

Silence In the Shadows by Emily Rafala (y8)

Despite the covering of azure sneakers on her feet, a chilly air still seemed to sweep across them. A lovely white jacket covered her arms, even with the warm summers' breeze that outside owned.

Her mother always said to laugh in the face of danger. This saying looped in her mind, despite the constant reassurance from her heart that this wasn't danger, but a miracle.

Her eyes glanced back to see a crack of light coming through a large crack in the door. She wouldn't be able to fit, but she wasn't bothered by that. *No going back now*, she thought. But why would she?

She knew she could do it for the hour required, but the intention to stay longer was like banging bongo drums. Loud, repetitive, and very, very annoying.

The man at the front desk said she could easily do it for an hour. He bore such a huge smile; she wasn't sure how it fit on his face. She had said nothing, and just politely smiled back. He wished her a sincere good luck, and the man's smile had seemed to somehow enlarge at his words. A glint of danger crossed his eyes. No, vulnerability.

She brushed the thoughts off. *Maybe it was just my imagination*, she pondered. What was his name again? Charlie? Billy? She didn't remember.

She walked into a rectangle of light; the one made by the door. It was in the middle of the humongous room that she was standing in. A huge shadow surrounded the sanctuary of light – the rectangle was like fire in the blackest night. The shadow extended so far, as if she could forever walk in one direction, yet still never reach an end. Her eyes were set on what she thought could be a wall, but her feet did not move.

Her legs felt heavy, like bags of sand on a hot air balloon. But she didn't know what caused this feeling, or how to push the bags off.

She knew she was falling backwards, but she didn't catch herself until her own shadow touched the surrounding darkness. Her arms flung out, where goosebumps and spiked up hairs nested like eggs. Sharp pains shot through where her hands touched the ice-cold floor.

Despite the constant ringing in her head, regardless of the jacket which at some point was thrown into the nearby abyss, she laughed.

It was forced, and dry, a lack of water alarming her mind like the siren of an ambulance, a sudden thirst she never realised she needed. It was so fake, yet every part of it was real.

Whatever part of her mind she still had, she thought '*laugh in the face of danger.*'

I must do this for Mum. I need this money.

Her hands clutched together, and they were covered in hundreds of tally marks.

Bare legs buckled as she broke down on the tile.

Her body was no longer in the light but smothered with the darkness, yet her eyes could still see, and they read a message which the floor carried.

WATCH THE SHADOWS

Charlie knocked on the door. “Avarice?” he asked. A weak, sickening groan came in response. “I’m here to see how your hour went.” Charlie smiled to himself.

Many moments after, there was silence, so he changed tactic.

“I have your money!” he stated cheerfully. His voice was in a sing-songy tune, and higher pitched than normal. He looked down in his cold hands where stacks of 100 dollars bills, and an 80,000-dollar cheque rested peacefully. His fingers were gently brushing against the bills.

“Say something if you want the money,” he said. He had to ask - no matter what stage the person was in. They were guaranteed to receive it, if they finished the hour, or stayed in for longer, which resulted in an even bigger salary.

He was given silence yet again as a response, which made him raise his eyebrows beyond his hair. Her name was Avarice – and in the form which she had filled out, her name meant ‘greedy’.

He shifted himself so the money was in his left arm, and used his pointer finger to press a white button which was hidden on the side of a mini yucca plant. The leaves were slightly limp. Charlie made a mental note to water it after. The button blended in fine with the white pot, and no person had ever seen it yet, upon arrival.

Charlie pressed his ear against the door and heard a deep click. The cracks in the door were no longer darker than shadows. A bright light was now seeping out the gap between the door and its frame. He twisted the door open with his right hand. A cool air had hit him instantly.

A body was shivering in the off-centre of the room. Skin had been picked away from her, where bone was exposed. She had blood on her hands, as if trying to bandage the wounds which were given.

Charlie walked towards Avarice. His legs buckled back after a couple steps, and he stopped in his tracks. While he was walking, his gaze had drifted to a message on the floor in blood. "You didn't watch the shadows, did you?" he queried, despite the answer being obvious.

He placed the money in front of her eyes. Her nose began to twitch, as if she could smell the money. Charlie then took the money back in his arm.

Silence was the response yet again, but this time Charlie didn't raise his eyebrows higher than his hair. His jaw didn't drop to the floor. His eyes didn't widen across his face.

Charlie went on his knees and checked her pulse. He rested two fingers on her ice-cold wrist for at least 30 seconds, but not one thud could be felt.

Charlie turned over her wrist to see hundreds of black tally marks which were in lots of 5.

"They got you many times, didn't they?"

He placed the cheque in front of her gaze, where eyes watched, not blinking. The bills were left in her scuffed arms.

Charlie stood up, pushing his hands on his thighs to help him. He smiled, ear to ear. He smiled, and it didn't fit his face.

In the happiest voice he could muster, he spoke:

"Congratulations! You survived the hour required. We hope you enjoy the pay we promised!"

He left the room, feet thudding on the floor, and he closed the door behind him, without looking back.

Her body was embedded in his mind, but most of all, her arms.

They were thin, extremely thin, but not because she was skinny.

They were limp, limper than the leaves of the plant at the front desk, but not because she was dying.

They were white, whiter than snow, but not because she was pale.

They were white, whiter than snow, because all that's left was a skeleton.