

Shadow in the Night

By Richard McMaster

*When we embrace our shadow we become whole,
the imperfect becomes the perfect.
Our self emerges with our soul.*

Depak Chopra

Day One

Luke felt like a stalker waiting for Elizabeth to appear, the woman he loved whose life he was about to ruin. Of the major traumatic life events, being fired from a job, facing murder, divorce, the death of a family member and jail time—any one of which can threaten your very existence—he was about to face them all.

His day had an ominous beginning. A late morning dream was chased scurrying into the dark corners of the bedroom by a screeching alarm clock. The dream was about a five-minute seemingly inconsequential event in his life.

Last summer Luke was sitting on the back patio when a male Baltimore Oriole crashed into one of the sliding glass doors and fell to the cedar deck at his feet. A dying bird dream was supposed to be an omen that someone close to you was going to die. What had happened? Did the bird see the reflection of an unexplored blue sky calling him to innocent carefree flight into what seemed like heaven?

The event must have affected him more than he thought. In his dream the bird was knocked out. Opening his eyes, the bird stood on wobbly feet, trembling, and then stuck out his flaming orange chest, shook his black feathers, looked at Luke and flew away. In real life he had died.

Now, Luke was sitting in his car in the Bainbridge Country Club parking lot in the pitch black of an overhanging tree, as far away as possible from the display of Christmas lights. Normally, by this time the entire parking lot would be dark except for the lighted cobblestone walkway that snaked from the asphalt surface to the two bronze-and-glass entrance doors.

Tonight there was an explosion of red and blue lights outlining the building and a menagerie of white twinkling lights that painted the ornamental trees. In the open lawn next to the sidewalk a full-sized plaster Santa sat in an authentic-looking Santa's sleigh, illuminated by red and green flood lights, and eight lifelike reindeer, plus Rudolph, rising up atop artificial snow.

The dream quickly forgotten, his day began like an airplane taking off, building speed and momentum and breaking its attraction to earth, streaking skyward then soaring. Having made some important decisions yesterday, he'd found last night's sleep came the instant his head hit the pillow. The company bonus this year was going to be the best ever and Elizabeth's

surprise Christmas present, a trip to Hawaii, he was sure would bring tears of joy. Christmas was just twelve days away and the weather man predicted snow. Nothing put Elizabeth in the spirit more than a white Christmas season, especially when soon they'd be off to Hawaii.

On his way to work, without thinking, Luke found himself in an exit lane by mistake and in the side-mirror he noted cars stretched as far back as he could see. As if the drivers sensed his dilemma, they began to move up to the cars in front of them, leaving him stranded, forcing him to an undesirable exit and a long turnaround in heavy traffic to get back on the freeway. He could see it in the small upturned corners of their mouths as they passed and refused to make eye contact. He knew they sensed his distress. Suddenly, a silver Taurus slowed and a hand appeared outside the window motioning him back into the lane. Later, when Luke passed him they made eye contact, he smiled and nodded thank you.

When Luke arrived at the office, the security attendant at the far end of the parking lot waved to him. At first he wasn't sure what he was indicating he should do, or if he was waving at him, but as he inched forward the attendant directed him into a parking place right next to the door.

Lately, his routine was to park in the back of the parking lot, but how could he pass up such a primo a parking spot? Business life was conspiring against personal life: stress, business lunches, dinners and now even breakfast meetings filled his everyday calendar and the combination was expanding his waistline. He thanked the parking lot security officer, even shook his hand, and then made his way to the office front entrance.

A simple act of kindness can put you in a positive frame of mind and set off a chain reaction of smiles, handshakes and events that last until you reach the uncomfortable tipping point of reality. Today, when Luke's day reached its high point a little voice whispered that good comes in bunches, and bad too, and while the good was pouring out the voice murmured, as clearly as if his shadow self were standing right next to him, that something bad was peeking around the corner awaiting its turn to pounce. Poof, like the flip of a light switch, his world view was no longer so bright.

Luke's health was screaming out in protest, but still he had lingering youthful thoughts that told him his body was impervious to the slashes and gashes of overindulgence and lack of exercise. During these past six years, the closest he came to exercising was driving a golf cart in occasional rounds of business golf. He kept telling himself this schedule was temporary and that he could succumb to the body beating for a little longer. But the time had flown by.

Fighting back, his usual routine now was taking the stairs to the third floor. The first half of his climb he gobbled up two stairs at a time. At the turn at floor two he was still practically skipping up the stairs and startled everyone in the hallway when he burst through the third floor office door—huffing and puffing. Everyone greeted him with a smile, like it was his birthday and they were planning a surprise party, or because he had a latté-foam mustache. Looking back it was hard to believe a day that started so good could turn so sour. The random play of life, good days and bad mixed together, top days and bottom days, all was a click away.

The day continued getting better right on through the lunch hour. As if he were tapped on the shoulder and a little voice whispered in his ear warning him, he hesitated before entering the intersection. The truck that ran the red light never slowed. He could see the driver's face as he passed by, staring blankly ahead, as if he were sleep driving. The truck would have hit him broadside.

