

SHADOWMANCY

JASON FRANKS





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For Yuriko

Act I.

— THE KEY IN THE WALL —

Even before I went to the Academy, my name was the source of my problems.

People would ask it of me, and I would tell them.

“Quay.”

They would ask me again, and I would repeat myself.

“Like, what you put in a lock?”

“Quay.” I did not offer them an alternative definition.

“What’s your surname, Quay?”

“That is my surname.”

“Then what’s your Christian name?”

“I am not a Christian.”

Then they would ask if I was trying to be funny. I was not. Humor is not something to which I am inclined. My interrogators would nod slowly and

consider their next question, which would invariably be: "Where you from, Quay?"

"New York," I would reply.

I would hold the same conversation, again and again, with everybody I knew. Teachers and classmates and neighbors and curious strangers.

It was a game to them. I would hear them talking about me—on the sidewalks, on the stoops, in the lunchroom, and across the schoolyard. Sometimes they muttered, sometimes they snickered openly.

"What's your name? Where you from?"

"Quay. New York."

They were the only answers I had. Even if I had cared to find out more, I don't believe my parents would have told me.



My mother was a good mother, I suppose. Certainly, she did all of the motherly things required for such a designation. She clothed me and kept me clean and made sure that I was fed and sheltered. She kept me, period. She said all the things that mothers say to their children. It was only the volume of secrets she kept that was in disproportion. Not that she had any choice in the matter.

My mother never allowed me to wander more than two blocks from home. The house, the school, the market, the deli—that was the extent of my world. Every time I tried to sneak away, she would somehow intercept me. Some would say that my mother was always there for me, but in my specific circumstances it was literally uncanny.

Reading was my only escape. I hated school. I had no interest in playing with my schoolmates. I didn't want friends. I despised the television. But books...

Our house was crammed with books, and I read every one of them from cover to cover. I devoured the contents of the school library like a swarm of locusts. Fiction, non-fiction. Magazines, journals, newspapers, comics. Manuals, textbooks, scholarly tracts, sale catalogues. Reading was my only escape, and I resented anything that came between me and that activity. My intellect was the only part of me allowed to wander.

By the time I was ten, I'd given up all hope of freedom. My entire universe was contained inside that two-block radius.

Unless my father was home.



My father traveled for his work. He was a teacher, a professor at some remote, but prestigious, university. That was all anybody knew about him, and nobody cared to know more. At the time I did not think that was strange.

I can't say that I liked my father, but I did look forward to his visits. During the few short weeks of the year he was home, things were different in the house. My mother was different.

It was as though someone had flipped a switch on her, as though she had been turned off. She would sit in front of the TV, or lie in bed and sleep, almost from the moment that he came home. My mother would greet my father when he came and went, but

I never saw them hold a conversation. Only when he left did she return to her usual self. She still looked young, but she was frayed on the inside. Worn through by doing her duty to the exclusion of all else. She had no more friends than I did.

I had read enough books and glimpsed enough TV to think that I understood the adult world. I thought she was drinking or popping pills, and I knew it was my father's fault—although I never saw my father do anything bad to her. He never so much as raised his voice.

What he had done to her was far worse than I could have guessed.



Some people are fearsome because they are fierce. They are commanding and assertive; they demand that you acknowledge their presence and their mastery. Others are fearsome because they are quiet. They demand nothing from you, but you know their mastery yet. My father was a quiet man.

Our house was always a quiet place. There was seldom conversation between my mother and me, and my father spoke even less. The only thing he required of us was that we kept the record player on. Always Mozart. To my knowledge those records were the only pleasure he permitted himself, though he could have taken whatever he wanted.

I never learned to appreciate music, but those records moved me in a way that I have seldom felt. Perhaps it was just that I associated Mozart so strongly with my father's presence. Perhaps at those

times I was happy. Perhaps it was just the thrill of fear. Even now I cannot rightly identify the emotion.

