

THE SHADES IN THE PHOTOGRAPH

By Mhani Alaoui

The photographer adjusted the camera lens. His soft suede boots sank in the mud and he grumbled under his breath. They were his best pair and more used to the city pavement than to the green, rolling pastures of the country. It was an unusual, uninspiring assignment but one which he could not have refused, for it was commissioned by *them*, by *him*, to be precise, and with much insistence. The photographer didn't understand the insistence or the choice of location. Mr. Woodlane had asked him to come to Green Mount and take a series of photographs of his young daughter, in the country light and air.

Mr. Woodlane had paid for his travels, taxi, ferry and train to the remote country home that was the pride of the Woodlane family. He, the urbane, cool photographer, who had fled the shameful country roads and the farmer's relentless poverty, had fled the land that never yielded enough, the hunger and want of the arid midlands, who would then only enjoy the grey of the city streets and the cool, icy lights of the city nights, the speakeasies and the bustling crowds, now stood with his boots deep in the mud to capture the pastoral fantasy of a wealthy man.

He wiped the thin film of dust off the lens of the Leica 1 his father had bought for him from a geologist who had come to take measurements and pictures of the rare rock formations in the midlands and had an old camera to spare. The father had dipped into his scant savings, one cold and difficult day, after finally understanding his son was not

made for the land nor the land for him, and that he would leave, without a doubt, to never return and that he couldn't bare to imagine his son out there without a tool in his hands. A tool that cast shadows and air, that was mere play of light and dark, but a mechanical tool nonetheless, a tool that sets fickle memories in stone, passing time into palpable truths, brought loved ones back into our midst, and that could turn a boy into a man. There was, the father said, his gnarled, worn hands pressed flat on the table between them, a future in this new tool, something between the horse and the tractor, if only his son would learn to use it.

The father's words held no meaning for the young man, they didn't appeal to him, nor did they resonate with him. They were nothing but the scattered words of a lonely old man. The photographer stared at his father's hands pressed on the large table that filled the kitchen, that was the most massive piece of furniture, apart from the father's bed that came with the mother when he married her, and that remained in the bedroom upstairs, even after the mother had left them.

He noticed how creased the hands were, how dusty the table, how crooked the wooden floor. He packed his suitcase and, in the early light of dawn, left his home and his father forever. He took the bus to the big city, to a small job at a specialty magazine.

He had put the Leica 1 away, and forgotten about it for months, until he heard news of his father's passing. It was then that the loneliness and cruelty of the big city bit at him. He could see his father's hands, the calloused, gnarled, tired hands of the unsuccessful, the laborious poor, showing him the secrets of the land, the skills his own father before him had taught him. And all he could do, his feet planted in the dust and grime, was look away, fixing a point on the horizon only he could see.

The young man tried to remember the father's face, but found he couldn't. He looked in his suitcase for pictures of him he may have packed and taken with him to the big city, but found he had none. And he couldn't, despite his best efforts, despite the little time since he had left the father's farm, remember his face. All he could remember were his hands resting on the table between them, the night before his departure.

He had given little thought to his father since that day when he had brushed his words aside, trudged on in the grey of the city, preferring to be poor here, in the center of the world, than there, in the midlands, where the isolation was great and time stood still.

He knew he wouldn't return to the midlands for the funeral. There was nothing and no-one waiting for him there, for the midlands knew how to decimate families when winter came, how to keep them away from each other, as the wolves' midnight howl rose high in the cool air and echoed through the plains.

As he was closing the suitcase, an object gleamed at him, from beneath the mess he had stuffed in there, for lack of space in his cramped studio. He pushed aside the paper and old clothes and found the Leica 1 his father had bought for him when he said he was leaving, without a proper workingman's skill, only a degree in history from a small midlands college, to find work in the big city.

The photographer turned the camera gently between his hands. He had followed the child around all morning, his camera hanging loosely at his side. The little girl was a bouncy child of seven dressed in velvet jacket and silk petticoat. He didn't think little girls still wore silk petticoats, and he was pretty sure they didn't, but he had come to understand that the wealthy bore their eccentricities as part of the liberties they took

with the world. He followed her through the rolling meadows that were her family's backyard, his suede boots sinking deeper and deeper into the mud. He watched as she played and slid happily in the wet grass, while her nurse admonished her to no avail.

