
Opening Extract from...

Whispering Shadows

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Translated from the German by Christine Lo

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A NOVEL

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For Anna, Florentine, and Jonathan

PROLOGUE

He was a small child. Even at birth. Six and a half pounds; barely more than a preterm baby though he had stayed in his mother's body a week past term. No cause for alarm, the doctors had assured them. He would catch up.

His skin was pale, almost transparent, and ever more delicate than that of other newborns. Tiny blue veins shimmered on his temples, his chin, and his hands even after the first few weeks, when suckling infants normally turned into well-padded babies.

His cries were less shrill, less piercing and shorter than those of the others. He grew tired easily, even later on, as a three- and four-year-old. While the other children at the playground on Bowen Road or, later, on the beach at Repulse Bay, barely knew what to do with their energy, while they climbed, charged about, or ran into the water shrieking wildly, he sat on the sand and watched them. Or he climbed onto his father's lap, lay his head on his shoulder, and fell asleep. He was economical with his movements, as if he felt that he had to conserve his strength, that his time was limited. No cause for alarm, the doctors thought. Every child is different.

He remained a delicate child. Thin legs and arms with no muscle tone, like sticks, so that at six years of age, he was still so light that his father could pick him up with one arm and throw him in the air. At school, he was one of the quiet ones in class. When the energetic Mrs. Fu asked him a question, he almost always knew the correct answer, but he never said anything without being prompted. During the break, he preferred to play with the girls or he sat alone in the schoolyard and read. In the afternoon, when the other boys either played basketball

or football, he had ballet lessons. His parents had objected. Was he not enough of an outsider as it was? An oddball with no close friends. He had not needed to beg them for long. The quiet disappointment in his face had been a fervent plea that his father had not been able to refuse.

A few weeks later, he had complained for the first time about pain. His limbs hurt, his legs especially. That was perfectly normal, the ballet teacher said comfortingly. Many children felt the same when they first started dancing, especially when they threw themselves into it with the dedication that made him stand out from the others. Muscle cramps as a result of movements he wasn't used to, suspected his father. An orthopedist whom his parents were friendly with offered reassurance. The boy was probably growing, so a strong tugging sensation in the bones was not unusual. It would pass. Nothing to worry about. Then the unexplained exhaustion began. He fell asleep during lessons, had difficulty concentrating, and spent most afternoons on the couch in the living room.

Would they have consulted a doctor sooner if they had not been able to lay the blame for the pains on ballet? If he had been a boy bursting with good health, a boy whose every prolonged spell of fatigue or weight loss would have immediately seemed strange? Should they have taken his complaints more seriously? Had they been inattentive or careless? It would have made no difference, ultimately. The oncologists took every opportunity to emphasize this. Paul wasn't sure if they only said that to calm him down—so that on top of the panicky fear he had about his son's life, he would not be tortured by his own conscience—or if they were telling the truth. Unlike other types of cancer, with leukemia, early diagnosis made no difference the doctors told him over and over again. As though they assumed that he had

feelings of guilt. As though those feelings were justified. But even if they were right, even if an earlier visit to the doctor would have changed nothing about the illness, the treatment, the prognosis, or the chances of survival, what was the point? Was that supposed to comfort him? Paul and Meredith Leibovitz had failed as parents; he had no doubt about that. Their son had been given to them to care for; they were responsible for his well-being, for his health, and they, Paul and Meredith Leibovitz, had not been able to shield him from this illness. What were a father and mother for if they could not protect their child against this?

"Don't blame yourselves. Blame God, if you like. Blame fate. Blame life, but not yourselves. You can't do anything about it," Dr. Li, the oncologist in charge, had said to them in a conversation shortly after the diagnosis. Meredith had taken that advice seriously and, over the next few months, been able to free herself of the guilt she had felt at the beginning. Paul had not. He did not believe in God, he did not believe in Karma; there was nothing and no one he could make responsible for the illness, who he could blame for it. Nothing and no one apart from his own complete inadequacy.

