

The Business of Shadows

by Katrina Dessavre

1

The flowerpots across the street from Frank's room at the Place d'Armes Hotel never appeared parched by the late August sun. This did not strike him as out of the ordinary until three weeks after his arrival, just as his tolerance for the stifling humidity of New Orleans began to wane.

One evening he sat on the balcony and watched his shadow mingle among the petals. The street was narrow enough to allow the light from his room to reach the opposite side with a dull glow.

His first instinct was to reach for the Leica. The roll of film was almost used up from a day's worth of documenting boarded up shops and crowds of unemployed laborers. It was his first real assignment, the first time he was paid to indulge his obsession of wandering through city streets in search of decisive moments.

Unedited, the sequence of negatives he took that day suggested a taste for the surreal at odds with the narrative realism the magazine was looking for. For every few caption-worthy images, he would sneak in details removed from any apparent context: advertisements peeling from walls, reflections in storefronts, empty courtyards in the French Quarter.

He was still young enough to feel guilty about deviating from his assignment during the day, but that night, playing with shadows seemed less transgressive. The ferns, entwined with honeysuckle and wisteria, spilled their waxy leaves over the ironwork railing, extending wispy tendrils down to the hum of conversations woven together by the light melody of a jazz band.

His curiosity moved past the frame when he realized that the flowerpots belonged to the only still and silent part of the two-storeyed block. Beyond the balcony, he could just make out the corner of a door slightly ajar. The rooms were dark.

My shadow is alone there right now, he thought. If only it had the sense to look around.

He sat on the balcony until the chorus of silverware died down to an occasional chink and the blues slid into an exclusively self-pitying key. Had anyone kept careful watch over the two balconies, they would have noticed a shadow move past the flowerpots and into the open door, just its flesh-and-blood likeness turned toward the light.

2

Frank had mastered the art of avoiding his shadow, eliminating traces of his presence from his photographs, so when he realized that his body was shadowless without any effort on his part, it was already close to dusk.

He was on Dauphine Street, facing a canvas of exposed brick and mold interrupted by the crisp silhouette of a balcony beam. As he watched the the uneven surface distort the shadows of passerby, he became aware of the wall's indifference to his own.

He coughed loudly, half-expecting it to catch up.

Twenty two years of companionship had clearly not established a bond of loyalty. Frank missed his shadow no more than he missed his grandmother's porcelain vase, smashed by a careless gesture.

He was not one to run to the nearest bar and share his predicament with strangers, and the panic of recognition dimished with each one who took no notice. By the time he was back at the hotel, twisting and turning in front of the flowerpots in hopes of coaxing the shadow back, he had convinced himself that the situation was nothing more than the rare, yet plausible, effect of the heat on foreigners used to colder climates. It was a private matter, not worth mentioning except during the most desperate of small talk silences.

For the next several days he tried to think of how his friends would react to his shadowless self, but he came to the conclusion that they would all perceive it as a natural progression in his work, a

sign that the surrealists had claimed him as one of their own. He never had the opportunity to test his theory; a new shadow was already growing, and a week later it was just as robust as his previous one.

Those few weeks in New Orleans seemed to have exhausted his capacity for reckless curiosity. When he returned home, the impulse to pick up his camera and seek out the surreal became less frequent. He was always a man for whom life began at the edge of some imaginary horizon, and he would never have reached it had the uncanny not come to meet him face-to-face many years later.

3

"Frank, your three o'clock is here to see you."

The day had congealed into complacency and a covert impatience for afternoon coffee. He had to scramble to recover a fragment of professional enthusiasm.

"Who is it?"

"Says he's an old friend. You two met in New Orleans twenty years ago."

"Send him in."

Three o'clock wore a black sportcoat tailored so precisely that the silvery pinstripes elongated his limbs to an ethereal thinness.

"Frank, it's been so long you probably don't even recognize me. How have you been? I see you have my portrait on your wall. So you haven't forgotten."

He walked past his desk to a wall covered in Frank's work. As a visual record of his career in advertising, it covered the campaigns clients had interfered in the least, mixed in with some personal photographs. The man was standing in front of an image that remained abstract to all eyes except Frank's. He had never told anyone about its origins.

"I still remember the dewy softness of the wisteria on my skin," the visitor said.

Frank was now fully awake. "Have we met before? I'm sorry, but that photograph," he broke off. This was not the right place to entertain barely articulated memories.

