

Beyond the Doubting of Shadows

Too many events in a man's life are invisible. Unknown to others as our dreams—Anne Michaels
Still more remarkable is the fact that our knowledge changes too, some items emerging, while others are lost—Plato

An emeritus professor of dead languages in the School of Classics, Sophie Ivy Reed knew, but had not realised, that she was like a moth following a beam of light directly to its source. For some years now, there had been something like a huge shadow in her life, a space she had entered step by step, slowly extending herself into the dark. She had dreamed of incarnate gestures in stories she'd written from that place. And when he arrived at the end of summer, she saw that she was scared, or perhaps more excited than scared, though the excitement was toned down by a certain sense of duty.

She had known of his coming, of course. She had thought his decision odd, rash, reckless, even. Who would ditch a successful surfing career at the drop of a hat? On closer inspection—of the act, not the wording—she could understand, for she'd done it herself. But who would choose the country campus of one of Australia's oldest sandstone universities to study poetry and philosophy? *That* was beyond her understanding. However, it was his decision and she had had to accept it despite—or perhaps *because* of, her having been instrumental to it through some fluke of fate.

Professor Sophie I Reed, author of *A Stardust Audience*, was trying not to dwell on this, the day his flight was expected. At 3.00 pm, she decided to take a short walk and headed for the library. It was a hot day, and the harsh, beating sun came out amid the high branches of the gum trees on the university car park, scorching and spreading out with a flush of chrome green after the recent rain. There were gusts of wind blowing gum blossoms. Sunshine everywhere.

Sophie spotted him from the car park on her way back to the Classics building and felt like calling out his name. But she checked herself as she checked her watch, ashamed of her own impulsiveness. After all, he was only due to land at 3.00 pm. And according to her watch, he was just getting through customs at 3.14 pm. She hurried back to her building and up the stairs to her office.

Confidently, she turned the door handle.

Now that was strange.

There he was in the corner of her right eye, defying the laws of time.

She recognised him intuitively—the way he moved with intent purpose.

Sophie Reed tried to make herself dislike him. She looked for signs: the arrogant French upbringing cleverly disguised among impeccable manners, the Californian accent, the loudness of his presence in her office, the goatee, the perfectly aligned white teeth, the gorgeous elf ears that were surely pinned back, the pierced earlobes, the tattoo, and above all, the smell of cigarette that clung to him.

But what she found she actually disliked as she listened to his story was some obscure affinity.

Like herself, he was a nocturnal migrant, crossing from coast to coast, with nothing at the end of his journey but a guiding light to divert him from his course. And this set off distant alarm bells.

Because in their conversations he constantly made references to Plato's arguments and use of metaphor in *The Republic*, Sophie instructed him to read *The Symposium*, and write a critique of Socrates' argument with Diotima.

Soon, though, Sophie would delight when he came whistling past her office. Soon, she would welcome his slipping in unconcealed through the door at any time of day to ask questions and answer just as many; to destroy all that seemed evident and make mere solitude exhilarating, complete, irrelevant. She would learn that you think by means of synthetic images that follow each other at great speeds, landing every now and then on linguistic fields, though never staying there for too long and flying off again to return to a grammatical airport. Soon, she would notice something in his voice, or perhaps in his manner, that spoke of loss. And this would move her. Then she would ask herself who was indeed this guy with a mind the size of a planet and the wild wonder and buried grief of a child.

Soon, after the heat had died down in the evening, she would drive out slowly, listening to *Oasis* all the way through the blue cloudless sky and the light so dazzling. At times, she would have to stop on the side of the free-way and shut her eyes. She would then listen to the noise of traffic and study the map in her heart and conscience. And she would ask herself who would not be grateful for this?

On campus, there is a small agora between the North and South buildings on the far side of the lake. In autumn, Sophie made a habit of going there after the day's work to stop what had become a constant moving back between two lights. Sometimes, she would watch the sunset there so that she would not get lost on the way home. She saw that when the sun is setting behind the hills and the light is falling gently on the stones, the air takes the shape of dreams.

One day, as she leaned across the rail from where you can see the hills breaking the sky, she smelled the smoke that hovers about him. He waved at her and before she registered that the hills hung mirrored in their shades like a poem flaunting its metaphor, he was leaning on the rail next to her. He jerked back and pulled out a packet of cigarettes from his breast pocket, took one and lit it. When he flicked his

lighter, she saw an unblinking star, but dismissed the image. Replacing the packet to its home, he lifted his head and looked at her. He took one drag from his cigarette and exhaled, giving her a small nod. He took another puff. She didn't miss the satisfied sigh he let out, watched the grey tendrils pour out of the lit end of the cigarette, reaching out into the space around it like a living thing. As the cigarette shrunk, she felt a wave of heat rush through her body and a violent desire for one. He scrunched the remnant of the cigarette on the rail and threw the butt into one of the small bins across from the agora. He sat down on the top step of the circular flight of steps and lit two cigarettes. He passed her one as she sat down next to him. The sun was gone but the evening was warm.

Any moment now he would glow next to her. She dismissed the thought, like a cliché. Then all of a sudden, he turned to her and said, his voice gravelly:

Are you ok SIR?

I thought you'd know.

I don't understand.

It seems we read each other's minds.

And finish off each other's sentences.

True, but absurd.

A total silence came about. Almost strident. Discordant. At the far end of the building on the North side of the agora a light came on. Sophie thought of Rembrandt and of paintings where the scenery would only return light that came through its windows. Light and shadow, thought to be real, yet in reality, ghostly, unreal and oneiric. The conversation could have ended there, but to break the spell she asked:

Where does that light come from?

Badly phrased question. You should ask *where do those shadows come from?*

A black light, angelic and cold, she said flatly, where the imagination burns through, undazzled and dazzling.

He burst into laughter, taking in the irony. Then more silence, a silence louder than the previous one, only interrupted by the screech of an owl somewhere in the distance, moved.

What was that noise?

Wrong again. You ought to say *where do these silences come from?*

And who do you think you are, *Grand Jacques?*

I am a question corrector.

It seems you come up with a new job every day.

Fallacious interference. I mean inference.

Anyway, do shadows speak?

No, but their spokespersons do. Which means shadows remain silent, but their silence can be heard.

Well, then, where do those shadows come from?

It depends; some shadows are merely the exact compensation of light, its natural consequence, or its double.

That may be so, but in this kind of scene, right now, the light is beyond the pale.

Why so Irish?

Pardon?

Well, there are shadows and shadows.

I thought that all shadows belonged to the same half-light or *penumbra*.

Ooh. Only in the same way that all lights are part of the same blinding light. Light blinds, shadows show.

Though Sophie Ivy Reed wanted to say she didn't need a philosopher at that point, she did not answer anything to that. She ventured a glance at him and saw that even in this twilight he seemed to be shining. She took a drag from her cigarette and watched the thin bluish smoke she exhaled drift. She could sense him shifting next to her and was aware of the texture of his clothes and of some slight rustle. Soft-rough, like skin needing a shave. She felt the voiceless ending stick in her own throat, so half-closed her eyes.

At that moment a form took shape and shone from the shadows of her childhood: there, in the sun-drenched sand of the Sahara, not the Australian agora or its desert, stood the Little Prince.

Dominique Hecq