

No Shadows in the Extremities of Light

by Skye Gullede

On the first day a clipboard had been thrust into her hands. 'Dr. Martin will see you in a few minutes', she'd been promised, so she had rushed through the paperwork, signing and initializing all the usual text no one seems to read. But the last document had given her pause.

An emblazoned, *What is your issue?*, and beneath, two silhouettes of the human body. The one of the left had its left side filled in, with the right side marked out in a dotted line. The other body was its mirror image. Underneath both was a checkbox.

How simple the document made it seem. It was almost appalling. It was gauche. But it was probably for efficiency, and Nia had tried to appreciate that as she checked the box on the right.

"Antonia!" the doctor had greeted, smile blinding as she was shown in. "Very glad to have you here!"

"Uh, yes. Thank you."

"I'm Dr. Martin," she'd said. "And it says here it's your left side?"

A pause. "Um. You mean, my right side's normal, and my left side's not...?"

"Yes, yes. And just to confirm, if you'd hold your left hand up against this wall?"

It was the old little trick constantly requested, but Nia had obliged. The doctor had taken a flashlight out and shined it over the hand. No shadow had appeared behind it.

Dr. Martin had beamed. "Alright, fantastic! Now, if you'll follow me..."

And now, a week later, still ruminating on the wisdom of checking off that box and holding up that hand.

Lights flash around her. This is the Intermittent Light Chamber. A circular room covered in light bulbs that blink on and off in irregular patterns. She's sat here already for more than an hour, on a stool in the middle, doing nothing. Soft jazz music plays from a speaker overhead.

The lights, small carnival lights, glow a soft orange. With the dark carpet underneath, the shadows are difficult to make out. All the lights to her left blink out. Then back on. Then back off. There is nothing to do but to think of her mistakes.

And what had they said? "We believe we can fix this issue for you." Yeah, 'fix' and 'issue' and all that. She hadn't really said anything, had just found the poster tacked up on a university bulletin board. It had haunted and haunted, each time she passed. A dark, glossy purple, and on it, in pale, kind blue, asking, 'Half-Shadowed?'

With the answer being 'yes', the poster had bore down on her. Heavier and heavier, till she gave in and copied the number. Later, slouched down in the corner, free hand shoved into her sweatshirt pocket, she'd nodded stupidly along as a cheerful voice went on about missions and goals, about fixing shadows. *We've converted an old hotel for this express purpose... there's no need for constant back-and-forth transporting... we've got everything covered...* And so one thing, then another, and on until here and now, she's spending her summer in an experimental treatment program.

In hindsight, probably not the best idea. Her mother had balked when she'd called about her summer plans. "Nia, really? You trust this?"—and the call had ended with Nia hanging up. A row of lights blink on above her, and the light descends to her right in a line. There's probably somewhere around an hour left in here. The lights start spiraling around her. The jazz continues.

There is no explanation for being half-shadowed. No scientific explanation, that is. About 0.3% of the population is one glaring mystery, defying all understanding of science. How can half of a solid body let in light like a window?

Half-shadows are, as far as anyone can tell, perfect bisections of the human body. Straight through the center. Whether the left or the right side is missing seems to be arbitrary. That, too, is apparently a perfect bisection. A 50/50 split within the 0.3%.

The strange thing is that twins aren't necessarily equal in shadow. A curious case, the mismatched twin shadows. And it's not a one-off, either. Though rare, it does happen: otherwise identical twins, and only one has a full shadow. Sometimes, and more rare, they're both half-shadowed, but on the opposite sides. One left and one right.

They've done extensive genetic research, but still, nothing. Even in twins there seems to be no genetic marker. Yet it's the obvious conclusion. How can your genetics affect your shadow? But then again, is there anything obvious with the shadows?

There are no scientific explanations yet, but there are plenty of others. The common claim is that the half-shadow is caused by a deficiency of morals, serving as a symbol of the deformed soul. People protest this, but arguments boil down to stories against stories. Half-shadows are held up as proof that magic exists, that there is a greater being in the universe, that we live in a simulation, *etc.*

After the Intermittent Light Chamber, lunch awaits her on a tray in front of her door. It's nothing remarkable, just roast chicken, covered in some sort of sauce. There is also steamed zucchini.

Pulling the plate closer, she notices a small folded paper hiding under the edge. Unfolded, it reveals a short note, scrawled out:

Hi 328!

- 330

There is an accompanying smiley face.

