelings, intertwining my reality with the phantom from my dream.

The day slipped away from me with surprising swiftness. I lingered at the gallery until 8 P.M., using the extra time to complete my haunted house painting. It was a small way to compensate for the hours I had lost, engrossed in sketching the phantom from my dreams. By the time I made it back home, the house was already bathed in warm, welcoming light.

As I unlocked the door, I found Mom having dinner. A plate setting was arranged for me across from her, an indication that she had anticipated my arrival. I joined her at the table, our meal consisting of the usual fare — fresh greens and hearty meatloaf she had prepared over the weekend. I found myself eating mechanically, my mind somewhere else.

"How was work, sweetheart?" she asked, spearing a forkful of greens.

"Usual," I replied nonchalantly, absently pushing my greens around on

my plate. I wasn't particularly hungry.

"And your session yesterday with Dr. Seddon? Did you tell her about your sleeping problem? Did she change your prescription?" Though her tone was casual, I could sense the undercurrent of concern. She was well aware of my recent sleep troubles.

"Yes... these ones are much better," I assured her.

"That's good news. Did you sleep well last night? No nightmares?"

"No nightmares," I echoed. I almost added 'just a very pleasant dream', but decided against it.

After dinner, I helped her clean up the kitchen before retiring to my room. I exchanged my day clothes for a large, comfortable t-shirt, took my medication, and let sleep claim me. As I drifted off, I found myself hoping to return to that dream pub, to once again encounter the enigmatic phantom.

5

I blinked my eyes open, finding myself perched on the edge of a cliff, my gaze fixed on the star-studded sky. The night was cold, its icy fingers seeping through my olive-green jacket, black turtleneck, and jeans, pressing against my back which rested flat on the frigid stone beneath me.

The cliff I occupied was one of Dingle, Ireland's many natural wonders. It was a rugged sheer drop that jutted out into the sea, an imposing bulwark of rock against the relentless waves. Below me, the dark water churned restlessly, its surface a shimmering mirror reflecting the starlight.

Slowly, I sat up, my eyes drawn to the nearby cluster of stone houses. Among them, a sign flickered in the darkness — *Dreaming Irish Pub*. A jolt of recognition shot through me. It was the same place! I was back in the landscape of my dreams.

Driven by a sense of urgency, I ran towards the pub, the sound of music growing louder with each step. And there he was, my phantom, commanding the stage. Tonight, he was performing his cover version of Joy Division's '*Love Will Tear Us Apart*'.

He was clad in his usual attire, but tonight he sported a grey t-shirt with a vintage black Mickey Mouse print. It was an unlikely choice, yet it somehow suited his enigmatic personality perfectly. I stood at the back of the room, transfixed by the sound of his voice. Then, his eyes found mine and held them, an unspoken connection kindling between

us.

As he sang, the melancholy notes of the song seemed to wrap around him like a cloak, adding a layer of raw vulnerability to his mysterious persona. It was the last song of his set, and as the final notes faded away, the stage went dark.

I stepped outside the pub, choosing a chair in the outdoor area. The night was cold, but I welcomed its chill, a stark contrast to the warmth that had filled me moments ago. Then I heard him clear his throat.

"Hi," he said, his voice soft in the quiet of the night. "I'm Stephan." The phantom of my dreams finally had a name.

I turned, and there he was. The glow from his cigarette briefly illuminated his features before he took a final drag and casually flicked it onto the cobblestones. "Megan," I acknowledged.

He stood there, one hand tucked into the pocket of his jeans, an air of coolness about him. "Are you here alone?" He asked, his voice just above a whisper.

"Yeah, just visiting," I replied, grateful he didn't ask where I was staying. I couldn't have provided an answer even if I wanted to. As we spoke, the bar waiter arrived with a bottle of beer and a glass of water. Stephan accepted both, placing them on the table in front of me as he settled across from me.

Pushing the beer towards me, he revealed a shy smile. "I can't drink alcohol until I've finished my second set," he explained.

"Thank you," I murmured, lifting the bottle to my lips. The beer was pleasantly chilled, the taste refreshing.

