

Shadows

A short story by Justin Newland

For the last time, Raleigh stood at the head of his walk. He tautened his shoulders against a stiff breeze. From the river bank, he heard the raucous sounds of fishermen laughing. The tide was full, at least for them.

The first step; this one was ambivalent, both fraught and satisfying, a change from stasis to motion, from planning to execution. As a child, that first unaided step had filled him with a joy. Beginnings were always exhilarating and full of adventure.

A second step: across the way, he saw a ship heading for the open sea. It reminded him of his first ever voyage in a pinnacle. He was just sixteen. He could still taste the sea salt and hear the creak of the oak masts. Above all, he could feel the freedom of the sea. From that point, he fell in love.

Soon after the pinnacle voyage, he fell in love again, this time with Alice. They'd coupled in an old hill fort, rough and rude in lustful haste. Tongue on tongue, she took him fully, hands pressed on his naked buttocks. Now he thought about it, she'd seduced him, not the other way as he had always imagined. The hussy! He smiled. He was glad he'd changed his will to her benefit.

With the same steady pace, he walked on. Bored with study, he leapt at the opportunity to fight for the noble Protestant cause. Vying against those Pope-loving Huguenots, he smelt blood and gore in the thick of battle. He still believed a man had the right to pray in peace to his God.

A horse's hooves resounded on the cobbles: down below, a Yeoman on his rounds, a lantern swinging in the gathering gloom.

"Five of the clock," the man shouted.

Another step: then to Court, and Elizabeth, my shepherd of the ocean: what a glorious piece of work was she; gone now, God rest her noble soul. As fierce like a lioness, as soft as a lamb: how she had sported with him and girded him to ever greater exploits: a lady without equal.

Step. Then Bess, oh, Bess. Cupid's arrow had smitten him right and proper. Her wit and charm pierced his sullen defence. He couldn't wait forever for a Virgin Queen. He had to live while he lived. So Beth it was, his grace and his downfall. Even now, she waited for him in his quarters in the Tower.

In the gathering evening gloom - a flash out of the corner of his eye; there it was again, dipping and diving. A bat? He'd seen enough men masquerading as bats during his life. That's how he'd ended up treading cold stones in the Bloody Tower. It darted past again. No, not a bat, a swift: why so late in the year, he wondered? It was beyond its time, like he was.

He'd forgotten how many ventures he'd started in his life. Of them all, he hoped that Virginia

was the one that would take seed. An Empire: that was the vision, England across the world the dream: *Ex Insula Angelorum – out of the Land of Angels*. Of the others, which ones would reach fruition? Perhaps none. Did it matter? No, he murmured, because he would leave behind threads for others to unwind, after his demise. Of late, he'd developed a long view, like the new fangled telescopes the astrologers had conceived.

He reached the end of the outward walk and stood facing a wall of undressed stone. Standing still, he thought how odd it was that, even in a journey, there was a pause. Without doubt, the turning point in his life was the Queen's discovery of his hitherto secret marriage. He'd never seen a woman so full of jealous ire.

An autumn wind gusted through the branches of the plane trees. The ague played him hard and his body ached. Long shadows enshrouded Traitor's Gate. He pulled his gown about him. He turned around, facing the return.

He reflected that the inward walk was subtly different to the outward. It was more than a change of perspective, a revolution, perhaps like that which Nicolas Copernicus wrought on the world, where nothing changed, and everything changed. The restless pursuit of knowledge had greatly energised his life, yielding riches and knowledge beyond imagination, and for this, he gave thanks.

He deliberately placed each step in the previous footfall, as if he was a scout concealing his tracks. He wondered whether, through dint of repetition, he had engraved each step of his walk in the stone, one for the outward, one for the inward. Those tracks would be part of his heritage. His life was in them. He'd been condemned to this walk, but it had been his making. He'd walked his life and times, up and down, up and down, another Sisyphus, pushing the boulder of his life up an imaginary hill.

Two thirds of the way back, he heard the sound of heel on cobble. A Yeomen guard approached Traitor's Gate below him. To shouted orders, they muddled into a line of welcome. The drum beat hard. A stately bark, trimmed in bunting, pulled up. Out stepped the Lord Chief Justice, full of rank importance for his task on the morrow. He, Raleigh, had been ready for years. Tomorrow would come and go, and he would take his leave with it.

This is my last eve on God's earth, he thought. I've reflected on my life, I've looked back through the glass darkly into the history of the world, but to see the Truth of oneself – well, she's a strumpet who'd make fools of us all.

What about good Bes amidst all these awkward Stuarts? How will she endure without me? Then he chuckled to himself. Well, she has survived with me, so after I am gone, she'll find it easier without me. She is a lady, that one, a strong one, and Carew will be safe enough in her smocks.

With a tear in her eye, she beseeched me this morning to pray to God for forgiveness and seek absolution my sins. I will do so. The cleric will visit me before dawn when I will unburden my soul. *Pax vobiscum*. I'll tell him how I was born in Devon with a Protestant soul and how I yearn to take the sods of that red earth in my hands right now. I will tell him of the Queen, how she loved and then

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loathed her loyal knight and servant, 'her eyes'.

He reached the end of the walk. In front of him was an opening into the Bloody Tower, and he could just see into his quarters, where he could hear his servant cursing as he tried to light the fire there.

Raleigh peered through the evening shroud to the river, cold and dark, the ebbing tide, bringing with it a squall of rain. The river - they had imprisoned him so close the sea, the place of his great success, and his great failure. Yet it was in his blood, he could feel it coursing in his veins even at this old age. He sniffed the rain as came towards him like a shroud. I was born near the sea, and I shall die near it.

He had returned from El Dorado his mind affrayed, his son dead, but Beth had soon mended him. Even so, some unsightly scars remained which only death could heal. One was his betrayal to the Spanish. How could his own King sink so low? He forgave him, truly.

Now he was ready. He stepped into the warming glow of the fire.