Alarmed, she drops the note and creeps to the peephole, peeking out to the door directly opposite. Her hotel room is tucked into a strange corner, along with two others. Up to the third floor, down a corridor and a sharp right turn leads to an alcove with three doors. Hers on the left, 328. Across is 330, with 329 in between.

The door doesn't open. She stands there for a moment watching it, then slinks back to her lunch feeling stupid. The note stares at her, inviting.

She stabs at the zucchini.

They had said that there's no contact to be had between patients. Something about progress and pressure. Stress. And she cannot sabotage what might become groundbreaking medical research. The thought of it, of a full shadow...

But there is something to say about the constant isolation. All she sees are glimpses of the other patients, the blank faces of the nurses. When she opens the window what she sees is a stretched out countryside, and a near-mirage of distant buildings. Her time is passed with the news and old detective programs, and the sound of jazz follows her everywhere.

The note smiles up at her.

What's the stress? she wonders.

On a notepad, before she can change her mind, she scribbles:

Hi 330

It's kind of boring here isn't it?

There are stories, sometimes, from people convinced their dog or cat is half-shadowed. These are cheap, sensational stories, clickbait, tabloid-esque. There is always something amusing in seeing photos of dogs held up before a blank wall, spotlighted ferociously. What would it prove, for a dog to have half a shadow?

For humans there are endless hoaxes. There was a viral video a few years ago, racking up millions and millions of views. 'Being Half-Shadowed Gave Me SUPERPOWERS?!?'. Unfortunately, but obviously, it was fake. There are schoolyard stories—'Having half a shadow means a demon ate the other half'—and myths—'If you're half-shadowed and you look into a dark mirror, the other half disappears'.

There are other stories as well, ones more truthful. 64 year old women just now discovering they've only got half a shadow. Middle aged mothers holding their toddlers out of the bath, realizing only one shadow arm and leg move on the wall. Engaged couples finding out the other has been half-shadowed the entire time, and the wedding only two weeks away. Then there is the turmoil. "IT'S RUINED MY LIFE" in tall, tall letters over pictures of shocked faces. Tears. Fights. There are crises and divorces. Hard to stomach snapshots of misery.

But it is only the sad stories that have any sort of financial payoff. The others, the shrug-and-accept, don't quite sell the same. A singer, letting slip in an interview her half-shadow, received minute attention. It hadn't affected her music.

When she was fifteen: a visit to her grandmother's, and when the two of them were alone, she'd been forced to receive a tearful confession.

"I think about it all the time, darling. Whenever I see anything about it, in the news. I'm so sorry it happened to you."

Nia couldn't respond.

"Oh, Antonia, but I've been thinking about it. I didn't quite know my father, you know. It was the war, and I'd only just been born. He was a pilot. They say he was very good, but. Oh, you know, it was the war."

This was the oft-repeated story. The hero pilot. The war. The young widow. The infant. Her grandmother blew her nose in a tissue.

"Oh, darling, I've been thinking, it must be from him. From my father, you know. My father, may he rest. I'm sure you've heard before. His plane crashed, and that was that. Mother always said he was a good man, but she never said anything about his- well. Perhaps she never knew. Oh, but it must be from him. I don't think anyone else in the family's had *it* otherwise."

She had been fifteen, so she had said, "Well, you know, some people think half-shadows are just all the sins of the family being shown in one baby."

And her grandmother had sniffed. "Well, then, Antonia. It must be from your mother's side."

328 -
I don't really get the swimming
Do you?

330,
Yeah I don't either
It's kind of weird

The Intermittent Light Chamber is a daily thing, and after lunch is the other daily thing, which is swimming. The Chamber makes some sort of sense, with the lights. But swimming? Alone in the locker room, she sheds the uncomfortable uniform they'd given her to wear in exchange for an equally uncomfortable swimsuit. The material is strangely heavy and stiff, and, she suspects, is not meant for swimming suits at all.

The indoor pool is quiet when she exits. Just the soft sound of water gently hitting the pool walls. She huddles down at lane eight and dips a hand into the water, pushing it back and forth.

"Antonia!"

She startles and almost falls in. "Uh, hi, Petra."

Petra is a short, thin, and incredibly loud woman. Her swim instructor, though what they do seems to mostly consist of floating. She watches as a beaming Petra strides over.

"Sorry about the wait. You ready to swim?"

Across the room another patient comes out from a locker room, and is met by an instructor. Their words echo and bounce, but they stay in lane one, far from Nia.

"Yeah, yeah, I am. What are we doing today?"