Stephan placed another cigarette between his lips, and watching me over the flame. He gestured with the pack towards me, "Want one?"

I nodded, accepting the offered cigarette and placing it in my mouth. He leaned forward, extending the flame of his Zippo to light mine. I could almost taste the scent of him — a combination of aftersmoke and

his cologne.

Drawing the smoke deep into my lungs, I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, I found his gaze fixed on me, his visible eye filled with an intensity that almost took my breath away. "Have you been performing here long?" I asked, breaking the silence.

"It's been a while," he responded, his voice carrying a hint of nostalgia, his words as brief and enigmatic as the man himself.

"I really enjoyed your cover songs," I began, trying to keep my tone light. "You bring a fresh perspective to some of my favorites. In fact, I think your versions might even be better." I chuckled, hoping my flirtatious undertone wasn't too apparent.

His response was shy, but genuine. "I appreciate that. It means a lot to me. One of these days, I hope to sing something I've written myself."

"Why don't you?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"I'm not sure if it's good enough," he admitted, his self-doubt surfacing.

I shook my head, taking another puff from my cigarette before responding. "Don't ever think about not being good enough. The work of artists, writers... and songwriters, is subjective. No one can definitively say if it's good or not. It always depends on the person who appreciates it." I paused for a moment, then added, "And there's always at least one person in the audience who does."

His smile was beautiful, even though half of it was hidden beneath his mask. "Now that you've said it," he admitted, "I might just do that someday."

"Don't wait too long," I advised. I wanted to add '*while I'm still here,*' but held back.

To my surprise, he reached out and took my hand from where it rested on the table. "An artist's hand," he mused, studying my fingers and the navy blue polish adorning my short nails. "What do you do?"

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"I work at a gallery. I mostly paint and do some sketches," I confessed, my gaze dropping to where our hands were intertwined.

"It looks like it," he agreed, finally releasing my hand. I wished he hadn't. I wanted him to hold on, to keep me grounded in this dream until I was forced to wake.

That night, under the star-studded sky, Stephan and I found common ground in our shared love for art and music. There was an unspoken agreement between us to steer clear of personal inquiries, a mutual understanding that seemed to acknowledge my transient presence in his world.

A voice from behind interrupted our conversation. "Stephan, time to go." He nodded in acknowledgment.

"Looks like it's my cue," he said, rising from his seat. "I have to get ready for the second set. Will you be staying for the rest of the performance?"

"Of course," I assured him, my voice filled with anticipation.

Finishing my beer, I made my way back inside the pub. Stephan was already on stage, his voice filling the space as he sang another cover song: The Postal Service's *'Sleeping In'*. His smile radiated warmth, reaching out to everyone in the crowd, including me. The audience was alive, clapping and swaying to the rhythm, and I found myself joining them.

At that moment, I felt a happiness I had never known before. A part of me yearned to stay in this dream forever, to lose myself in the music and the magic of Dreaming Irish Pub. But even as I reveled in the joy of the night, I knew that it would soon come to an end. Yet, this time, I was comforted by the knowledge that I could find this place and Stephan again.

6

Once, my life was a monotonous cycle of work during the day and solitary at night. But an unexpected twist had altered its course. My days continued in their habitual rhythm, but now each moment was charged with an anticipatory thrill for the day's end, tinged with an uncanny surrealness. I found myself increasingly detached from the real world, absorbed in my own own new world. Work had become a mechanical process, something to be done and quickly forgotten. Meals were often skipped, forgotten amidst the haze of my daydreams — always looking forward to that Irish pub.

I began taking my medication earlier each night, driven by the yearning for sleep's sweet release. It was more than just rest; it was a portal that transported me back to Stephan, back into the vivid dreamscape that had become my sanctuary. I hoped that if I slept earlier, I could spend more time in this ephemeral reality.

Every time I closed my eyes, I was there again, in Dingle, Ireland. The dream always unfurled in the same way — beginning at the cliff, overlooking the boundless sea. A well-trodden path led me from the cliff's edge to the *Dreaming Irish Pub*. The journey was brief, yet every step was laden with a mixture of excitement and anxiety.