Paul stood by the window and looked out. It was early in the morning. There were several tennis courts and soccer fields right in front of the hospital. A couple of joggers were taking advantage of the still-tolerable temperatures at this time of day and running their laps. The dark gray clouds that had hung low over the last few days had disappeared and given way to a cloudless blue sky. The monsoon rain had washed the smog out of the air and the view was clear, which was rare in Hong Kong. He could make out the Peak clearly, the narrow IFC tower and the Bank of China in front of it. Between the skyscrapers

of East Kowloon and Hung Hom the silver-gray water of the harbor gleamed, already crisscrossed by dozens of ferries, tugboats, and barges. Traffic had already come to a standstill on the Gascoigne Road and Chatham Road South flyovers. He thought about the beach in Repulse Bay and about the sea and how often he had gone out with Justin to build sandcastles at about this time of day on the weekends, while Meredith was still sleeping. Just the two of them, father and son, with the warm and humid summer air of the tropics blowing around them, bound by a mutual understanding that neither of them needed to speak. How he had allowed Justin to spread mud on him and how they had returned home laughing, and how Meredith, heavy with sleep, had always been a little put out by their good mood and needed some time and two coffees to be able to share it with them.

He turned around. The room was tiny, hardly bigger than a storeroom. He could cross it in two or three big steps. Justin's bed was against the pink wall. Next to it was the stand for the drip, a chair, a nightstand, and a foldout armchair, on which Paul spent the night. On the nightstand were two books that Paul often read aloud and a pile of cassettes, which Justin had still liked listening to a couple of days ago. Now he didn't even have the strength to do that. Paul watched his sleeping son. His skin was as white as the bedclothes; his face had lost all color. His eyes lay deep in their hollows and a soft, light blond down covered his head. His breathing was shallow but quiet.

Paul sat down and closed his eyes. *I'm sorry to have to tell you* . . . It had been nine months since the pediatrician had, in a low voice and with a sorrowful expression, told them the results of the first blood test. Since then these words had rung in his ears. They had taken hold of him, and they echoed in his head

even nine months later. Would he ever be free of them? Would he ever hear anything else? *I'm sorry to have to tell you* . . .

Why my son? he had wanted to scream, but he had kept silent and listened to the doctor talk about myeloid leukemia, hemoglobin counts, bone marrow tests, and procedures. Why Justin? Why did Meredith no longer ask herself this question?

Relief came only in the brief moments when Paul started awake at night and thought he had dreamt it all. He sat in bed for a few seconds and had the feeling he had woken from a nightmare. It wasn't true. The blood count was normal. Justin still had his head of strawberry-blond curls; his hair had not fallen out. He was lying next door in his room, in bed asleep. Paul felt such relief then, such indescribable joy, almost foolishly happy, as never before in his life. It made the crash to reality seconds later all the worse.

Where was Meredith? Why was she not with them? She was on a plane. Probably forty thousand feet above Pakistan and India right now. Or over Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, depending on whether the plane had taken the northerly flight path or the southerly one out of London. A very important conference, she had said. About the bank's new strategy in China. About investments and shareholdings worth billions. As the head of the Hong Kong office, it was impossible for her not to be there. She would be in Europe for two or three days at the most. They would be able to keep Justin in a stable condition until next week. The doctors had assured her of this. And the morphine had knocked Justin out; he slept practically all day, so he wouldn't notice his mother wasn't there anyway, she thought. She had looked at Paul, and they had looked into each other's eyes for a moment, for the first time in a long time. Should he disagree? Should he tell her that he was almost certain that

Justin knew perfectly well whether his father or mother was in the room, if they were sitting by him, holding his hand, stroking his head, or talking to him, even if his body did not display any outward reaction any longer? That was why he had practically not left the tiny room for almost a week now. That was why he sat here, camping on the small cot, which was at least ten centimeters too short for him, and on which sleep was out of the question. That was why he read aloud from books, sang lullabies, hiking songs, and Christmas songs, anything that came to mind, until his voice gave out. He knew that Meredith had felt comfortable with her decision and that she would not have let herself be dissuaded, that she did not even expect him to understand her any longer.

Meredith's workload had increased in proportion to Justin's condition worsening. He had read somewhere that this was not uncommon for parents whose children were dying of cancer. What was unusual in their case was that it was the woman who sought refuge in work. Two days after the diagnosis she had unexpectedly flown to Tokyo. From then on she had shuttled more often between Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong and her long days at work were followed by dinners with clients that went on late into the night.

Paul had noticed that there were two kinds of couples at the pediatric oncology unit. The first kind still looked each other in the eyes; their child's illness welded them together. They shared their fears, their doubts, and their feelings of guilt. They supported each other, gave each other strength or clung together. The other kind crept through the corridors with their heads down, staring at the floor. They were afraid to look into their spouse's eyes because they would see in them what they did not want to see: a reflection of their own fear, their rage, and

their immeasurable grief. They were made mute by the prospect of death; they turned away from each other; they retreated into themselves, more and more despairing, as they searched for a place that they hoped would be free of pain. Paul and Meredith Leibovitz were one of these couples.