The water isn't especially deep, coming up to her collar at its deepest, and to her navel in the shallow end. Petra instructs her to walk back and forth, and so she spends fifteen minutes fighting the water, being told to, "Be more forceful with your steps! Carve the water away from you!"

When she is given a moment of rest, she decides to finally ask, "So... what does swimming do for shadows?"

Petra laughs. "I don't understand the science too much, I'm only here for swimming. But it's to do with the light distortions. The water refracts light. The shadows get bent. Maybe they don't understand the science too much either, huh? But it has great results, I've seen it happen."

"You've seen shadows grow?"

Petra laughs again. "That's what you're here for, isn't it?"

328 -

I fell asleep in the light chamber today haha

330,

*I wish they would change the music
the jazz is getting old*

328 -

*Yes!! The music just repeats
Also by the way, left or right?*

What kind of half-shadow would you be? is a common enough type of online quiz. People have made a personality test out of it. Lefthand half-shadows are more even-tempered, idealistic, patient, while righthand half-shadows are bolder, passionate, pessimistic. Or else, lefthand is colder, more analytical, while the right is more flexible, compassionate.

People ask, *fun question, if you were half-shadowed, which side?* and you're supposed to assign yourself one. There have been moments, when a half-shadowed answers honestly and are told, *no, no, you're not a left shadow! You're a right one for sure! Look, don't you agree? She's such a righty!*

330,

My left is missing, you?

328 -

*Nice, a righty!
I'm the opposite haha*

(a crude picture of that initial document, with the person whose left side is filled out and the right is empty)

At the end of every week is a shadow examination. It involves one stripping and standing in front of a light, while the doctors study the shadow stretched out on a wall behind. It's very clinical. Only the shadow matters.

Dr. Martin is all smiles when she lets Nia into the room. This is the third shadow examination she's had. The first two had been rather fruitless, but Dr. Martin promises, "We'll probably be seeing some results today! It always takes a bit for the treatment to have any effect."

Nia unclothes as fast as she can, and tries not to curl in on herself as she positions herself on the mark on the floor.

"Remember, stay as symmetrical as you can," Dr. Martin calls, and the lights flick off. A large floodlight turns on, and she is drowned in light.

Her eyes tear, and she has to shut them. She isn't allowed to face her shadow, due to possible stress and hindered progress. Instead, she feels the light piercing through her eyelids.

Dr. Martin says something behind her. Another voice chimes in. Nia can't make out what they're saying; the voices seem far away. The light is deafening.

She thinks about the moment of her birth. Was she held up before a wall, spotlighted at only moments old? And when the shadow showed itself as corrupted—when the news was delivered, from doctor to parent to family, did they cry? Her grandmother, pearl-clutching must have. She cannot imagine her mother crying. Her mother has never said anything about it. Scornful of all shadows, scowling at the mention of it. Nia has never asked.

Eventually, the tears come out. Standing stark naked and outstretched, blinded by the burning spotlight—she has never felt more hopeless. And it is not her the voices behind her are discussing. A rage bubbles up. Reduced to just half a shadow, that's all she is.

She imagines the shadow, towering up above her, right hand outstretched, maybe curved against the corner. The impossible half-shadow, standing tall.

When she was thirteen: her aunt, bustling in, blonde hair piled up high. Visiting from her busy city life.

"Let's make some tea and have a catch-up! How have you been? Oh, but you're so big now, Antonia! Grown up!"

Thirteen and bombarded with questions—*how is school and your friends? what about sports and classwork dances shopping do you sing? bake?*—staring, all bug-eyed, frightened wonder. Answering and nervous laughter. *Ha-ha*. Listening to a gripe about a neighbor, an ode to a cocktail, the mythology of traffic—the Fantastical City.

And then a pause, an awkward shuffling. Her aunt played with the handle of her cup.

"Oh, but, you know. Ever since you've been born and your parents told all of us, I... Well, I always think about you. And I have this wonderful friend, absolutely brilliant. She works with the law and medicine, the pharmaceutical, you know, and she was telling me something fascinating last week. I mean, it's horrifying, but so strange. And I wanted to ask you, if you wouldn't mind, but, do you know if your mother took anything while pregnant with you? I mean, of course, ha! different cultural practices and all that. And there's always things for like morning sickness and all. But besides that, you wouldn't happen to know, would you?"

And Nia hadn't known, because why would she?

"Oh, well." Her aunt deflated and sank down in her seat.

"Are you saying my mother made the—" she gestured behind her "—when she was pregnant?"