I knew, of course, that this was just a dream. But it felt so tangible, so vivid, that it often seemed more real than my waking life. I could smell the intoxicating aroma of wildflowers from the meadows, hear the symphony of crickets as dusk settled, and feel the cool caress of the evening air on my skin. Each sensation was a heart breaking reminder

of the bittersweet dichotomy of my existence — caught between the dreariness of reality and the enchanting lure of my dreams.

Tonight, I had arrived earlier than the usual time. The pub, typically a hubbub of activity and laughter, was unusually quiet — only the staff and the band were present. An air of tranquility hung in the place that was often filled with mirth and chatter. My experiment had worked. By adjusting my sleep, I had managed to alter my arrival time in this dream world.

Stephan and his band were engrossed in their practice session, lost in a world of rhythm and melody. The notes of their music wafted through the air, filling the room with a captivating tune. I found a spot at the bar and ordered a beer, the folded bills with cold coins in my pocket serving as bizarre reminder of the tangible reality within this dream.

As I sipped my drink, relishing the crisp bitterness on my tongue, I noticed Stephan's gaze on me. He waved me over with a warm smile, his eyes glinting with an invitation. Without a second thought, I moved towards him, drawn by the magnetic pull of his presence.

He was standing by the stage, his fingers dancing over the strings of his guitar. Tonight, he was practicing Cranberries' *Linger*. He handed me the chords and lyrics, his eyes gleaming with an unspoken invitation. I accepted, and what followed was nothing short of surreal. Our voices melded together in perfect harmony, our shared melody resonating through the empty pub. It was a moment of beautiful serenity, a snapshot of peace amidst the whirlwind of my chaotic life.

As the break before the show commenced, Stephan and I retreated to our habitual spot outside the pub. With cigarettes in one hand and beers in the other, we relished the quiet comfort of each other's company. The silence was soothing, a soft blanket that wrapped us in its warmth. Yet, it was in this tranquility that I found the courage to voice the question that had been nagging at me.

"Why do you cover part of your face?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. The moment the words left my lips, I knew I had crossed a boundary. But like an arrow shot from a bow, they couldn't be taken back.

* * *

His response was curt, tinged with irritation. "I just don't like people seeing the full me."

Despite his clear discomfort, curiosity propelled me forward. "But why?" I found myself asking, my voice barely above a whisper. "I don't see anything wrong with you." As my hand reached out, yearning to touch the mask that separated us, he artfully maneuvered his head, causing my hand to fall into empty air.

The cold void where warm contact should have been sent a pang of rejection through me. Yet, I persisted, my voice laced with a mix of frustration and intrigue, "Are you deliberately attempting to foster an aura of mystery? Is the charm of being an anonymous performer part of your appeal?"

"Megan, pump the brakes," he retorted, his tone sharper now. "That part of my life is off-limit."

Never one to back down easily, I persisted. I had always had a knack for pushing boundaries, for testing the limits of people's tolerance. "It doesn't make sense to me," I argued, "why you would choose to hide part of yourself in a world that seems so perfect."

Stephan lit another cigarette, taking a long, deep drag. "Your opinions aren't needed, especially in areas you know nothing about," he said, his tone laced with iciness. His reaction was jarring. The friendly warmth that typically characterized him had evaporated instantly, replaced by an unmistakable wave of irritation. I was taken aback — most would have deftly sidestepped such a personal question, but Stephan's annoyance was unmistakable. It felt as though he was fiercely guarding a secret about his face, a secret he was determined to keep hidden.

"I'm sorry...I'm just..." I stammered, but before I could finish my apology, he flicked his cigarette away and turned his back on me. I watched, a lump forming in my throat, as he stormed back into the pub, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I remained outside, nursing both my beer and my bruised ego, waiting for the usual crowd to fill the pub.

* * *

When the music started, Stephan's voice carried through the open door, singing a song I didn't recognize. Throughout his performance, he deliberately avoided looking in my direction. The weight of his avoidance was heavy, a tangible reminder of our unresolved tension.

I had half-expected him to seek me out during the show break, to offer some form of reconciliation. But he didn't. The sting of rejection was sharp and unexpected, leaving me feeling raw and exposed. I waited, clinging to a shred of hope for an apology, or even just a glance my way. But none came.

