

THE QUARRY

The Shadow

Suzin Lee

The first time Alex saw him, she was indifferent. In fact, if it wasn't for the minor incident, she probably would have brushed past him. The murmur of the supermarket was monotonous in Alex's ears; her mind was fixated on the broken wheel of her trolley. *Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.* Alex sighed. She wondered if Dad had ever helped Mum with the shopping. Not that it mattered, now. She reached for a loaf of raisin bread, then hesitated at the thought of Mum's tantrum the other day.

'I'm sick of eating this crap!' Mum had shouted as she threw the freshly buttered toast against the wall. 'If your Dad was here—'

'Well, he's not. And this is all we've got in the pantry, so you can starve,' Alex had snapped as she walked out of the room with the empty plate.

Her hand hovered over the beckoning bag of bread before she threw one, then another, and another, into the trolley. She smirked.

With the trolley piled high with groceries, Alex wheeled it down the health food aisle towards the checkout. Then, they collided. The details of his appearance bypassed her memory except for one small feature—his glasses. Thick-rimmed with additional shades, one side of the frames were wrapped with a Band-Aid, holding them together. They fell off his face and clattered onto the linoleum floor as Alex swerved her trolley, barely missing them.

‘Oh! Oh... I’m so sorry! Are you okay?’ Alex said as she picked up the glasses.

She handed them over to the man, who hesitated at her gesture. He took them, observing her with alarm. Slowly and silently, he walked away.

Alex noticed that other people were staring at her with the same expression on their faces. Any other day, this might have struck her as weird, but she realised the time—Mum had been home alone for longer than she should have been.

The plastic bags rustled as Alex treaded carefully into the dim house. She closed the door gently and when the lock clicked, turned quickly towards the hallway. Silence.

Quietly, she opened the blinds of the living room. A shrill ring broke the peace.

‘Shit!’ Alex muttered, as she clambered over the sofa reaching for the phone. ‘Hello?’

‘Alex, is that you?’ An English accent crackled through the bad reception. ‘It’s Auntie Sue. I just wanted to check in, how’s your Ma going?’

‘Oh! Hello, Auntie Sue. Mum’s alright, the same old.’ Alex fidgeted with the cord in her hand as her eyes nervously watched the hallway.

‘Would you like me to fly over?’ asked Auntie Sue.

‘Oh no! That would be such an inconvenience!’ Alex pulled a face. She couldn’t think of anything worse than to have Auntie Sue fussing around.

A door creaked open down the hallway. Alex perked her head up.

‘I better get going now. I think Mum is awake,’ Alex whispered hoarsely.

Alex watched nervously as the ghost-like figure appeared along the passage. Her hair was disheveled, eyes vacant, and her face was as pale as the silk nightgown she was wearing.

‘John?’ Her shrill voice quivered, echoing off the walls.

‘Mum, it’s just me,’ Alex called out.

Light footsteps pattered on the floorboards.

‘Oh, Alex...’ Mum’s voice was soaked in disappointment as she observed the empty living room.

‘Mum, remember Dad is—’

‘I know.’ Mum stared at the bouquet of flowers on the kitchen bench. A card with the word ‘condolences’ peeked through the leaves.

Alex watched Mum walk back into her room with her head hung low. You could see her bones protruding through her nightgown. Alex wanted nothing more than to get Mum out of her room, to open the windows and curtains and change the bed sheets. A pungent smell had started to arise from in there; a rotting stench that seemed to infiltrate Mum’s grieving body. Alex wrinkled her nose. It was getting worse.

A week later, Alex’s feet were crunching through the autumn leaves as she made her way to the bus stop. Three weeks felt like a very long time away from work. She missed the buzz of computers inside the busy office. A cold gush of wind sent a shiver up her spine; it felt like a breath of fresh air. Alex had never been a patient person, she knew it was only a matter of time before she would snap. She had begun to throw away the condolence cards and sometimes left the phone unplugged. But no matter how hard she tried, the memory of her Dad’s death seemed to taunt her. Even the crowd of black coats at the bus stop triggered memories of his funeral. Alex released a dramatic sigh, receiving side-glances from the people near her.

When the bus appeared around the corner, the drowsy crowd started to stir. Feet shuffled as everyone hungrily inched forward in hope of getting a seat on the bus.

Alex had seated herself comfortably and was drinking coffee from her thermos when she saw the man jump onto the bus; the same man from the grocery store. Alex held her thermos in mid-air as she eyed him. *He hasn't paid for his bus fare, maybe he is poor.* He took out a notepad and started scribbling. Every time she looked up, she felt him glance away. Alex felt the hairs on her arms stand on end—it was as if he knew she was watching him.