"I know it's not an ordinary business and I apologize for arriving without warning, but I couldn't tell your assistant to schedule a meeting with your old shadow. I don't want to take up too much of your time. I'm getting married, you see, and the thoughts of settling down made me realize I need to settle my debt with you."

"Debt?"

"It's the least I can do. I've made a name for myself over the years, as have you, but it would mean nothing if you had not encouraged me to slip into the open door, past the flowerpots. Why don't you stop by my apartment? I live on the sunny side and I'm always home when it rains."

The man pulled out a card from his coat pocket, put it on the desk, and left, closing the glass door behind him without a sound.

Frank looked at the card.

Penumbra Enterprises
Richard Atheling
CEO
501 West 21rd Street
New York, NY 10011

4

"The one thing I do miss about being a shadow is the way I could stretch myself along walls, feeling the cool caress of concrete and sensation of brick tickling my back."

They were standing on Richard's private terrace, under a grid of wooden beams lined with ivy and canvas, overlooking the wastelands of Chelsea now moistening into a darker shade of grey. Hidden among oleanders and orange trees not yet in bloom, projectors diffused panels of neon light converging into the form of a

skull. For Frank, it embodied the vulgar, childish aesthetic that plagued this part of town.

"I can't believe you've kept it all a secret. Although "born and raised in New Orleans" isn't far from the truth."

"So you have looked me up. I should have warned you when we last met. But you know better than anyone how online profiles only tell half the story. Or, in my case, the story takes on a life of its own. But I suppose you want to know what really happened after I left you, after you went to sleep and I opened the door."

Richard took a step closer, one foot on the elbow of Frank's insubstantial shadow, which curled ever closer to the speaker about to reveal his means of escaping obedience.

"Did you see me looking for you the following night?"

"No. I could barely keep myself from dissolving into twilight, too dim to reach your side of the street. You were always facing the foyer, which opened into a long hallway illuminated only by countless half-open doors. I was still mutable, grasping at opacity with the desperation of a man drowning, and the light from any of those doors would of killed me had I ventured in immediately. So I took my time, clinging to the shadow of a vase displayed on a side table, tracing its web of cracks while I listened to the intersection of ideas and watched their authors cross paths in the hall."

"Who were these people?"

"Oh, everyone and anyone. Ordinary faces, like the ones you pass on the street and don't look twice. With each fragment of knowledge, I began to reconstruct a human form. Eventually I reached the end of the hallway and leaned against another iron balcony, only now the view opened up to a courtyard, the kind you used to look for in the French Quarter. I stayed there for weeks, months even, and I would have been content to remain there had the owner not decided to leave."

"The one who watered the flowerpots? Who was it?"

"Poetry," Richard said. "She rents out rooms in cities but never stays

in one place for too long. When the courtyard began to lose its warmth, I had to leave. I wanted to feel like I took up space in this world. Just brushing against a shoulder in a crowd would send me into rapture for the first few weeks.

"I wandered into a printing press, drawn in by the smell of paint and paper, and fascinated by the noise and movement of the machinery. My hands, still weak and shaky, made me an inept printer's assistant, but I loved aligning the cylinders, mixing colors, bending and fitting the metal plates, anything that reassured me of my own physicality. I developed an interest in the specks of dust that stuck to the paper, uninvited, and created a constellation of imperfections. When the press closed down by the weight of its own expenses, I was left with a stack of prints saved from the trash pile and the conviction that I understood the potential of flatness better than anyone. I had been flatness my entire life, worked to overcome it, but its value proved to be as mutable as I once was."

He looked down at the two shadows, now inseparable against the wood paneling of the deck. Frank was eager to change the subject.

"Is this your work?" he asked, moving towards the skull, passing his hand through the panels of light.

"Before I tell you, give me your first impression."

Frank's instinct to assess a visual object's potential was a reflex perfected by years of selling soft drinks and fast cars. He rattled off observations that, had he stopped to consider them, were placeholders, signifying nothing.

"It absorbs its environment yet remains separate from it, fluctuating between the abstract and symbolic."

"A true professional. I can tell you hate it, just like you hate that glass-walled office of yours. But if you're going to lie for a living, come do it for me. I'm leaving for Venice in a few days to meet with potential investors. You could come as my assistant."

"I can't accept on such short notice. I won't be much use to you, anyway."

Richard must have sensed an undercurrent of pride in his tone, and the truth was that Frank was a bit taken aback. He was not

inclined to go from creative director to assistant, much less for a man who seemed blind to the poetry he claimed had shaped him.

“That’s the way the world is, Frank. One of us has to be the shadow.”