Despite the time spent with her that morning, the photographer had not taken a single shot of the little girl. He could feel the mud seep inside his boots and into his socks and he didn't know how long he could remain outside.

The photographer had never seen a little girl like this one up close, only in magazines, or seated, poised, in their family parlors, when he, the up and coming photographer, was invited on the rare occasion to be shown to discerning friends and relations.

Still, he didn't take a single shot of the child. He slipped a cigarette between his lips and sat beneath a maple tree, his eyes straining against the sun.

The child's nurse asked when he would take a picture of the child, reminding him of the father's exigencies in all matters, especially those concerning his daughter. She then advised him, with the haughtiness of her old-fashioned profession, of the older employee towards the newer one, of the trusted worker towards the restless worker, to take many pictures, to allow their boss to choose the most pleasing ones. The photographer looked up at her, noted the tight-laced shoes and pencil thin outline she formed against the blue sky of a Green Mount morning.

The photographer became pensive. For men like Mr. Woodlane, he would never be an artist, or never simply an artist, always a man for hire, a pawn to his high game. But he had agreed to this assignment, he hadn't been forced to do it, or if he had, it was

by no justifiable means, for he had been attracted by his client's reputation and generous pay, and now he must do as he had been commissioned to do.

The photographer nodded and stood up. The nurse was already a vague figure running after the child. Her outline fragmented the heaving meadows and her stiff dress split the horizon in two.

Then he heard a man's voice echo in the distance. The voice had a deep, singsong quality to it, of the kind used to call across vast expanses, to break through its silence and to gather in the weak and the lost. The photographer turned to find a man walking across the field, a flock of sheep surrounding him.

As the man got closer, the photographer could see that he was a farmer of indistinct age, his clothes thinning at the edges, a leather hat placed firmly on his head. His face was wrinkled and brown, the color and texture of the earth that bore him. A beard, scarce and cropped, carved his features between light and shade. The man had the face of those used to hardships, closed and giving all at once.

The photographer felt a peculiar curiosity towards this man who, despite being in his natural element, had just entered a scene in which he didn't belong. The farmer was now close enough for the photographer to look into his eyes. They were grey and tired. They seemed to look inside and beyond him, as though the young, urban male in front of him simultaneously interested and mystified him. The photographer respected his aloofness, which he took for pride, and his directness, which he took for earnestness.

The expression in the man's eyes was, also, vaguely familiar to the photographer. Perhaps it was something he had captured or encountered, in the past.

The photographer walked towards him, his hand outstretched in greeting. The flock of sheep rubbed against his legs and ankles, but he didn't mind their hurriedness or their gruff, animal softness. The farmer too extended his hand and held the photographer's outstretched arm, at the elbow, before hesitantly stepping back. Something had caught his attention. He craned his head towards the pastures behind him.

It was then that the photographer too heard it: the excited shrieks and agitation of a child. The little girl was in the midst of the farmer's flock, running around the animals, trying to hold them as they moved away from her.

The nurse protested at the child's behavior and ordered her to stay away from the sheep, lest she ruin her clothes. But the little girl didn't pay her heed and continued her play, breathing in the fresh air and the sheep's warm, rough scent.

The farmer stood by awkwardly, trying to maintain the flock around him. He sometimes crossed the wealthy man's property to take his sheep to pasture, he explained to the photographer. It was a shortcut and he didn't think he was doing any harm, as the family rarely came to these parts and the home was closed for most of the year.

The photographer listened to him in silence, the camera weighing heavily on his chest. He wondered what this man must feel, he for whom the land was a world, to see that, for others, it was a mere, passing display of privilege. He wondered if he only understood this, or if he was too weighed down to see.

The nurse stopped the farmer's low rumble of words. She told the farmer to gather his flock. She told him that the child, the man's *child*, could get hurt, that the consequences of that would be dire for all those involved.

The farmer nodded hurriedly and explained he was passing through, that he meant no harm.

They were once again interrupted by the cries of the little girl. She had her arms around one of the sheep, round, ivory white, eyes as soft as snow. She wanted to play with it, she didn't want to be left alone, she would tell her Daddy that Nurse made the cute sheep go away. The nurse tried to talk to the child but that only infuriated her more.