Although his visits were supposed to be vacations, my father would spend most of his time in his study, working. My mother would rouse herself to cook and clean and do whatever was necessary to look after the house. Neither one of them had attention for me, but I did not need or want it. I had more time to read when my father was at home.

Some nights, when he became restless, my father would leave the house. He would be gone for hours. Sometimes, he would take me with him.

Together we would walk the streets. Ride the subways. There was never a destination, just a circuit that ended where it had begun. I lived for the journey, but I dreaded the return home. We traveled in silence. I knew better than to ask questions of him.

Teacher or not, my father was a man of few words. He would speak only to issue instructions: "Give me two tokens," to the lady in the subway booth, or "Come along now," if I lingered too long at the window of a bookstore. Nothing more.

We stayed on the streets. Walking, just walking. Always walking. We never browsed inside any stores or stopped in any restaurants or cafés.

I came to believe that there was some meaning to these journeys that I could not understand. Some pattern described by the route we took, by names of the places we went and the trains we rode; some hidden significance in even my father's few utterances. I did not want affection from him. All I wanted was meaning.

After a couple of weeks in Brooklyn, my father would pack his duffle bag and go. He never said goodbye to me or to my mother. He'd be gone for six months or more. He never told us when to expect him back, and we never did expect him.

It usually took a full day for my mother to recover herself. I never tried to sneak outside my assigned territory during this time. I suppose I was recovering too. We didn't discuss it. We didn't discuss my father or anticipate his comings and goings. It was beyond our control and beyond our ken.

When I turned thirteen, I decided that the next time he came and went, I would go with him.



I didn't ask permission. My father was not a man you could ask for things. Furthermore, I knew that if he explicitly refused me, I would never be able to leave. I would be confined inside that two-block radius forever.

From the living room window of our apartment, I watched him walk down the steps. The Mozart record was still playing. My father had his duffle slung over his shoulder, and he did not look back. I was sure he knew that I was watching him, so I waited until he had turned the corner before I went out the door after him.

It was a summer night. All I had on were jeans and a t-shirt and sneakers. I thought myself fully prepared for whatever journey was to come. I had the sum total of my earthly wealth in my hip pocket—a five-dollar bill I had liberated from my

mother's purse and one dollar eighty in coins that I had collected from the change slot in the vending machine in the school cafeteria, from the gutter, from inside the sofa.

Six dollars and eighty cents. I did not think it would last me long, but I hoped that it would demonstrate my self-sufficiency if my father called it into question.

I shadowed my father, moving past the darkened shop fronts, the alley mouths, the tenement stoops. We passed the deli, then the school. This was the furthest I had ever been, unaccompanied.

There was nobody about.

I watched him go down into the subway station. I did not turn the corner in time to see him put a token into the turnstile, but I was certain he had not stopped to buy one on his way down. Perhaps he already had the token with him. I thought it more likely that the turnstile had simply let him through.

As soon as I judged it safe, I slipped under the turnstile. I did not want to risk losing him while I bought a token, and I did not want him to hear the turnstile twist.

I followed him up to the platform. Here there were people. A street girl. A drunken merchant banker. A bum who was likely responsible for the reek at the bottom of every ramp. Perhaps he was marking his territory, like a dog. Perhaps he just used whichever wall was closest when he had the urge to piss. I was homeless now, too, I supposed. I felt the urge to urinate.

I boarded the train in the carriage behind the one my father chose. I didn't know where it was going.

I didn't care. I just wanted to go somewhere. Away from the house, away from the deli, away from the school, away from what was left of my mother. It wasn't that I wanted to be with my father, it was just that he was the only person I knew who ever went anywhere.



My father disembarked at a downtown station. I followed him out of the train and up the stairs to the street.

The city was full of people, despite the late hour, and it took me a moment to locate him in the sudden crowd. My father had already crossed the road and was striding on, past a row of brightly lit storefronts. These were nothing like the shabby grocery marts and pawn shops and pizza parlors of my Brooklyn neighborhood. These shops showed jewelery, watches, suits, and cocktail dresses behind armored glass windows. There were brand names on the awnings and limousines in the streets. My father had never brought me to this part of town in our late-night wanderings.