When her stop approached, she carefully made her way down the aisle, seeing him fold the piece of paper as she drew nearer. The closer she got, the more she noticed a pungent smell, and scrunched her face in disgust—it was the rotting smell that had started to infiltrate Mum's room, and it was coming from *him*. She covered her nose and looked around madly, but no one else seemed to be bothered by it. Just in time, the doors opened and Alex flew out. She stared with a gaping mouth at the bus as it continued on.

By their third encounter, Alex felt an uneasy dread. She had organised to meet Toby for a date night, which they hadn't done in a while, since the passing of her Dad. Waiting in line at the movies, Alex felt restless being in such a busy space. All the noise of people chattering seemed to echo in her head, and the smell of the buttery popcorn made her stomach churn.

'You alright?' Toby asked as he put his arm around her shoulders.

'Yeah, I'm fine,' Alex replied, her foot tapping impatiently.

The two of them waited in line behind a big family; a toddler wailed in a stroller and another two ran wild. Alex crinkled her nose.

'I think that baby's nappy needs changing,' she whispered to Toby. 'It's making me feel really nauseous.'

Toby raised his eyebrows and shrugged sympathetically. Then one of the children bumped into a person waiting in the queue, making them turn around. *It was him.* Alex froze as the man turned in her direction. Their eyes met for a few

seconds—an icy shiver ran up her spine. His face was expressionless, not a flinch nor a flicker.

‘Toby...’ whispered Alex.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Do you see that man? The one in front of the family?’ Alex’s voice trembled.

‘Where?’ Toby inclined his head.

‘There, don’t you see him?’ Alex tugged Toby’s shirt in desperation.

‘There are many men in this line, Alex. Which one are you talking about?’

The man walked away as Alex watched in horror.

‘I keep seeing the same man,’ she said.

Toby looked at her quizzically before stroking her hair. ‘Does he look like your dad?’

Alex shook her head, ‘No, it’s got nothing to do with that.’

‘You sure? I think it might be.’ Toby gave her shoulder a squeeze. ‘It’s okay, Alex. You haven’t even had a proper chance to mourn, with the way your Mum has been.’

Alex shook her head again. ‘I told you, it’s got nothing to do with that.’

Toby nodded and gave her a light kiss on the forehead, as if politely dismissing her behavior and worries as a figment of her imagination, a mourning strategy, or a cry for attention. Alex bit her lip.

‘Yeah, maybe I’ve gone fucking mad as well,’ she said.

‘Come *on*, Alex. You know that’s not what I mean.’ Toby tilted his head to the side.

‘No, I think that’s exactly what you mean,’ Alex muttered through gritted teeth as she pushed Toby away from her and started running.

Weaving through the crowd of people, Alex was determined to confront this mysterious man. *I’m not crazy*, she repeated in her head. Her eyes darted from left to right across the bustling food court. *I’m not crazy*. Sure enough, there he was standing

in the far corner, staring at her as if he knew she would find him. Alex made her way through the people, drawn to his stare.

‘Alex, stop!’ Toby had grabbed her arm and turned her swiftly around, ‘Where are you going?’

‘He’s there! I need to talk to him,’ said Alex, pointing at the man.

‘Okay, where? Where is this man?’ asked Toby.

‘Just there, in the corner!’

Toby paused, staring intently, ‘Alex, I don’t see anyone standing in that corner.’

She jabbed her finger in the air, ‘Look! He’s right there!’

Toby looked again, then shook his head silently. He pulled her towards him in a tight embrace. She looked past his shoulder and watched the man walk away, slowly disappearing into the crowd.

That night, as Alex lay awake in her bed, she could hear her Mum’s muffled sobs in the room next door. *It wouldn’t be a surprise if I was going mad too*, she thought. Toby had suggested they book an in-home psychiatrist for her mum. He was worried about her condition, but Alex knew that his underlying agenda was really Alex. She hugged her pillow tightly as she listened to Mum’s whimpers softening, until there was finally silence. A soft breeze rustled the autumn leaves outside whilst a storm brewed in Alex’s mind. She imagined herself barging into Mum’s room, shaking her frail body and shouting, ‘No more, Mum! No more! I can’t handle this anymore!’ Alex’s body shuddered. She didn’t feel like herself anymore.