As the dream began to fade and my waking world started to seep in, I was left with a lingering sense of hurt, and a troubling realization: Stephan hadn't spoken to me since our confrontation. The silence was deafening. It hung over me like a cloud, casting a melancholic shadow over the dream world that had once been my refuge.

Night after night, Stephan eluded me, a phantom disappearing into the shadows. He danced with the crowd, his charismatic allure captivating everyone within his reach. Each flirtatious smile he bestowed upon them elicited a pang of jealousy that gnawed at my heart, a bitter pill I was forced to swallow.

When the curtains fell for their performance break, he would vanish swiftly from the stage, a whisper in the wind. His absence was as pronounced as his presence, leaving an unspoken void that no one else could fill.

Yet, I found myself returning, drawn like a moth to a flame. The pub, with its dimmed lights and the intoxicating rhythm of music, had become a sanctuary, a world far removed from my own. It was an escape, a haven where I could momentarily forget the dreariness of my reality.

7

Once again, I found myself seated in the familiar confines of Dr. Seddon's office for our regular session. The room exuded a comforting aura, its soft lighting casting gentle shadows on the worn-out carpet. The faint scent of lavender hung in the air, a soothing balm to my frazzled nerves.

"How has work been treating you, Megan?" Dr. Seddon began, her gaze steady and full of sympathy. "And what about your sleep? Are you managing to rest well? Any nightmares troubling you?"

"I've been sleeping better," I admitted, deliberately skirting around the intricate details of my dreams and Stephan. The absurdity of it all made me certain that no one would believe me anyway, not even my therapist. "As for work...it's simply work. It occupies my time, but it doesn't fill the void. There seems to be no purpose or meaning to what I do during my waking moments."

Dr. Seddon's expression softened as she probed further, her professional mask slipping away to reveal a hint of empathy. She ventured further into the labyrinth of my emotions, "So, you're occupied, constantly on the move, yet there's a void, an absence of contentment? Can you delve deeper, Megan? Describe to me exactly how you feel."

A lump formed in my throat, choking my words before they could escape. Dr. Seddon had a knack for peeling back the layers, for seeing the raw, unfiltered version of me, as she always did. I responded with

a mere nod, my silence echoing louder than any words could.

"I just feel...adrift, I suppose," I finally managed to murmur, my voice a mere ghost of a whisper, barely slicing through the thick silence enveloping us.

"Does it feel like you're losing control of your life?" she probed, her voice steady, yet laced with an underlying note of concern.

"Yes, it's like someone else is at the wheel...not me. And the worst part is, I've started to become indifferent. I just go along with the current," I confessed, my gaze focused on my fidgeting fingers, desperate to avoid her piercing gaze.

Dr. Seddon scrutinized me with a careful eye, her forehead creased with concern. "Megan, I can't help but notice you've shed some weight. Have you been eating well?" she asked, her tone filled with worry.

I shrugged off her concern with a nonchalant gesture, my gaze fixated on the cold, sterile floor. "I suppose I could be taking better care of myself," I admitted, the truth of my words lingering heavily in the air.

As our session drew to a close, she scribbled something on her notepad, then tore off a prescription slip and passed it to me. "These are supplementary vitamins. It's crucial that you maintain a balanced diet, Megan."

Once the session was over, I found my way home. The house greeted me with an eerie silence, the quietness serving to amplify the emptiness gnawing at me from within. I found myself standing in the kitchen, staring at the line-up of new medications on the counter. As I picked up the bottle of sleeping pills, an idea began to take shape in my mind.

It was a desperate experiment, a bold attempt to validate my theories about my dreams. With a sense of resigned determination, I doubled the dosage of my sleeping pills. My hope was that it would allow me to linger longer in my dreams, providing me with the time I needed to make things right with Stephan.

* * *

As sleep claimed me, I found myself waking up in the familiar landscape of my dream world. I was late as I entered the pub; the music had already begun. Stephan was in the middle of his performance, his charisma filling the room. Tonight, he looked even more handsome, his rugged attire accentuating his prominent stubble. His face bore a stern expression, his eyes focused solely on the stage. He noticed my entrance, his eyes meeting mine briefly before quickly averting his gaze.