After lunch Luke's assistant entered his office and announced Peter wanted to see him in his office. Peter was CEO of Community Medical Center and the thought of meeting with him

soured the day. Four o'clock meetings were dreaded by the employees. Customarily that was the time of day when bad news hit. Luke delivered bad news on Friday afternoons as well. It seemed the humane thing to do.

Given that his day had progressed beautifully so far, he practically skipped to the meeting. Besides, even though Milton hadn't given him a financial report for months, he knew his division's year-end results had to be good. The six-month report suggested at year end the volume of procedures and revenues would far exceed his expectations. Without the financials he didn't know how good or why. It seem liked a mistake, but even Peter would be pleased and it could even help fatten his Christmas bonus.

When he entered Peter's office his mood shifted. Like he was walking into a morgue, the chill of gloom hit him as he stepped toward the empty chair at the table. He studied the solemn faces seated there: Peter; Doctor William Charlton, chief medical officer, an employee of Peter's; and Humphrey Treadwater, hospital board chairman. Humphrey was the most important man he had ever met. Humphrey was in his seventies, tall, tan and athletic-thin with butch-short silver hair. He wore a confident benevolent smile everywhere he went. His sense of responsibility for the community was well known and admired. The first time they met he'd made a lasting impression on Luke—he was not a man to be out-thought or dismissed.

Seeing Humphrey sitting there caused Luke to stop and take pause. This was the moment his day turned and his life was changed forever.

Tonight, twelve days before Christmas, Elizabeth would preside over the end of the year country club board meeting. She often said how much she hated the job, even as her success was acclaimed by members who had elected her President for an unprecedented five years in a row. She said it was more like jail duty. She asserted it ran counter to her real life, her true calling.

When she wasn't disguised as the elected leader of the dress-for-success beef-eaters and palm-pressers of Sentinel County, she was a server in a food bank assembly line or was doing laundry for the St. Albert's homeless shelter. Most of her energy, though, was devoted to Ralph's Tree House, her greatest love, alongside her daytime companion Ralph, Luke's competition as Luke often joked, the founder of the organization.

Luke had several times provided Ralph his business expertise and they had become friends. Ralph Parson was born in Hollywood, California. Luke teased he must have had movie star parents because of his Ricardo Montalban accent and good looks. He was the founder and director of a charity formed to keep families together in times of crisis. As Elizabeth first explained, when families entered the last stage, lost their jobs, house, and everything they owned, when the water was swirling faster and faster seeking the black bottom of a drain, there was Ralph's Family Tree House. Ralph's Tree House provided shelter so the entire family could live under one roof.

Ralph had purchased an old brick and stone mansion on the edge of town in a heavily secluded forested twenty-five acres. Ironically, the house was originally owned by a land baron in the late eighteen hundreds, who by reputation went through wives like men in those times went through whiskey. Like the families it served, the mansion was on its last leg until he restored it. In the beginning, Luke stayed clear of this aspect of Elizabeth's life, knowing his best contribution was to keep his mouth shut so as not to say anything stupid like "hey, they got themselves into this mess!"

Tonight Elizabeth's contributions to humanity were to deal with country club members who were late on their dues, a fist fight in the ladies locker room that ended in stitches, issuing

golf etiquette proclamations to remind members that golf was a gentlemen's game, reviewing course maintenance reports, the planning committee update on a locker room remodeling initiative, and supervising the hiring of a new chef.

Now in addition to the five-year sentence she had been serving, some in the community were asking her to run for political office. Presiding over a Country Club Board was the perfect proving ground for politics, access to money and schmoozing to get things done.

Sitting in the dark car at the far end of the parking lot waiting for a woman to appear could prompt a call for the police if she didn't come out soon. For an hour now Luke had lingered in the black stillness and the longer he was there the more he hoped the meeting would go later into the night. This was the friendliest and quietest spot he had found since he left the office on this roller coaster day.

Normally, he wouldn't have waited in the car so long. He would have gone in and rescued her from one of the hangers-on board members, probably Bob Henry. Clinger was his nickname, used only behind his back. Bob was always the last to leave a meeting and when he talked to you he liked to get up close, touch you and lean awkwardly within kissing range. A curious man, he reminded Luke of Shultz, from the television show *Hogan's Heroes*, heavysset and disheveled. Bob was a lawyer who loved an argument, any argument, and insisted on having the last word, even after the meeting had ended. Elizabeth said the poor guy was just starved for conversation.

Tonight Luke had no desire to break up the meeting and get stuck in a looping conversation with Clinger, the kind where he would start scanning the room in search of rescue, and wishing he weren't so damn polite. He especially didn't want to engage in a hold-your-breath marathon discussion about some meaningless city government issue, like the potholes on Grant Avenue. He'd spent an anxious hour discussing those city potholes with the man last time.