Just three days ago, making the most difficult of decisions, they had no longer been able to look each other in the eye. They had sat side by side, like two strangers, neither able to find strength or support in the other. The doctors told them there was no hope. The relapse of six weeks ago was as unexpected as it was serious. The cancer cells were multiplying at an explosive rate. They had not responded to the two courses of chemotherapy. All medical recourse had been exhausted. Now it was just a matter of keeping Justin as free of pain as possible. And it was a question of whether his life was to be extended at any price. There were options. They talked about the intensive care unit and ventilators. They could certainly win some time that way, perhaps a week, perhaps two. It was not a problem, medically speaking.

We assume that you wish to do this, Mr. and Mrs. Leibovitz?

Meredith said nothing. She had closed her eyes and she was silent.

The doctors looked at him. They waited. They waited for a decision. Do you have any other questions? Should we talk you through it again? Meredith kept quiet. Paul shook his head.

Should we move Justin to the intensive care unit?

Paul shook his head again.

"No?" the doctors asked.

"No!" he heard himself say. "No." He had decided. Meredith did not disagree.

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It must have been just after 2:00 PM when the heart stopped beating. Dr. Li could only guess at the exact time of death later on.

A nurse had last been in the room at 1:00 PM. She had wanted to collect the tray with the soup and the tea that she had brought an hour ago, that lay cold and untouched on a small table. She had felt the boy's pulse, which was weak but regular. She had checked the drip, the catheter, and whether Justin was getting enough morphine. Paul Leibovitz had been sitting silently next to the bed, holding his son's hand. He had asked for the ECG machine to be switched off, so the room was unusually silent, unlike the rest of the unit.

Dr. Li entered the room at five minutes to three PM and thought at first that father and son had fallen asleep together. Paul Leibovitz had tipped forward, his upper body lay on the bed with his right arm stretched out, and his left hand clasped his son's delicate fingers. Justin's head had sunk deep into the pillow and was turned to one side. Only when he looked again did Dr. Li realize that the boy was no longer breathing, that his eyes were wide open and staring, and that the father was not sleeping but weeping. Not loudly, not plaintively. It was not pain that was being cried out, as was often the case here. These sobs were terribly quiet, hardly audible; they reached deep inside, and sounded all the more despairing for it.

In the last thirty years, despite all the advances in medical science, Dr. Li had seen many children die. The death of a child was a traumatic experience for all parents, but in most cases there were brothers or sisters who required attention, grandparents who had to be cared for, work that had to be done, and mortgages that banks chased the monthly payments for. Life went on, even though the families could not imagine it in

the first weeks and months. Some people, a few people, were broken by the loss. They allowed themselves to be consumed by feelings of guilt or sank into self-pity. They could not bear the emptiness or simply refused to let their children die. They never found their way back into life. Dr. Li thought about those parents as he listened to Paul Leibovitz sobbing.

ONE

Paul lay still on his bed, held his breath, and listened. All he could hear was the low, monotonous hum of the fans. He lifted his head from his pillow a little. Listened. Wasn't that the first bird calling? The sound came from the other side of the small valley; a faint, lone chirrup, so tentative that Paul was amazed that it hadn't been silenced on its way to him. It was a good sign. It meant that dawn would soon be breaking, that in the village the first cock was crowing, and would be followed by others in intervals of seconds. It meant that in a few minutes the birds in his garden would also start singing, that he would hear the clatter of his neighbors' crockery and pans. That the night was over. That he no longer had to endure the voices of the darkness.

Life goes on, Paul!

Meredith's harsh voice. Over and over again. Paul waited until the first rays of light fell through the wooden shutters and her voice had fallen completely silent. He pushed aside the mosquito net and stood up.

He made his bed, rolled up the tent that protected him from the mosquitoes, switched off the fans, went down to the kitchen, put some water on to boil with the immersion heater, went up again to the bathroom, and turned on the shower. The water was too warm to be really refreshing. It had been a typical summer night in the tropics, hot and humid; he had perspired a lot despite the two fans standing at the foot of his bed. His neighbors thought he was crazy because he refused to install an air conditioner even in the bedroom. Apart from old Teng, he was the only one on the hill who abstained from this luxury of his own free will.

Life goes on.

