

Marie Laberge

THE WEIGHT OF SHADOWS

A novel

*Translated by Katie Collins*

ÉDITIONS MARTHA

She had died. Her mother had died and she hadn't known anything about it. Worse than that, she hadn't sensed anything, guessed anything, hadn't had even the slightest intuition – even though she could have sworn that, wherever in the world it was, she would have been able to feel the grip over her loosen. As if the moon all of a sudden relaxed its pull on the seas and, relieved, the waters let themselves go and flooded the continent. But no – no relief, no change.

So she could have sworn for nothing. (*"You never had any talent when I was alive – why would you get any when I died?"*) She can hear her mother snickering from here. Only would she have said it? With that inimitable smile, it would have been enough for her just to think it.

No, she doesn't even want to recall her eyes. She closes her own really tightly for a moment then lifts her head: the canteen for the pampered Napa staff is packed. She has the strange impression of being there for the first time in her life, of not recognizing anything. Lots of dark suits, sober ties on shirts starched so impeccably, they look as if they're about to crack. You would never imagine there'd be even the slightest mess of body-hair under those finely striped shirts: just a white marble chest, ready for the embalmer. A chest that no breath, no sigh will ever raise again.

No. She's going off track again. She had stared at her mother's torso for an eternity, silently giving her the order to stay there, motionless, to forbid her from getting up and starting everything all over again.

She hesitated only to determine whether it was that she had remained there terrified, or that she had succeeded in terrifying her mother's body.

She smiles: she must be mad to believe such an aberration – nothing ever terrified Yseult Marchesseault. Nothing. And, above all, not her daughter – this poor thing, incapable of existing on her own.

“Can I sit down?”

Who is this man? This perfect, irreproachable, toothy smile. Even his breath must be fresh. The shirt is white with faint pink lines, the tie...

“Diane? Mind if I sit down? Am I bothering you?”

“Me? No. No problem.”

Distraught, she stares at him: he knows her name, he's addressing her like a friend – what does she say to him usually? Her heart pounds, she panics. (“*Breathe. Breathe. You – you can still breathe.*”) She obeys, breathes deeply and smiles but her eyes are frantically searching.

“Are you OK?”

Great – he has stolen her line! Her beautiful trite remark that would have given her the time she needed to place him. Her voice answers him almost inaudibly: “So, so.”

“Yeah, you seem it. Is it Gagnon?”

“Gagnon?” Oh my God! There's a Gagnon? If this man is about to drag out all her past, she'll have to escape.

“Well, yeah. The memo from Gagnon this morning – haven't you read it? His threat to cut half the workforce. The whole department is under pressure.”

“Not yet, no.” Smile – she tells herself she's got to smile, seem interested. Not too much or you seem won over. Bring it in a little. Bring in the corners of your mouth. Now the

eyes. Look him straight in the eye. Well... He's got bluish-grey eyes with dark flecks. That must be rare. It might be beautiful.

"What's going on, Diane?"

She stares at those eyes that are really watching her. It feels warm in her chest. As if she were drinking boiling liquid.

"Diane?"

"My mother died."

As soon as she says it, like a photo developing, the whole reality appears: the outlines of the canteen, the bluish-grey eyes of Georges Simpson, his stunned expression as if she'd just hit him, even Gagnon's memo comes back to her. She laughs, madly relieved. "No, Georges – don't give me that look! It's not true!"

Georges short-circuits. He was just recovering from his surprise and about to feel sorry for her. In his head, he was already tinkering with his message of condolence. He had never known she had a mother. But everyone's got a mother, haven't they? "Not true? How come not true?"

She stands up, lively and laughing, all of a sudden another woman, sure of herself and her seductiveness. "I wanted to make you forget Gagnon. It's called shock therapy."

"It works." He is livid. He feels ridiculous for sure, with the dregs of compassion confusing him even more. "You had me."

"Not hard, Georges. You're my best audience." She picks up her bunch of keys from the table, abandoning the coffee she's hardly touched next to Georges's. "What are you doing for lunch?"

Georges's brow furrows. Sensibly, he holds back: he doesn't fancy making a fool of himself twice in one day.

"Is it a state secret? Georges, I just want to invite you to lunch."

"In honour of what? Is it part of the therapy?"

"Totally! Half past twelve downstairs?"

"No problem!"

He watches her go off: that tiny, unique movement of her hips that finishes off each step, barely noticeable, that makes him just want to put his hand there to check if there has been any sway at all. The small of the back of Diane Marchesseault always aroused leniency in him.