As Luke concentrated on the country club entrance, expecting his wife to appear any minute, he mused that at least now his day couldn't get any worse. Elizabeth was such a pragmatist. She would add sense to his day. He wanted to see her and talk to her, smell her Eternity scent, but at the same time there was a part of him that also didn't want that. He wasn't sure how to break the news to her. Maybe it was just as simple as when she got into the car and asked how his day went, he could lighten the moment by quipping, "Could have been worse if there had been a code amber."

When Luke saw the brass-and-glass entrance door of the Country Club swing open he gasped. He was surprised to hear his own unexpected release of air break the car's silence. When determining it was a false alarm, he slouched back into the car seat. The dashboard lights dimly illuminated the interior. He could hear and feel his heart beating against his chest.

Once again he was wishing she wouldn't come out before he could recompose himself, but as soon as the thought drifted into the night, like magic she suddenly appeared in the darkness with no warning. There was a man at her side. They stopped twenty yards away. The man turned away to survey the pitch-dark parking lot and then leaned in close to her and affectionately clutched her arm before he turned and walked off toward his car. *Who was that?*

Fallen leaves scurried at her feet as she shuffled toward the car. She pulled the trench coat collar up around her face to shield against the north wind that was nipping at her, a warning of winter days ahead. She cinched her belt tight around her waist as she slid into the seat next to him and sighed.

"Hope that sigh wasn't for me," Luke said, trying to begin on a light note.

“No. Funny meeting.” She shivered and gazed blankly out the window. “It went longer than it should have. More and more I hate doing this. There’s no reality in that room. None. All the good air is snuffed out by ego and greed.” She sighed again.

“Who was that guy?” Luke couldn’t shake the image of the man reaching out and touching her affectionately in the parking lot just minutes earlier.

Elizabeth shifted in her seat and pushed her purse down in front of her to the floor.

“The guy in the parking lot.”

“George Strong. You remember, he wants me to run for city council.”

“And?”

“Of course I declined. Told him I enjoyed my sanity too much.”

“Friendly guy,” Luke mumbled, just loud enough to be heard.

“How was your day?” she asked warmly.

Thankfully, she couldn’t see his face in the dark car. Since leaving the office he had prepared himself to tell her, but now he wasn’t ready. Her question was expected and he had rehearsed his answer, but the words stuck in his throat. “Not good. Horrible, actually.”

As he turned the five-year-old silver Impala to drive out of the parking lot, the headlights found the proper lane and a half-block later they came to a stop sign. Luke used the distraction as an excuse to peek at her in the dim illumination of the dashboard lights while checking for traffic. She was staring straight ahead through glassy eyes beyond the end of the headlight beams. Her mouth was slightly parted. Maybe she didn’t hear him. By her silence it was obvious she had something on her mind—her own announcement, perhaps. Wouldn’t that be the icing on the cake if she had some bad news of her own?

She’s probably resigning from the country club board. She has such a bright future, but dislikes it so. They had joined the club a few years ago and had stretched their budget and poured themselves into the life they found there. Elizabeth was popular and moved quickly into a leadership role. In spite of that, they often discussed whether they were country club material. As a golfer Luke found the challenge of playing well-groomed fairways, open style rough and manicured greens was a childhood dream come true. By reputation the Bainbridge Country Club Golf Course was the top course in the state and for Luke, joining was an ‘I’ve arrived’ moment.

The road was narrow and winding for a three-mile stretch. Usually Luke dipped the car into the curves with the sway of a race car driver, but tonight the car felt heavy and the curves came more like corners.

“How was your day?” Luke broke the silence.

“Remember that couple? That old couple I told you about who were placed in assisted living last month? You remember; they were found barely alive. They were trapped in a home they had owned for fifty years, a drafty, cold and damp, dangerous place, in need of numerous repairs, falling down around them. In love as if it was their wedding day, more than death itself they feared they would lose their house, even as it was killing them.

“Someone told them they wouldn’t be able to stay together so they would not let anyone in their home for fear it would all be taken away. They hadn’t slept in their own bedroom for five years because of a leaky roof, so he slept in a chair and she beside him on the sofa.” Her voice cracked. “Well, Jenny had a stroke today and is in the hospital. She’s not going to make it. I don’t think he can live without her.”

Ordinarily Luke kept quiet when she discussed such matters and just tried to be supportive. He felt bad for them, but he blurted out, “I’m sure it happens all the time.” As soon as his words hung suspended above the hum of the engine, he regretted them.

She continued un-fazed. “They didn’t have to keep living that way, forgotten, out of sight, out of mind, like so many other seniors citizens. Do you know what happens to the elderly when they don’t have family or advocates looking out for them? They die.”

Luke was focused on telling her what happened and did not want to continue the discussion about senior citizens and risk any further insensitivity on his part, so they drove in silence.

This was the year. Their five-year-old main car, an Impala, was paid off and their heads were above water. They were going to take a week vacation this year. Their last vacation was five years ago. He was counting on his Christmas bonus this year.