The camera on the photographer's chest was becoming burdensome. Then it dawned on him. Ill-inspired, ill-equipped, in a mournful trap between rural poverty and high privilege, he had found a way out.

"Nurse. Let it be. If the man agrees, I have my picture".

The nurse looked at him, stared at him from beyond the loss of her own father and mother who had not been able to care for her, from beyond the brothers and sisters she would never see again, from beyond the dying of her chosen trade, from beyond the wasted years spent with a family that was not her own, and that would never be her own:

"If that is so, sir, please wait no further. Mr. Woodlane is waiting for results and I will be held responsible if things don't go as he wishes".

"Don't you worry, nurse. This job, I know well".

The photographer adjusted the camera while the farmer fidgeted, not certain of what was happening but confusedly feeling, as only men whose way of life has been intruded upon can, that the matter had something to do with him and that it would further hammer in how little say he had when it came to these wealthy folk who had chosen to lay down their weight, for a joyful, light-hearted moment, in his small corner of the world.

The photographer turned to the farmer and, pointing energetically at the animals, explained what it was he expected of him. In the meantime and oblivious of the scene unfolding in front of her, the little girl continued to play and laugh excitedly. The farmer chose a sheep from the flock and brought it shyly to the photographer. The sheep was fluffy, silvery white and its large brown eyes were soft. The farmer cradled the animal in his arms. He held her close, and his face expressed his worry and his determination.

The photographer gestured to the nurse to bring the child to them. The farmer then raised the child and carefully placed her on the animal. He then stood aside. The photographer tried to take a shot of the child sitting on the sheep but the animal wouldn't stand still, moving its head fearfully from left to right, its hooves planted firmly in the ground, breaking its soft, wet surface.

The photographer's began to lose his temper. Sweat now covered his back and thighs. His boots, he was certain of it, were permanently ruined. The farmer stepped in, held the anxious animal in his arms and soothed it, like a parent would a child. Once the animal had quieted down, the farmer put his knees to the ground, held the animal's face, and nodded to the photographer:

“Go on, do your business. She won't budge.”

The photographer raised his hand both to signify his okay and to ask for quiet. To his surprise, he felt a rush of emotion like none he had ever felt before. Or perhaps he had felt such a rush of emotion, when he was just a kid, when his mother still lived with them at the farm, and when he would follow his father breathlessly across the arid fields, which may not have been as arid back then, which may even have been green and moist, and when his father would take him by the hand and show him the seed and the sapling.

He took the picture of the bright-eyed, smiling seven year old with her velvet jacket and silk petticoat sitting astride the silvery white, gentle eyed sheep and of the serious-looking farmer, his left knee sunk in the mud, holding the animal's head under the chin to face the camera as he himself stared earnestly into it.

In the background were the gentle, rolling hills of Green Mount that encased the scene in an apparent tranquility belied by the wrinkles and furrows lining the farmer's face, foiled by the sudden, cool breeze that reminded one that after the softness of fall, came winter, strong and harsh, to destroy everything in its wake that was not kept safe behind closed doors and thick, wooden walls.

The photographer got up, stretched his long legs. He had poured his emotions into the shot, lightning-quick, breathless and pure. The Green Mount hills stretched, golden and endless, into the horizon, while the photographer reflected that, all in all, his morning had not been wasted.

The little girl sniffed the air and curled her nose: she must have sensed that something about the rolling hills was not what it seemed, that beneath the gentleness, the loveliness, was a harsh grownup-ness that went beyond what she could imagine,

except in her bed at night, when sudden nightmares of terrifying blackness and fierceness seized her and sent her crying in the cold arms of her nurse, and left her wondering where mum may well be that evening, after the goodnight kiss when the mother's perfume and white fur coat left her feeling small and of no consequence. And when her father's silver voice talking to his guests made her yearn for that voice against her ear, even though he rarely spent any time with her, let alone speak with her, though she tried to never doubt his love for her, as she lay in her bed, trying to sleep off her furious craving of it. So the child curled her nose against the sudden scent that came from the north and that whispered, as early as October, of the loneliness and aridness of winters in Green Mount, of the endless struggle and of the patience needed to survive when the soulless white canopy covered the earth.