A lump of unspoken emotions formed in my throat as I quietly settled into a corner table. Tears threatened to spill from my eyes, a silent question echoing in my mind: *why was I hurting so much when this was nothing but a dream?*

When the first set came to an end, Stephan vanished backstage. Drawing a deep breath for courage, I followed him. He was alone in the back alley, a solitary figure nestled amidst crates of empty bottles and the looming presence of a huge dumpster. A lit cigarette served as his only companion, its faint glow casting an ethereal light on his face.

"Hi," I offered softly, my voice barely piercing the quietude. Surprise flickered in his eyes as he turned to regard me.

Nodding in acknowledgment, he took a long, contemplative drag from his cigarette, the burning tip illuminating his face in a warm glow.

"I'm sorry about what happened last time," I confessed, my words barely above a whisper, as I navigated the distance between us. "I know I overstepped."

He shrugged off my apology, his gaze fixated on the glowing ember of his cigarette. "Forget about it, Meg," he responded, his voice devoid of any emotion.

"Are we okay?" I ventured hesitantly, uncertainty seeping into my tone.

"Yeah, we're good," he assured me, his voice carrying a hint of finality.

An uncomfortable silence descended upon us, the air heavy with

unspoken words. Seeking to dispel the tension, I asked, "Do you have another cig?"

Rummaging through his back pocket, he offered me his pack, a silent invitation to join him.

"You're incredible on stage, Stephan. You really come alive," I complimented, skillfully steering the conversation away from our previous disagreement.

His amusement was notable as he chuckled, "Really?" He offered his lit cigarette to light mine. As we stood there, smoking in companionable silence, our backs resting against the cold wall, our shoulders barely millimeters apart. I could feel the warmth radiating from him, his familiar scent wrapping around me like a comforting blanket. A pang of longing hit me as I realized this was something I'd miss when I woke up. We didn't need words to communicate. For now, we were in sync... we were okay. That night, I decided to abandon my quest to uncover what was hidden behind his mask. If I wanted to be a part of Stephan's world, I needed to accept that I would live within the confines of his reality, even if it existed only within this dream.

8

More frequently, I found myself existing in the realm of my dreams rather than the harsh reality of my waking life. I tweaked my medication regimen, allowing myself to surrender to the allure of sleep earlier and stay cocooned in its embrace for longer durations. My relationship with Stephan in this dream world was flourishing beautifully. After his mesmerizing performances at the pub, we would often retreat to the cliff's edge, sometimes sitting on the rock face, other times lying on our backs and losing ourselves in the celestial tapestry above.

Our conversations would meander through various topics — life, his music, my art.

"Stephan, the way you perform those covers is truly remarkable," I found myself saying one day. "More often than not, they transcend the original versions. You have this unique ability to breathe life into each word, infusing it with such raw, unfiltered emotion. It's as if you're narrating a deeply personal tale, each note a chapter of your own story."

A soft chuckle, laced with a hint of surprise, escaped him. "That's quite a compliment, Meg. But there's an unparalleled satisfaction in singing your own songs," he confessed. As he spoke, his face which was free from its usual disguise, turned towards me. From this particular angle, I couldn't see the half that usually hid behind his mask. It felt as though, in that fleeting moment, he had shed his armor, allowing me a glimpse of his true self. His gaze met mine and he said, "And your art,

Meg. It's like you're painting a symphony of emotions, each stroke a note resonating with whoever is viewing it."

I smiled back at him, a thought tugging at my heart. Why couldn't I simply stay here forever? Why should I endure the brutal realities of a world where I felt unwanted? I was weary of feeling unhappy, of feeling like an outsider. I yearned to remain in this place where I could truly be myself. But no matter how many questions I posed, I always found an answer leading me back to reality.

So, I continued to drift between these two realms, straddling the thin line between my reality and my dream.

Things were getting better in my dream world. Sometimes, I would bring my sketchpad along, capturing the cliff and Stephan on it. The sight of him against the backdrop of the setting sun, his silhouette dark against the vibrant hues of the evening sky, was a sight to behold. I would pour all my feelings into these sketches, hoping to capture not just the scene but the essence of our relationship...whatever that was.