The next day, Alex received a text from Toby saying that he had booked an initial consultation for a therapy session at 6pm.

‘Just for your Mum. You can listen in if you want, up to you,’ he added.

When Alex arrived at home at exactly 5:45pm, the lights were on in the living room. *Strange*, Alex thought as she fumbled with her keys. She was greeted with warm air as the heater had been turned on, and she could hear her Mum's high-pitched chuckle. The house had come alive again. Alex frowned, disturbed by the sudden change.

'Mum?' Alex called as she made her way to the living room.

'Oh, Alex! We have a visitor!' Mum called.

That smell hit her before Alex could see him. She covered her nose and froze in shock at the sight of the man. He rose onto his feet, pushing his glasses up.

'He said he was an old friend of your Dad's. High school friends, did you say?' Mum looked over at him in admiration, then at Alex quizzically, 'Why are you doing that?'

'I... I...' Alex mumbled behind the hand blocking her nose.

She edged her way toward Mum. *What the fuck is going on*, she thought.

'Mum... you can actually see him?' Alex asked cautiously.

Mum frowned, 'What do you—'

The man cleared his throat. 'May I have a word with your lovely daughter?'

'Oh, yes of course!' Mum sprang to her feet. 'I'll just make some more tea.'

'Sit down, Alex.' The man gestured. His voice was low.

Alex shuddered as she sat in the furthest seat away from him, her trembling hands gathered in her lap.

'You know me, I presume,' he said.

'I've... seen you around,' Alex replied, avoiding eye contact.

'Which you shouldn't have.' The man peered over his glasses. 'I knew something was wrong when I first saw you at the supermarket. Normally, people like you can't see me.'

'What do you mean?' Alex's eyes were wide.

'It means I have prolonged my stay. My job here proved to be more, well, *complicated*.' The man paused for a moment. 'You see, the fact that I am starting to

be seen means that I need to leave this planet as soon as possible. But the problem is, my job is not done. I had a list of people to select from, and I selected you.'

'Am I going to die?' Alex whispered, her voice trembling.

'Yes,' the man replied, 'because that is the fate of all humans.'

He took out a clipboard and started scribbling notes indifferently, as if he was sending off a parcel.

'And it seems you have already become very sensitive to death,' he said, nodding.

'The smell...' Alex mumbled.

'Like a rotting corpse, or simply, the fragrance of death.' The man shrugged. 'It's an acquired taste.'

'But... I can't die,' Alex said. 'What about my Mum? What about—'

'No one gets to choose their death, Alex. Death is a natural occurrence whether it be sudden or expected,' the man said as he peered at his clipboard, 'and yours will be... sudden... the result of a natural cause.' The man put down his clipboard, 'I'm ready when you are.'

Alex felt an adrenal surge of mania rush through her blood, as if all the anger and frustration that she had contained was finally bursting. She stood up abruptly, looking around for something to aide her escape.

'Stay away!' she roared, her arms in front of her in defense.

'Please, don't resist. It never works.' The man stood up.

Alex threw a vase of flowers at him and the glass shattered on the floor. The man shook his head. 'You can't cheat death, Alex.' He halted at the sight of blood tricking down his injured arm and growled. 'And it seems that I am really running out of time.'

Alex watched as the man threw his glasses onto the floor—the same glasses that had clattered onto the floor of the supermarket, the same glasses with the Band-Aid wrapped around the side. All of a sudden, he looked different; his eyes looked darker and his face hollower. A Grim Reaper, hungry for life.

He lurched and grabbed hold of Alex's arm, covering her mouth with his other hand.

'You won't even know it's happening,' he whispered.

Alex's eyes widened as she watched a golf club rise up behind the man. It hit him square on the head. He swayed on his legs, as if confused by the pain, his mouth opening and closing in silence. Alex watched in horror as her Mum swung with all her strength. *Swoosh, thud. Swoosh, thud.*

'Over. My. Dead. Body,' she growled through gritted teeth, between each forceful stroke.

It was the sight of a madwoman. She didn't stop until the man had buckled over into a limp heap. Unconscious. Dead. Mum was panting, with sweat running down the sides of her face.

Alex was screaming.

'Shush!' Mum hit Alex lightly on the shoulder.

'Mum, are you insane! Why did you do that? *How* did you do that?' Alex blundered over her words.

Mum tucked her hair behind her ears as she tried to find her composure. Her chest was still heaving.

'Whether it be a man or a ghost or some weird shit like that, I'm not losing any more people. Now get the shovel.'