He seemed a different man walking these streets, dressed in his dark suit, his black hair tied back into a ponytail and the old duffle bag slung over his shoulder. For all that I resembled him, he seemed a stranger to me then. He looked sinister, capable of both wonders and horrors. More capable than I could ever hope to be.

Around a corner we came to a street lined with fancy restaurants. Men in tuxedos, women in

evening gowns. They might as well have been space aliens. People did not dress like this in my neighborhood. My father, in contrast, looked as if he belonged here—a prince who had come to survey a distant part of his kingdom. He might have owned every place, every person, every car and tree and streetlamp within his vision.

My father turned abruptly and disappeared into an alley I hadn't even noticed was there. I followed him.

At the end of the alley was a decaying old building. A sign in the window named it the "Key in the Wall Ristorante Italiano." The light behind the glass door was warmer and duller than the cold, bright lights on the main street. I pulled the door open and went inside.

Plastic tables, covered with cheap checkered tablecloths. Laminated menus, paper napkins. Jars of Parmesan cheese and chili flakes. Guttering candles in mismatched glass holders. There was no maître d' to intercept me at the door.

None of the few patrons looked up at my father as he passed by them. He turned into a corridor. A sign indicated that it led to the gentlemen's room.

The corridor was unpainted. Exposed pipes ran the length of both unplastered walls. Cockroaches skittered in every darkened recess. My father picked his way between the stacks of spare chairs, potted plants, broken appliances, boxes of non-perishable kitchen supplies. He moved past the restrooms and went on to the end of the hallway, which was strung with beads like the entrance to a head shop or a pornographic bookstore. I followed him through.

As I passed through the bead curtain, my surroundings became...strange. The exposed pipes bent and branched and pulsed as I went on. The walls crumbled into loose bricks and cement dust, and the linoleum floor buckled beneath me, leading down into a darkness that was neither a cavern nor a pit, neither void nor abyss. It was deeper than the ocean, but shallower than the sky. It was a space that lay between other spaces.

In later years I would come to know it well.

As I followed the path, my field of vision narrowed. I could see no further ahead than my father. I prayed he would not look behind him. But a part of me wished that he would, and take my hand.

My father slung the duffle bag off his shoulder and carried it in one hand. That was when his clothing began to change. The weave of his suit jacket rippled, and the pinstripes ran out. The collar rolled down into a tabard; the shoulders softened, and the cuffs drooped into scallops. He went on without breaking stride, now clad in a sweeping robe.

The duffle bag grew legs and became a beast: a quadruped with the armor of a lizard and the grace of a cat. It loped ahead at the end of a length of chain that had once been the duffle's handle.

A surge of exultation drove the fear and loneliness from me. Perhaps I would die here. Perhaps I would live to find some new world, some new life. In either case, I had won my fondest desire. I had escaped my two-block prison.

Beneath my feet the linoleum became concrete, then bare earth, then loose rock. The path began to

rise again, bending one way and then the other. The stone became smooth, and then polished.

Slowly the way spread open again, and the space around me unfolded into a bright, open sky. With my field of vision restored, I found that I had emerged from the interstices to a plateau high in the mountains. I did not know which mountains they might be, that were walking distance from Manhattan. It was cold enough that I immediately began to shiver. There was no snow on the rocky ground, although all of the neighboring peaks were white with it.

A sea of clouds, golden in the twilight, prevented me from seeing the valley floor below. When I looked behind me, I could see no indication of the strange path that had brought me there.

Cut marble steps rose from the far side of the plateau, leading up to a ziggurat carved directly into the mountainside. It resembled a Cambodian temple or a Tibetan monastery, but there was something Brutalist about its lines, which were sheer and sharp and severe. Even in the dusk, light reflected harshly from the bare white stone, making it hard to look upon the building directly. I wondered how brightly it shone at night.