Before anyone could stop her, the child slid from her unsteady mount and fell over. She sat in the mud, with her velvet jacket and silk petticoat spread around her, her cheeks a bright red, her hands pressed tightly against one another.

The farmer reached out to the child and helped her up. Her silk petticoat and velvet jacket were ruined. He held her carefully, her body far from his own, as though he thought their worlds should never get too close, but he did so with a tenderness few had ever shown her. Only then did the photographer notice that her shoulders were stooped and her eyes too large for her small face.

The nurse appeared at their side. She grabbed the child by the arm, her eyes grey and cold with anger. Her straight back and stiff neck belied her trembling hands and pursed lips. She leaned towards the child and said to her: "you dirty child. You dirty, filthy child. We're going inside, now. Scrub it all off. And the silk and velvet, ruined, like

everything you touch. Too good for you. Your poor mother. ” In an instant, she had shed her veneer of propriety and gentility to reveal the rage and roughness beneath.

The child lowered her head and the photographer guessed she was fighting the tears welling in her eyes. The nurse grabbed her arm and led her away from the simple, autumnal scene. They walked quickly through the meadows and into the columned house looming in the distance beneath the gathering clouds, while the photographer shot their receding backs.

Though the photographer did feel sorry for the child, he couldn't help feel an even deeper pity for the nurse. He could sense her rigidity and the pain it caused her. Her stiff back, threadbare skirt and tight shoes spoke of her suffering and her imprisonment in a body that had known few, if any, joys. She had been hollowed out, left empty inside, repressed, stifled by a grey, oppressive childhood and by the equally grey and oppressive adulthood at the service of a powerful family who saw her as a prop of sighed-after, bygone days and of a child who would forget her when she too had reached adulthood.

The woman and child disappeared into the red brick mansion and closed the door behind them. The photographer let his gaze wander the thick whiteness of the gathering clouds. He felt free.

At that moment, surrounded by the rising stillness of Green Mount evenings, his boots deep in the mud, the photographer's sense that he had come upon something special, something he had never experienced before as a photographer, perhaps as a child, but never as an adult, at a job, never behind a camera, despite his success with worldly urbanites, deepened. Here, today, with the shot of the farmer, his sheep and the

little girl, was something more, something that combined the old and the new inextricably, irrevocably, unfathomably, and from which there could be no return.

He turned towards the farmer. He now knew, but hadn't he known from the start, that the farmer was the reason the camera felt differently this time. He also knew he couldn't let this feeling ebb and depart forever more: "Tell me, friend, would you agree to let me take a few shots? It's for a personal series, a project of mine, for a new exhibit."

The farmer met the offer with silence, his gnarled hands wrapped around the wooden stick he used to climb steep paths or gather his flock if they strayed too far. The photographer became restless, began to doubt whether the farmer had heard him at all. He repeated his question, eager to keep his heart beating, his pulse throbbing, his art afloat, excruciatingly aware of his need for this quiet man and the photography he inspired: "How about that picture, then, old man?"

The farmer raised a hand, looked at him with an expression the photographer couldn't decipher, but that seemed familiar; an expression he had encountered before, one that rattled memories he thought he had buried forever. The farmer then said: "It's time for me to go, and you, son, should do the same."

The farmer called the flock to his side and walked away from the photographer. The photographer noticed that his stooped back was large and that the wooden stick gleamed fiercely in the grey light streaming down from the hills.

Many years had passed since that day. The photographer, no longer a young man, still lived in the big city, surrounded by his work and the respect of his peers. Though he had achieved relative fame, he never again would feel the rare, heart-breaking sensation of

that afternoon, in the rolling Green Mount meadows, nor would he ever shoot such a pure, powerful picture in his life.

He now lived in an apartment that was spacious enough for him and his darkroom. He had never married. It was not that he never intended not to marry, it was just so. That was the way the cards had fallen for him. He had never wanted children and only recently did he think that a companion would be good, that he wouldn't have the courage to die alone. Yet, he also believed it was too late for him. He thought of his father from time to time, though they were never happy, cheerful thoughts. Life was not, in the end, what he had expected it to be.

One morning, the phone rang. The photographer answered and listened quietly to the excited young man at the other end. His eyes closed, his fingers wrapped tightly against the handset, he listened intently. He only opened his eyes after the young man asked him the following question: "So, will you, sir? Will you come up to Green Mount to see with your own eyes and to tell us about the days you spent up here?"

