

*The Shadow I Know*  
Clara Hager  
10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Spencerport H.S.

### The Shadow I Know

The familiar crunch of gravel filled my ears as I stepped out of the car into the blistering heat of the day. The whisper of a feeble breeze provided no comfort from the scorching heat; it felt as if I stood still for too long my shoes would melt into the ground. I studied the old house as I waited for my brother and mom to exit the car; it seemed to have decayed since last we visited. The paint had chipped further, exposing pieces of bare wood along the sides. The tin roof had been pried up near the corner of the porch overhang; the culprit was likely squirrels. The weeds in front of the house formed a thick moat of unwanted shrubbery, choking any flower that dared sprout. The echo of two car doors slamming signaled it was time to head inside.

Almost as soon as we approached the house, the dogs emerged from their cove underneath the porch and bounded up to us, nearly pushing me over as they jumped for my attention. Not wanting to fall behind, I only gave them a quick scratch behind the ears before I jogged to catch up with my mother who was already halfway through the door. The porch creaked as I scampered up the steps, the dogs following me closely. I picked up a toy from the railing and tossed it further out in the yard; they tripped over each other to be the first to get it. Before they could return it to me, I stepped inside and closed the door.

My grandfather welcomed us inside with a smile; my mother's lips were a thin line. "Go play, kids," she said, keeping her glare on my grandfather. "This shouldn't take long."

My mother and grandfather took a seat at the kitchen table as my brother and I scurried off towards the other kitchen. The house was unique in the sense that it was almost two houses in

one. There were two kitchens, two living rooms, and matching bedrooms for each section. Heavy doors separated the house from itself; it had been built this way so my great-grandmother could continue to live there with a caretaker far before I was born. She had since passed, but the house still remained divided with those same heavy doors.

My brother and I were accustomed to spending time at our grandparents'; when summer fell to August we would spend our days there while our parents were at work. We had developed little games to pass the time; trivial things became games and competitions as a meek attempt at entertainment. The games began to fade when my brother got a phone, and he was content with sitting in my grandfather's puffy green chair, scrolling through iFunny. Once I had finished perusing the comics section of a nearby faded newspaper, I attempted to get his attention.

"Thomas," I said. It was if I had never called his name.

"Thomas!" I said, louder this time.

"Mmm?" he gave a grunt of inquiry, but never looked up from his phone.

"Wanna play 'Expiration Date'?" I asked.

"Mmm," he grunted again, making it clear he hadn't truly heard what I'd asked.

"Thomas!" I tossed a half-chewed tennis ball at him in an effort to get him to listen to me. The ball landed in the center of his chest, causing him to recoil.

"What?" He finally took his eyes off his phone, looking at me as if I was a bug he'd just spotted on the wall.

"Wanna play 'Expiration Date'? I'm bored."

"Fine."

We shuffled to the pantry, mere feet away from the living room, and began to search the shelves for the oldest item we could find. My grandparents never cleaned out expired food from their house; my grandfather believed that if it was in the freezer or a dry good it couldn't go bad. Thomas shifted to looking through the freezer, emerging with a completely frozen tray of pork chops.

“When did this expire?” he asked.

I studied the block of ice for a few seconds before responding, “2007?”

“Nope, 2003.” I wondered at the fact that tray was older than I was and that it was ‘still good’. Thomas haphazardly shoved it back into the icebox, causing two more bricks of unrecognizable food to plummet to the ground. As he attempted to fit everything back the way it was, I continued the quest for expired food. My fingers closed around a small box that I discovered to be a box of powdered canning liquid. It had expired April 29, 1991.

“I’m not even gonna make you guess this one. Look how old this is!” I said, showing it to my brother, who now held a bag of frozen green beans in his hand while he attempted to balance a box of popsicles on a shelf.

“That’s older than me!” he marveled as I had a few moments prior.

“I know, I don’t think we’ve even canned anything while I’ve been alive,” I laughed. I returned the box to where it had sat for two decades and reached for a box hidden in the back of the cabinet. I had to extend my entire arm into the darkness in order to retrieve it, but I felt strangely determined to get that specific box.

It emerged from its seclusion, turning out to be a box of lime JELLO. I studied it for a moment, noting its expiration date was July of 2011. It was such an insignificant little box, yet it held many memories.

My grandmother and I always used to make JELLO on afternoons I couldn't go outside. I thought everyone baked something when the weather was bad; I would always make cookies with my babysitter on days I couldn't explore. My grandmother didn't like to bake, so we'd end up making lime JELLO, as it was her favorite flavor. I'd spend the day watching cartoons, intermittently running to the fridge to see if the JELLO had set. My mother often came to pick me up before it had, but that just meant I had a treat to enjoy the next day. My favorite flavor had always been cherry, though after many rainy afternoons I became partial to lime.

A floorboard creaked, then another, closer each time. My grandmother's shadow appeared in the doorway and began to float towards me and my brother; both of us holding some food items in our hand. I quickly shoved the JELLO back into the cabinet, and my brother rushed to balance all the food back in the freezer.

"Have you seen my dogs?" the shadow asked in a hollow voice.

"They're okay; they're outside," I said.

"Oh..." The shadow seemed to flicker she stared at me. The vacancy behind her black stare chilled my soul. "Who are you?"

"My name is Clara." I knew trying to explain who I am further than giving my name was pointless.

"Clara?" The shadow flickered once more. "I have a granddaughter named Clara."

“You do?” I asked, trying not to seem too excited. This was the first recognition I had gotten from the shadow. “How old is she?”

The shadow stuck her arm out at a little below waist height. “Oh, I’d say about three.” I sighed. I don’t know what I expected. Still, I knew it was a ‘good day’ for her. It seems almost wrong to call it a ‘good day’, as there isn’t any ‘good’ part of Alzheimer’s.

I’d only seen a few of her ‘bad days’; those were the days she couldn’t even remember her husband of 50 years or her own children. Those were the days the shadow didn’t display any glimmer of my grandmother. My family would lament that this is the complete opposite of how she was when I was little, but this has become the only version of my grandmother I know. She walks around with no purpose, no memory of most things she used to. Alzheimer’s had claimed my grandmother and left only her shadow behind.

“...have you seen my dogs?” she said after a moment.

“They’re just outside under the porch; don’t worry.”

“Ok...” The shadow didn’t flicker anymore. She stared at me for a minute or so before once again asking, “Who are you?”

“My name is Clara.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Clara. I’m Lenore.” She stuck out her hand, and I shook it, as if we were just meeting. Her grip was weak yet icy; it felt as though if I held on long enough I, too, would become a shadow. Just like that, the ‘good day’ was over, I disappeared from the shadow’s ever-temporary memory. “Where do you go to school?” She continued her usual line of questions, content in her own haze of a world.

“I go to school in...” my voice began to fade as I heard my mom begin to raise her voice at my grandfather in the other kitchen. I could only make out fragments of their conversation, despite the volume. I tiptoed closer, but a floorboard groaned beneath my weight and revealed my position. My mother quickly turned her head to where I was standing. Addressing me now, she said, “Grab whatever you came with; we’re leaving.” Her face made it clear I shouldn’t waste time.

I quickly informed my brother of the situation, and we skittered out the door, trying to remain unseen. My mother stormed out of the house moments later, still fuming. I opened my mouth to ask, but closed it again when I realized I was better off not saying anything.

Quietly, I filed myself into the backseat of the car, and the house got smaller as we moved down the driveway. I took one last look at the antique building, giving it a small wave. It continued to stand there, unmoving, as if I had never been there at all.