Her aunt sighed. "I'm not saying anything at all, really. It's just that, it's been known to happen."

"No, but- Mother wouldn't!"

When she was five: the day before school began, in the late summer light she had stared at her shadow slanted on the side of the house.

"Nia! Nia! What's this?"

Her small foreign mother, coming up, shadow stretching up.

"Nia, come inside. Let's eat dinner."

She had turned to her mother. "Look at my shadow, Mama."

Her mother, face smooth, pulling her away, "A shadow, Nia. Nothing really special. Let's have dinner now."

After the examination, Dr. Martin had said many things she's finding difficult to remember.

"Look!" and a paper was thrust in front of her. "Look, there's some improvement here!" An arrow, pointing to the head. "It's not a dramatic amount of growth, of course," the doctor had continued. "But it's a start! We're thinking of increasing your time in the pool. Also maybe add sunbathing in, during the afternoon, naturally. But how exciting! Imagine, in a couple weeks, what the shadow will look like!"

So standing there, fresh from a shower, the water dripping from her hair and down her back, making the carpet beneath her feet wet—standing there, fully naked, with the desk lamp aimed and shining like a beacon from behind her back—Nia faces her shadow.

The shadow is stretched out on the grey hotel wall, so close it is like facing another person. The line of it is clean. The line cleaving it is clean. She hunts for the evidence of any growth, tries to ask, is that truly the top of my head, there? Is that half my width, or is it more? Looking down she wonders how long till she'll see a sliver of the left thigh.

Is this the shape of her shadow as it always has been?

And then the foolishness hits. What is the shape of her shadow? What can she say? How can she pool it and pour it into cups to measure the amount?

Under her left foot she has never had a shadow, unless the light hits and the shadow leans and covers the left side. Then there is no lack to be found.

330,

Hate when they check our shadows.

Is it even growing?

328 -

yeah who knows

(a frowning face)

The days continue. The notes shoved underneath the doors and left on the food trays. The Intermittent Light Chamber, with the ceaseless jazz. The swimming with Petra, who makes her do somersaults and twists. The newly added sunbathing, which is just her, sitting in a lawn chair out in the sun. The sunbathing is rather peaceful, actually. Far away she can see the figures of other patients sitting in the sun as well. The country air is clean, and the little breezes are pleasant. Often, she ends up napping.

She has a dream once, while out in the sun. It was a memory of a picture book she had adored as a child, one given by her grandmother. *Mother, My Shadow*. In her dream, the colors waver and the people move. They walk all over the pages, stretching their arms and legs. She can hear the voice of the child, then the response of the mother.

Mother, my shadow is folded up in half. Look, it doesn't touch my left foot nor my left hand.

Oh, dear, let's unfold it now.

Mother, my shadow is all crinkled up. Look, my fingers are crooked and my left leg is wavy.

Oh, dear, let's iron it out.

Mother, my shadow is all tired out. Look, my head hangs and my feet are dragging.

Oh, dear, let's put it to bed.

Mother, my shadow has disappeared! Look, I can't find it anywhere!

Oh, dear, look. It's sleeping at your feet.

But who says the shadow is a good thing? Does it not plague our crops? To be half-shadowed is to be more virtuous than those with full shadows. The light shines more roundly upon those with only a sliver of their selves cast upon the ground.

But you need a bit of shadow, yeah? What can all the light do for you? Bake you until you're crisp, out in the desert, pierced in the light. What can all that light do? So goddamn bright. Nowhere to hide.

328 -

*Why do you think we have to wear these uniforms
they're so uncomfortable
And the swimsuits?!?*

330,

It's horrible.

I wish they'd let us bring our own clothes

328 -

*I hate it here
I want to leave*

After her fifth shadow examination, as Dr. Martin says things about percentages, she fiddles with the smooth fabric of the uniform pants. 330's note comes to mind, and in a lull she can't help but ask, "So why do we have to wear specific clothing?"

The doctor beams. "Oh, yes! It's made of a special fabric, you see. With metal essences. A bit of iron, copper. It's to help draw out the shadow from you."

A pause. The thoughts in her head all jerk to a stop. "Pardon?"

The doctor leans forward. "The metal ions bond with, to put it simply, the shadow particles, and pull them out of the body. Like magnets. Now, of course, this isn't the most practical method, but every bit helps! And wearing these clothes encourages the shadow particles continuously."

"Are you... are you saying shadows are inside bodies? And magnetic?"

"Yes, they are."