As my father mounted the steps with the lizard-cat restrained on a tight leash, a figure resolved at the top of the stairs. It was a tall, elderly man, clad in robes that were cut more simply than my father's.

"Ah, Professor Quay."

My father stopped dead in his tracks, but when he replied it was in his usual, uninflected tone. "Chancellor."

The Chancellor's hair was long and white and his face seamed and gaunt, but he stood as straight as a soldier on parade. Only the rectangular glasses resting on his nose gave any hint of infirmity.

I had never seen such a visage before. To this day, I have never seen that cast of features duplicated, or that set of expressions. The Chancellor was from some race long gone from the world to which I belong. Some race that was no longer represented anywhere—not even in Brooklyn.

"Let us not waste time on pleasantries, Professor Quay," said the Chancellor. "I know what you have done."

"And what crime is so heinous that you have seen fit to name me for it?"

"You have kept a family, Professor. Worse, you have attempted to conceal them from us."

It was the only time in my life I had ever seen my father hesitate. "It has taken you thirteen years to penetrate my wards."

The Chancellor shook his head. "Professor Quay, I did not penetrate your wards. *He* did."

My father turned and looked down the steps. The expression that came upon his face when he saw me there was not a kind one. But he said nothing. Instead, he turned back to the Chancellor and cocked his head. "So what?"

The lizard-cat at his side hissed. Something dripped through its teeth and sizzled on the marble stairs. Nitric acid.

“So what?” he said again. “I remain the greatest magician this Academy has yet produced. When you are gone, I will be the Chancellor. All the faculty know it.”

The Chancellor stared at my father. “I am not going anywhere, Professor.”

A breeze stirred the Chancellor’s robes. My father fell.

He landed, sprawling, on his back. His head struck the edge of a step, and I heard bone crack. My father lay where he had fallen, dressed once more in his suit, with the duffle bag crumpled beside him. His eyes were rolled back in his head, and blood dribbled from his mouth.

But it was not the fall that had taken him. His face had been empty before he had hit the ground.

The Chancellor turned to me. “Now then,” he said. “Come here, boy. I wish to examine you.”

I mounted the stairs as my father had before me. I stopped with my feet at the same level as his head. I became aware of more figures arrayed behind the Chancellor, but his eyes transfixed me and I could not so much as glance at them. I have never seen eyes like those, before or since. The irises were dark behind the lenses of his glasses, but they cast some kind of colorless radiance that chased the shadows from his features.

“You are a bold one, young master Quay. Talented, as your father before you. Would you study here at the Academy? Would you seek the Mysteries?”

“Yes.”

“It will not be easy for you. Perhaps you will find power here, perhaps only misery. If you choose to

study at the Academy you will have to give up your freedom. Your place in the world. If you fail, you may never earn them back."

This did not seem like much of a sacrifice. I had never been free. I had never had a place in the world. "All right."

"You will also have to relinquish your name."

"All right."

The Chancellor peered down at me over the rims of his spectacles. "Convince me, Master Quay. Why should I believe that you are willing to give up the name that your father, apparently, could not?"

"Because I don't want it."

"And why is that?"

I did not look down at my father. I knew he could neither see nor hear me. "It belongs to him."

"I see." The Chancellor drew himself up again. "Your father..." He inhaled deeply as he considered his words. "Your father did not keep you because he loved you. Do you understand me, boy? Your father kept you because you were his property."

"I understand."

The Chancellor straightened his glasses. "The Academy does not permit families," he said. "The skills we teach here are far too dangerous. We cannot risk our Arts falling subject to some *dynasty*." He looked at my father. "Even base heredity is a corrupting influence. It is crucial that the discipline remains pure. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

The Chancellor continued to regard me. "You should not be here. You should not exist. I am

breaking the rules by allowing you this, but I will not make you pay for your father's failings."

At the time, it seemed like he was being generous.

I would give him cause to regret it.