

SHADOW NOTES: The First Two Pages

By Laurel Peterson

One of my favorite writing prompts came from a graduate course I took at Manhattanville College with writer Elizabeth Eslami. Liz told us to start with the phrase *All s/he [or I] wanted was...* and then write. Is the desire big—like James Bond’s desire to save the world from takeover by Spectre? Is it more personal, like the desire to be loved or to gain self-confidence? How does this desire manifest itself in action? I tell my fiction students to start there, in the middle of a desire—and to think about some reasons why the desire may be thwarted. *Save the back story for later*, I say. Keep the stakes high and raise questions. Those are the things I tried to do as I opened my novel *Shadow Notes*.

I begin the story in the middle of my character’s failing marriage, with a frightening dream that demands she act to save her mother which is in conflict with her desire to avoid her mother. Then I offer up lots of questions: Why is she so angry at her mother? How did her father die? Will she go home or not? What danger is the mother in—and are the danger and the dream real? Why does Clara take her dreams so seriously? When she gets home, how will her mother react? And what’s up with the soon-to-be ex-husband?

In addition, I want my readers to have some sense of the character’s personality. So in the first few pages, I have tried to convey that Clara is a world traveler, an independent spirit, but still rebellious and angry over the unresolved issues she has with her mother. As these issues are at the core of the story, I want the reader to understand her desire to protect her mother and how it’s at war with her desire to be free of all obligation. Here are the pages: enjoy!

CHAPTER ONE

All I wanted was to blow this little Spanish town and my soon-to-be ex-husband, head to Paris, and bathe my wounds in Chanel and walks along the Seine. But I’d had a terrifying dream. The last dream predicted my father’s death. This one predicted my mother’s:

I’m standing at the edge of a vast green field. The field slopes up and loses itself in the bluest of blue skies, pure like the polished cobalt that stretches out over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains outside Santa Fe, New Mexico. In front of me is a paddock with three lean and muscular horses, brown and sleek in the bright afternoon sunshine. The breeze fluffs their tails. I recognize this place as home, although I have never lived anywhere that looks anything like this.

In the distance, I see my mother running down the hill. Her arms stretch out toward me, overbalancing her, and she stumbles, falling to her knees in the soft grass. I can’t see what frightens her. The pasture is empty. She screams my name: “Clara! Look out!”

I turn. Behind me hangs a dense cloud, green-black like the sky before a tornado. This cloud, though, is more like a mass, something palpable, living and dense and suffocating. It is almost upon me. I turn to run toward my mother, only to find a dark

mass almost upon her as well. If they shroud us, I know we will never find our way out, we will never find our way to each other. Mother is weeping in the middle of the field. "Clara, please. Help me." When I finally reach her, she is laid out, as if for a grave, arms folded across her chest, her face as white as empty paper.

I woke exhausted, shivering and cursing into my pillow. I couldn't fall back to sleep, no matter how I tried to calm myself with restful thoughts—salmon antique roses against a grey stone wall, the lull of rain pattering on stone courtyards. All the reasons I didn't want to go home kept intruding.

Going home meant returning to Mother; it meant dealing with my own guilt. I'd never told her my dream about father's death, how I'd seen the sleek black casket, the priest, my father's face made up all waxy or plastic, as if he belonged at Madame Tussaud's. I'd never told her he'd whispered from the casket, "Heart attacks happen, Clara." I knew when he'd said it that I could prevent it, but I hadn't. I blamed myself. I blamed her.

Mother lied. When I was little, before I knew better, I would tell her my dreams, and she would get this frightened look on her face. The look intensified whenever my dreams corresponded to real life. Like the time I dreamed that Timmy Lefkowitz would throw up blood, and then he did on the playground the next day. I shouted at her that if we'd told Timmy's mom or the teacher, they might have kept Sean Gallagher from beating Timmy half to death in the bathroom because Timmy said the Virgin Mary was just another girl, not a saint.

She said no one believed in dreams or intuitions until after something happened. She claimed nothing I could have said would have changed what happened, and telling people only made them frightened of me. I was going to have to get used to that, and if I didn't, people would call me crazy. In fact, until I gave up telling her much of anything, she would say, "It's just a dream, Clara, a coincidence. You mustn't tell anyone about your dreams." She'd make me repeat it, as if I were in detention, writing a hundred times "I will not tell lies."

Then I'd had the dream that predicted my father's death, more terrifying than any dream I'd ever had. Was it symbolic? Real? She would tell me to ignore it, as she had all the others. I didn't want to frighten my father, in case it wasn't true, and I didn't want to stay silent, in case it was. While I was paralyzed by indecision, he died. I hadn't forgiven myself for ignoring my intuition. That was fifteen years ago.

Now, here I was again and this dream felt the same: if I didn't act on it, Mother would die. She'd pushed me away, but she was my mother, and no matter how angry I was with her, I couldn't lose another parent. If I saved her, maybe then I would have done something right, and if I'd done something right, maybe she would be the mother I wanted.

I rolled over and looked at the clock: six p.m. Sliding out from the covers, I shivered for a moment. On the floor lay three open, packed suitcases.

I picked up the phone and dialed United's international desk. "I need to change a flight," I said.

Shadow Notes is available through Amazon or Barking Rain Press. Check it out at <http://barkingrainpress.org/>.



BIO: Laurel S. Peterson is a community college English professor. Her mystery novel, *Shadow Notes*, was released by Barking Rain Press in May 2016. She has written a column for Gannett Suburban Newspapers on local history and served as editor of the literary journal *Inkwell*. She has two poetry chapbooks, *That's the Way the Music Sounds* (Finishing Line Press, 2009), and *Talking to the Mirror* from The Last Automat Press (2010). Her full length poetry collection will be published next year by Futurecycle Press. She is the co-editor of *(Re)Interpretations: The Shapes of Justice in Women's Experience* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009). You can find her at www.laurelpeterson.com, on Twitter: @laurelwriter49; and on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/LaurelPetersonWriter/>.