"Yes", said the photographer, "I will come." "How about next weekend? It will give us time to organize your visit and set up the other speakers," said the young man. "Yes, next weekend is fine." As the young man was about to hang up, the photographer asked:

- Tell me, what happened to the people in the photograph?
- I'm sorry?
- The farmer, the nurse, the little girl...
- Funny you should ask. I read that you never go back to a subject once you are done with it. Well, yes, if you must know, and as I have decided to research the

photograph for my history course. You see, I teach the history of Green Mount at the local college. This is what we know: The little girl, you know who she is, from what great family... well, it came as such a shock to everyone... She was a sickly child but no one had expected something like this to happen. To *her*, his golden child.

- What do you mean?
- It had something to do with the nurse. It seems the child, I believe it was the year you took that picture, had a bad fall. She had always been a weak child and her health had always caused the family great concern. The nurse had left her unattended for a short while, and when she came back, she found her lying on the ground, broken. She was never able to walk again.
- I don't remember reading anything about this matter in the papers?
- The family kept it secret, out of the press. They never returned to Green Mount. They turned their property into a hotel. That's how I found your photograph. It was one of many black and white pictures in the hotel lobby. And I recognized your signature, and how precious it was...all this history in our small town...

The photographer interrupted him:

- What happened to the nurse?
- The nurse, well, they say she lost her mind, that she would be found wandering the house at night, looking for the child, weeping and pleading. The family had her interned, at their own cost. Which was kindly of them.
- And the farmer?

- The farmer? He was the hardest to trace. People in these parts don't like to talk very much. But my father is from here, and he helped me get this information. And yet, there he was, hiding in plain sight.
- What in the world do you mean?
- The winters up here are harsh, and some years they can be devastating. A few years after these events, the winter was one of the hardest the farmers had ever known. He, like many others, lost his flock and his crops. Like many others, he sold his land to survive.
- Who bought his land?
- Mr. Woodlane, of course. It's all part of the hotel property now, a national reserve as well, I hear. The farmer had nowhere to go. His wife left him and his children went down to the big city to try their luck there. Mr. Woodlane offered him a job at the mansion. He's still there. He takes care of the grounds and lives in a small shed behind the hotel, in the servant's quarters. He still is there, he's a very old man now, can you believe that. The Woodlanes are good people, they took pity on him. You will see him when you get here. Perhaps you can take a picture of him, again.

The photographer's heartbeat quickened:

- What makes you think he would agree to that?
- Of course, I mean, of course he would agree. It would be a great honor for him, a way of keeping his memory alive, don't you think? Who would even know he had ever lived, if it hadn't been for you...

The young man's words caused the photographer a deep pain, though he couldn't explain why. Perhaps the young man understood something was not quite right for he added:

- It's true. How strange. Such a bright, cheerful photograph, and their fates, now that I think of it, so sad, terrible, all of them.
- You say my photograph is cheerful?
- Well, yes... Don't you think so? I mean it's the golden spirit of Green Mount and the innocence of childhood that you captured there. Don't you see that anymore?

The pain the photographer felt in his heart was now a physical pain. His back ached, his legs ached and his arms ached. It was the ache he felt as a boy when his father had him work in the fields, under the scorching sun, the arid dust penetrating his boots.

He hung up the phone and sat down at the round, wooden table by the window. He put his hands on the table and noticed how gnarled and creased they had become.

The phone rang again, but this time, he didn't pick up. He was remembering the black and white photograph of the earnest-eyed farmer holding his sheep's head to face the camera, his knee in the mud. He was remembering the rich little girl all dressed in velvet and silk, white socks and shiny, black boots, a joyful smile on her face. He was remembering the rolling hills and the white flock of sheep, the great red brick mansion and the needle-thin nurse. This had been his pastoral fancy, his pastoral fabrication; his amoral commission for a man whose own wealth couldn't protect him from the darkness that always lurks beneath the glossy surface.

The photographer tried to remember the farmer's face, his creases and wrinkles, for they must have their own importance, but found that he couldn't. Instead, all he could

see, and for the first time in forty years, was his father's face as he left the family farm, with his cold gift in his hands, to never return.