He hated those words. They embodied the unspeakable injustice and the utterly appalling, monstrous banality of death. Everything in Paul strained against it. There were days when he felt that every breath he took was a betrayal of his son. Days when the survivor's feeling of guilt threatened to overwhelm him, when he was not able to do anything other than lie in his hammock on the terrace.

The fear of forgetting anything. Justin's sleepy face in the morning. His big blue eyes that could shine so brightly. His smile. His voice.

He wanted to do everything he could to prevent the clamor of the world from covering up his memories. They were all that he had left of his son. He had to hold on to them until the end of his life; they were not just immeasurably precious to him, but also extremely fragile. They could not be relied on. Memories were deceptive. Memories faded. Memories evaporated. New impressions, new faces, smells, and sounds layered over the old ones, which gradually lost their strength and their intensity until they were forgotten. Even while Justin had still been alive, Paul had felt this loss: a pain that he had felt almost daily. When had his son spoken his first words? Where had he taken his first steps? Was it at Easter on the lawn at the country club or two days later on the trip to Macau, in the square in front of the cathedral? When it happened, he had thought he would never forget, but two years later, he was already unsure of the details. This loss was only bearable because new memories with Justin formed every day as the old ones disappeared. But now? He had to rely on the memories he had. Sometimes he caught himself searching for a few moments for Justin's voice, closing his eyes and having to concentrate until Justin appeared before him.

To stop the memories from being extinguished, he wanted to protect himself from everything new, as far as that was possible. Forgetting would be betrayal. That was why he had moved to Lamma shortly after his divorce and that was why he rarely left the island, and then only very unwillingly. Lamma was quiet. There were no cars, fewer people than anywhere else in Hong Kong, and hardly anyone that he knew. His house was in Tai Peng, a settlement on a hill above Yung Shue Wan, ten minutes from the ferry terminal. It was hidden behind a formidable wall of green bushes and a thick bamboo grove at the end of a narrow path.

He had set himself a daily routine. He woke at dawn, drank exactly one pot of jasmine tea under the parasol on the terrace—never more, never less—practiced tai chi on the roof for an hour, went into the village to make his purchases, and ate at the same harborside restaurant—always the same mixture of vegetable and shrimp dim sum with two steamed Chinese buns stuffed with pork. Then he carried his shopping home, after which he went on a walk lasting three to four hours. Every day, this took him past the small plots of land in which old men and women were weeding, breaking up clumps of earth, or spraying their greens and tomato plants with insecticide. They greeted him with a nod and he answered with a nod. He was safe with them. They would never think of speaking to him, let alone of engaging him in conversation. He carried on walking to Pak Kok by the sea, took a wide arc back to Yung Shue Wan, and then went halfway across the island to Lo So Shing Beach, which was almost always empty, apart from on a few weekends in summer. Paul went swimming for exactly twenty minutes. Then he sat in the shade for half an hour, sometimes longer in good weather, and looked at the sea, always relieved by the

familiarity of the scene. Or he closed his eyes and meditated. There was nothing unexpected to fear here.

The walk back took him over the long ridge of a hill from which he could see the narrow East Lamma Channel that separated the island from Hong Kong. Only seldom did he linger on this path, gaze at the huge container ships with their full loads, and ask himself what their cargo might be and where they might be going. His only companions were stray dogs or the odd homeless cat. He spent the rest of the day in the garden or on the roof terrace looking after his plants and cooking or cleaning the house.

He did not read a newspaper and had no television; he only listened to the BBC World Service on the radio from seven to seven-thirty in the morning. A day on which he did not exchange a single word with anyone was a good day. A week like any other in which nothing happened to leave traces on his memory was a good week.

He knew today would be more difficult. It was the third anniversary of Justin's death and Paul planned to travel to Hong Kong Island as he did every year and to climb the Peak.

It was not a good day for a hike. The second of September in Hong Kong was never a good day for a walk. The thermometer by the door showed a temperature of ninety-seven degrees Fahrenheit and humidity of 98 percent. The city was sweating. It was groaning in the heat. Everyone who could do so was hiding in air-conditioned rooms during this time.

Paul fetched a third bottle of water from the fridge for good measure and packed it in his backpack. He was wearing gray shorts and a light short-sleeved shirt. To prevent sweat from running down his face and stinging his eyes, he had tied a bandanna around his forehead. His long, muscular legs were

evidence of his daily walks, and he had the flat, toned stomach of a young man. Even so, the climb would require all his strength in weather like this. He picked up his trekking pole and walked down the hill to the village at a leisurely pace. He was sweating even before he got to the ferry.