She feels dizzy. "But if the whole outfit's all... magnetized or whatever, then aren't you just pulling out the, uh. The particles. The shadow particles. From all over? Won't that add more particles to the right-side shadow?"

Doctor Martin smiles and pats her hand. "It's alright, I know you aren't studying science at university."

Later, in the shower all Nia can think of are the metal 'essences' in the clothes and the 'shadow particles'. The insanity of it hurts to think of.

But, some part of her reasons, with light passing through half of your body, why not believe in the shadow particles? Maybe they do exist.

Another thought asks, if they put magnets in the clothes, then what's in the water? There's a spark of paranoia. But surely not in the water. But then again, the daily swimming? The water does taste somewhat metallic, once she thinks about it.

She wipes water off of her face, and startles at the red on her hand. A bloody nose, and the blood is running down her front, running into the drain. While watching the reddish water comes a desperate flash: *Oh no, my shadow particles!*

And all prior reasoning is allowed to crumble.

*330,
My god
They're complete quacks
This is insane*

Dinner that night is pasta with a basic tomato sauce, a salad on the side. A bland meal, and she finds herself picking at it. A news show plays on the television across. The noise washes over her.

It has been near six weeks. Six weeks in this grey hotel room. She's not turned on the main ceiling lights. One floor lamp in the corner glows warmly. The television shines blue. The desk lamp casts a net over her dinner. As she eats, the shadow of her right hand is stretched out on the table, warping in movement, unidentifiable as a hand.

The glass of water in front of her is inviting, but she can't bring herself to drink it. If she dwells too much upon it, her clothes begin to weigh down, and her stomach turns. She gives up on the pasta.

Sprawled out on the bed, she watches the news show end and a war documentary begin. It ends too, and the news returns. The time: 10:32.

She gets up and goes to the peephole, staring out at 330. The door stares passively back. She paces back to the television, and learns no news. Returning to the door, she stares down at the doorknob.

Nia isn't really thinking. It is like static. Before she fully realizes she's burst out the door and is knocking on the opposite room. There's a moment of panic as the door opens. She doesn't know what to do.

Peering around the door, a blonde girl blinks at her, mouth slightly agape.

An awkward pause, then sticking her hand out: "I'm Nia. 328."

The other girl hesitates, then opens the door further and takes it. "330. Ines. Uh, what-what are you-? Why-?"

A shrug. "I just realized they haven't, you know. Locked us up in here. We can leave if we want."

Ines's eyes become rounder. "Leave?"

Another shrug. "If you want?"

A multitude of emotions flicker through Ines' eyes. They are not actually prisoners.

"I- God, yes. Yes!"

And Nia can smile. Taking Ines's hand again and pulling her out into the hall. Walking, at first, then jogging, running, past all the closed doors in the dim hallway. They take the elevator, and in the brief moment of descent, they huddle down against each other and giggle like children. The elevator opens, and they dart out, past more doors.

All Nia can think is that she cannot wait to savor the return. The familiar shapes of all the landmarks and the familiar weight of the air. The knocking on the door, and her mother, startled, opening it with wide eyes. The fruit that will be hastily cut. The tea that will be poured. The patting of her hand as her mother soothes, *How difficult, how horrible.*

A small ache develops in her chest. She wants to march right up to the door. *Mother! Mother, I'm home!* Here is our green door. Here is its scratched pane of glass. And the turning of the handle, the slight creak of the hinges.

Mother!

They burst through the doors and out onto the lawn. Racing across the dew-slick grass barefoot, aching from smiling. Soon the hotel is a small bright blot against the dark. Smaller, and smaller, it is shrinking.

Without any words they both begin to lose the heavy clothes. Nia throws the shirt as far as she can, and raises her arms up and screams at the sky. Ines throws herself into the grass and shrieks. Above is only a small sliver of moon, and it smiles down at them.

"No Shadows in the Extremities of Light" by Skye Gullede

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Finalist story in the 2022 ACM Nick Adams Short Story Contest

Associated Colleges of the Midwest ACM.edu/NickAdams

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Streetlights from a road grow ahead of them. They race toward it and jump upon the road. Naked and laughing, underneath a stark streetlight. Their shadows, glorious halves, painted beautifully on the pavement.

"God, look at us! Look at us!" cries Ines, pointing at those shadows.

Dancing with the euphoria of discovery, capturing, perhaps, the happiness felt when that blessed mortal first lit a fire in the cave and danced with their own shadow. In one heartbeat their shadows align, and one person is outlined on the pavement.

Yet dancing is movement; the shadows fall out of line and two people are dancing again.