On one such evening, we were back at the pub. The atmosphere was electric, filled with laughter, clinking glasses, and the soulful strumming of Stephan's guitar. The crowd hushed as he took the stage.

"I have something special for you all tonight," he announced, his voice carrying over the silence. "This is an original piece I composed. It's called 'Silhouette of Love.'"

The first chords resonated through the room, and then he began to sing:

In the shadows, your silhouette dances,

Bathed in moonlight, entranced in trances.

Your love, a melody that enhances,

My heart, it prances, takes chances.

* * *

Chasing-Shadows

In the stillness, your silhouette lingers,

In my dreams, traced by my fingers.

Your love, a melody that sings,

In my heart, it brings, sweet springs.

Silhouette of love, in the twilight above,

You're all I'm thinking of, in this dance of love.

His voice, a rich tapestry of emotion and skill, filled the room. Each word he sang was proof of his undeniable talent. As the final note faded into silence, the crowd erupted into applause, their cheers reverberating through the room like an echo in a canyon. I couldn't help but let a smile grace my lips; Stephan was truly in his element here.

This dream world was our sanctuary, a haven where we could be ourselves without the burdens of reality weighing us down. However, I found myself increasingly questioning. Was this also Stephan's reality? Was he content in this world, just as I was? And more importantly, was he happy with me being a part of it?

A sad undertone laced my thoughts as I pondered these questions. I was living a double life — one in reality and another in this dreamscape. But what of Stephan? Was he too straddling two worlds or was this dream realm his singular existence? And if so, was my presence enriching his world or was I merely an intruder in his solitude? The answers were elusive, much like the fading fragments of a dream upon waking.

9

A sudden, jarring sensation roused me from my sleep, akin to being yanked upwards from the fathomless depths of an ocean. Blinking against the harsh, fluorescent lighting, I found myself ensnared within the sterile confines of a hospital room. Across from me, my mother's eyes, reddened and swollen from what must have been hours of crying, bore into mine.

"Megan, sweetheart," she said, her voice trembling like a leaf caught in a gentle breeze.

Confused, I croaked out, "Mom, what happened?" My throat felt parched as if I hadn't had a drop of water in days. An IV line was tethered to my hand, a steady drip of fluid flowing into my veins. Monitors flanked my bed, their incessant beeping forming a dissonant symphony in the otherwise silent room.

Her fingers, cold with worry, wrapped around mine. "I was terrified, Megan," she confessed, her voice barely above a whisper. "I found you in your room, asleep but eerily still... You'd been in that state for days, almost lifeless." Her words hung heavy in the air, underscoring the gravity of the situation and painting a sobering picture of my recent past.

I looked around. The room was a stark contrast to my dream world. Cold, clinical white walls, the incessant beeping of the heart monitor, the faint smell of antiseptic—it was all too real.

* * *

Before I could respond, a group of doctors entered. They fired questions at me, probing my mental state, asking about my feelings, and even hinting at suicidal thoughts. I realized then, they thought I wanted to die. But that wasn't it, not at all. I just wanted to sleep, to escape to my dream world where I felt valued and loved. That night and the following day I was confined in this room.

I stayed in the hospital for two days, gradually regaining my strength. Sleep came, but it was empty, devoid of dreams or nightmares. I drifted into a void of nothingness, which felt even worse than my reality. But I kept my feelings to myself; I didn't want my mother to worry more than she already had.

Upon my return home, I was granted a temporary respite from work. Those vacant days were spent in the company of Dr. Seddon, where I finally peeled back the layers of my thoughts and feelings, revealing the dreams that had been consuming me, holding me captive. I confessed about Stephan, the intoxicating allure of my dream world, and my desire to spend more time in my dream world than in reality.

"Megan," Dr. Seddon began after a prolonged silence, her voice cutting through the tension like a knife, "It's crucial to distinguish between dreams and reality. Dreams are beautiful, yes, but they're fleeting. They aren't real. The more you immerse yourself in them, the more you risk developing an aversion to your reality, and it will become increasingly difficult for you to reconnect," she paused, weighing her words carefully before proceeding. "Reality, regardless of its harshness, is what we truly inhabit. If you continue escaping to your dreams, you might lose touch with reality altogether. That's akin to losing your sanity."