It was the memory of a lie he had told of necessity that drove him to visit the city and climb the Peak twice a year: on the birthday and on the death anniversary of his son. It was a ritual that he could not even explain to himself; adherence to it had become a kind of compulsion. As if he had to make up for something.

Not long before his death, Justin had asked him if he thought that they would climb the Peak together again one day. The highest mountain on Hong Kong Island had been one of their favorite outings; the walk around the summit, which commanded views over the city, the harbor, and the South China Sea, had made a great impression on Justin even when he was only two. To Paul, it seemed that the Peak was a place in which his son felt safe. It was a kind of lookout over the world that Justin insisted they visit in every season: in summer, when, thanks to its height, it offered a little relief from the oppressive heat and humidity of the city; in winter, when the wind blew so cold that Justin wore a woolen hat and gloves and they were almost the only people walking around up there; yes, even in spring, when on many days the clouds covered the summit and you saw nothing but mist before you. They had often sat on a bench up there eating and Paul had explained to his son how airplanes flew and ships floated, why the big double-decker buses suddenly looked as small as toy cars, and why stars were called stars and not suns, even though they also emitted light.

Would they make it there together again?

"Yes, of course," Paul had replied and his son had lifted his head a little, smiled at him, looked into his eyes, and asked, "Really?" Paul had looked into his son's tired eyes and not known what to say. Did Justin want to know the truth? Did he want to hear no, Justin, no, I don't think so, you're too weak for it and I can't carry you two thousand six hundred feet uphill. There is no hope anymore. We will never stand together on the Peak again and count airplanes, and ships, and dream about gliding through the air like birds and leaving droppings on people's heads. Of course he didn't want to hear that. Of course no one in his right mind could have brought himself to tell an eight-year-old that. Why should he? But then what could he do?

"No cheating, Daddy. Tell the truth," Justin had said in a warning tone shortly after the diagnosis, as Paul, in his helplessness, had tried to play down his son's condition and babbled away about a bad case of the flu. No telling lies. The truth. He, Meredith, and the doctor had stuck to it, in as far as a child could understand the kind of destructive force raging in his small body. But this? Will we climb the Peak again? This was not about leukocytes and plastocytes, not about hemoglobin counts and the next blood transfusion. It was a simple question that expected a simple answer: yes or no? Justin looked at his father, his eyes demanding the truth.

"Yes, of course," Paul said reassuringly, for the second time, nodding. Justin gave a quick smile and sank back into his pillow. It was a little white lie, the right reply—who would worry about it? But Paul could not forgive himself for it. Even today, exactly three years after Justin's death, he felt the sting of it. He had betrayed his son. He had left him to cradle an illusion, a stupid, ludicrous, completely ridiculous hope, rather than tell him the truth, to share it and make it more bearable that way. A feeling

of shame had crept over him, and it had not diminished, no matter how often he had turned his lie over in his mind and justified it to himself. The feeling of despair remained, and with it, the feeling that he had been a coward at a critical moment.

TWO

Paul was the last passenger to get off the ferry, and a hellish scene greeted him: two jackhammers pounded at a stretch of asphalt, and, next to them, growling buses expelled black clouds of exhaust. From behind a construction site barrier came clanking and crashing so loud and shrill that he winced at the shock of it, his ears hurting. All around him were crowds of people rushing here and there in a great hurry, constantly passing right in front of him and jostling him as soon as he stood still. He fled into a taxi and took it to the terminus of the Peak Tram; a pedestrian path up to the summit started there. The altitude difference was about sixteen hundred feet; it was a distance that he had covered without any problems before; on some days he had even done it with Justin on his back.

He took a big gulp from his water bottle, picked up his backpack, and started walking. The narrow road passed May Tower 1, May Tower 2, and Mayfair, incredibly expensive residential developments that looked like faceless satellite towns but in which an apartment cost many millions of Hong Kong dollars. He and Meredith had owned two large apartments in Mayfair, which they had sold at more than three times the original prices at the peak of the property boom in 1997. He had used part of the profit to buy the house on Lamma and he lived off the interest on the rest of it.

Paul turned into Chatham Path, which led away from the road into thick tropical vegetation. It was a steep ascent and Paul felt the strain in his calves and feet, his thighs and knees, how they hefted his one hundred and fifty pounds or so upward. A thick blanket of cloud, gray like ash, had hung over the city for weeks. It had cleared somewhat in the morning and now