Her words echoed within me, their truth stinging like a slap. I understood her caution, yet the thought of forsaking my dreams, of bidding goodbye to Stephan, felt akin to scaling an insurmountable mountain. "Please," I implored, desperation tingeing my voice, "I am not ready to relinquish it. In there, I tasted true happiness. I wasn't familiar with such joy until I discovered that place."

"Megan, that was your hidden desire. That wasn't reality. Our dreams take our deepest yearnings and weave them into scenarios that we find

acceptable.”

“It appears real. It feels real...” I couldn’t prevent the tears from falling down my cheeks. I was clinging to the last shred of hope that those moments with Stephan were real.

“They do. Because you are living them. You allowed your dreams to morph into your reality. You are venturing onto a dangerous path, where I might struggle to bring you back,” she warned.

I was at a loss for words. My mind was confused. It felt like a game of ping-pong, with my mother and reality on one side, and Stephan and the pub on the other. I couldn’t subject my mom to another heartbreak, losing me after enduring the pain of my father’s departure after the divorce would undoubtedly devastate her. So, I made a painful and difficult decision.

“Allow me to sleep just once more. Let me bid farewell to Stephan.” I pleaded, my eyes begging for understanding.

Dr. Seddon considered my plea for a moment before finally acquiescing, “Alright, Megan. But on one condition—it must be under my supervision, in my office.”

And with that, I prepared myself for one final journey into my dream world.

10

Once again, I found myself back at the pub. The familiar scene unfolded before me—Stephan on stage, his fingers strumming the guitar with practiced ease, his voice filling the room with the melancholic strains of *'Secret Meeting'* by The National. He caught my eye and winked, making my heart flutter yet fill with an impending sense of loss.

His songs, I realized, would be my keepsake from this dream world — the auditory reminders of him and our time together. I committed to memory his rugged features, the way he swayed in rhythm with his guitar, and how he'd brush his wavy hair away from his face with a casual flick of his hand.

After his first set, Stephan descended from the stage, his gaze scanning the crowd until it found me. I clasped his hand and together, we ran to our favorite spot—the cliff that offered an unobstructed view of the sea's vast expanse. I was painfully aware of our dwindling time together—each precious second slipping away like grains of sand through my desperate fingers.

"Hey, you've been absent for three nights! What happened?" He asked, lighting a cigarette and offering it to me with a casual grace. I accepted it, drawing in a deep breath of the smoke, allowing it to dance in the air before handing it back to him. Sharing a cigarette, this was a new intimacy between us.

I kicked at a stray pebble, sending it skittering across the grass, "Oh,

some complications arose that needed my attention.”

"I was worried. Started thinking you'd lost your way or simply decided not to return," he chuckled, the sound of his laughter filling the silent night.

His words tugged at my heart, but I forced myself to stay strong. He was staring at the sky as though searching for answers in the infinite expanse. I longed to linger here a bit longer, to stretch these fleeting moments into eternity. But I knew, any second now, Dr. Seddon would wrench me from my slumber. "Stephan," I began, my voice a fragile whisper carried by the wind, "This isn't my world. I don't know if you're aware, but this..." I gestured vaguely at our surroundings, the dreamlike landscape bathed in moonlight, "only exists within the confines of my dreams."

His eyes widened, a flicker of confusion dancing across his features, yet he remained silent, granting me the space to continue.

"Perhaps this is your reality, but I'm merely a transient visitor, here tonight and gone before sunrise. Do you understand what I'm saying?" My voice wavered, choked with unshed tears threatening to spill over. We walked along slowly, his hands buried deep in his pockets. A memory of him, is carved in my mind forever.

After what felt like an eternity, he nodded, "I've always known, Meg. That's why I never asked you anything, never probed deeper. I was content with our moments." A sigh, heavy with sorrow, escaped from his lips, "I had nurtured a faint hope that we'd have more time... maybe figure out a way for me to traverse the boundaries of your dreams and exist in your reality."

"Oh, Stephan," I sobbed, his words piercing my very core, leaving a trail of raw, unbearable pain. His confession, so honest and vulnerable, was a sad reminder of the cruel fate that awaited us.

I felt the comforting strength of his arms as they enveloped me, pulling me into his embrace. I wound my arms around his waist, burying my face in the comforting junction between his shoulder blades and neck. The world fell away as we held each other—just two souls anchored in

this fleeting moment. He allowed me to release my pent-up tears onto his shoulder, his right hand cradling the back of my head in a tender gesture that spoke volumes. Please, don't let me wake up, I pleaded in silent desperation.

Eventually, his grip loosened and he gently disentangled himself from our embrace. I lifted my gaze to meet his, drinking in every detail of his face as if trying to etch them into the canvas of my memory—his captivating grey eyes that held mine when he was performing, his tousled hair that danced in the moonlight, the mask that concealed half his face, leaving his emotions a mystery. My fingers, trembling with a mixture of fear and longing, reached up to trace the outline of his partially visible lips, a heartbreaking farewell to our shared dreams.

"Stephan," I said, my voice barely above a whisper, "I need to return to reality. If I don't, I might lose myself."

Stephan held my hand against his mask, his gaze never wavering from mine. His grey eyes, brimming with emotions I couldn't decipher, bore into me. "Is this our goodbye?" He asked, his voice laced with sadness.

With a heavy nod, I confirmed his fears. "I wish I could stay, Stephan, but I have no choice."

"Meg, I'm used to seeing these eyes in the crowd, seeking me. You've been a good friend to me," he said, his voice thick with emotion.

"And you to me, Stephan," I replied, my voice choked by my tears.

A sad smile played on his lips as he murmured, "Who knows, maybe someday, our realities will intersect?" I nodded, knowing it was a distant dream for both of us. But at that moment, this was the only solace we could hold onto.

My fingers delicately traced the outline of his mask, his concealed beauty that had captivated me from the start. He placed his hand over mine, a tender grasp that spoke volumes of our unspoken emotions. Our eyes locked, as if becoming windows to our respective souls. As if understanding my unspoken wish, he reached for his mask, about to reveal the face that had been hidden from me all this while. God, I

could finally see him. I've been dreaming within those dreams to see him fully. I could hardly believe it—I was about to see the man who had been the central figure in my dreams. This was his parting gift to me, a moment I had yearned for with every fiber of my being. I closed my eyes, bracing myself to finally see without the mask.

When I opened them again, just as he was about to lift the veil and reveal himself, I was violently yanked back into the harsh reality. The echo of my desperate cry, his name ringing out in the silence, seemed to reverberate through the emptiness that followed.

Jolted awake, I found myself back in Dr. Seddon's sterile office, my cheeks glistening with the tears that had involuntarily escaped. I had been so tantalizingly close, on the brink of uncovering the true face of my phantom. Now, all that remained were the haunting echoes of our heart-wrenching farewell, the ghostly imprint of his touch still lingering on my skin, and the gut-wrenching realization that I said goodbye to a man I cared for deeply in a world that didn't exist — just beyond the confines of my dreams.

The stark cruelty of my reality. The universe had orchestrated a cruel play at my expense. I couldn't help but question, was retaining my sanity worth the price? Was it worth returning to a reality devoid of joy, filled with an overwhelming sense of meaninglessness? The question hung heavy in the air, taunting me with its cruel irony.

*“Megan, that was your hidden desire.
That wasn’t reality. Our dreams take our
deepest yearnings and weave them into
scenarios that we find acceptable.”*

– Dr. Agnes Seddon

On a journey to find herself, Megan ended up chasing a phantom, pulled into a strange world that was far from real, yet somehow more magical. Among the cobblestone streets of a quaint Irish pub, she met Stephan, a musician whose melodies echoed even long after dawn. They only spent four hours together each night, but for Megan, it was perfect. So, each night, Megan would rest her weary eyes, embarking on a night-time quest to find Stephan in their shared dreamscape, her phantom friend who existed somewhere between slumber and sunrise.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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