

FROM

Shadow of the Lions

BY CHRISTOPHER SWANN



Standing by the stone lions at the gates of Blackburne, Fritz looked out forlornly over the empty fields. He fingered the Saint Christopher medal he wore around his neck, a gift from his grandfather who'd fought in World War II. Watching him fiddle with that medal, I was annoyed. It was something of a shock to realize that. It felt like a betrayal, but it was also liberating. Fritz was being neurotic and self-indulgent and attention-seeking. I knew any minute he would sigh and talk in a defeated tone about college. And I couldn't take it. Not then, not while I was consumed by my own guilt, wrapped up in my own garbage.

Oblivious to all of this, Fritz shook his head. "It's stupid, but it's just—there are all these *expectations*," he said. "I mean, I go to Blackburne, so I'm supposed to be set, right? But what if I'm not? When I was a kid, I told my father I wanted to be a cowboy. He handed me a copy of *Lonesome Dove* and said that was as close as I'd get, that I was *meant* for things. But what? Granddad got a medal at Okinawa. Grandpa Joe built a shipping company out of nothing. My father built his own company from the ground up, and he can quote Shakespeare and Tennyson at the drop of a hat." He stopped, grimaced, and then shook his head again. "Jesus, listen to me," he said. "I'm sorry. After all you had to go through today with the J-Board and everything, here I am bitching about college and all the crap in my life."

The J-Board, or Judicial Board, was the school's organization of student-elected prefects, the students who embodied the honor code. When a student was accused of violating the honor code, the J-Board determined whether or not that student was guilty. Fritz was a prefect, and I had appeared before the J-Board that morning.

“It’s okay,” Fritz said, mistaking my silence for feeling awkward about the hearing, having had to sit across from a group of my peers, including my roommate, and be judged. Fritz shrugged with that half smile of his. “I knew you couldn’t have done it.”

The moment stretched and took on weight like a branch bowing under a load of snow. Long past the point when I should have affirmed my innocence, I said nothing. Fritz stared at me, his eyes widening. It must have been all over my face.

“Fritz,” I said, and then stopped. What could I possibly say?

“Jesus Christ,” Fritz said. His face was pale. “You fucking did it, didn’t you?”

“Fritz, I —”

“I stood up for you. I said there was *no way* you would’ve —”

“I know,” I said, rushing through my confession. “I know, I’m sorry —”

“Do you get what you’ve done? What kind of position you just put me in?” His voice rose, tightening like a screw biting into wood. “I have to turn you in, Matthias!”

“You can’t do that!” I said. “Please, Fritz. It was an accident, I swear.”

“You cheated by *accident*?” Fritz looked at me as if I were a stranger, someone contemptible. The pain I felt from his look was so bright and immediate that I was unable then to consider whether or not he was right to judge me that way. He was right, of course. But at the time, all I could see was a rejection of nearly four years of friendship. “Was it an accident when you lied to the Judicial Board?” he said. “When you lied to *me*?” He raised his hands to his head as if he would pull out his hair. “Jesus,” he said. “It’s too much. It’s too goddamn much. I can’t trust anyone.”

Something in me gave way, a floodgate opening to vent my fear and self-loathing. “Don’t give me that holier-than-thou crap,” I said. “You’re telling me you haven’t ever made a mistake?”

He stared at me. “I’ve never cheated,” he said. “Not once.”

“Because you haven’t had to,” I said, warming to my ugliness as if I were holding my frozen hands over a fire, gathering comfort from its heat. “You’re a fucking genius who’s going to get into college. Yes, you are,” I said as he opened his mouth. “You are. And so am I. But the difference is that you don’t

have to worry about paying for it, or even getting in. You've got the grades and the extracurriculars and all that shit. I mean, Jesus, look at your *family*. You think your father and your uncle won't pull strings for you if they have to? Stop being such a fucking drama queen about it. *God.*"

For a few frozen seconds, we stared at each other, stunned and hurt, but only one of us in the wrong. A jay cried in its harsh voice from the darkening wood. Aside from that, we were alone, locked into a terrible moment at the edge of our friendship.

Fritz made the first move. He let the Saint Christopher medal drop from his fingers to dangle on the chain around his neck; then, without a word, he turned and began running up the drive, back to school. Within ten seconds, he was among the trees, and then the drive curved and Fritz curved with it, vanishing from my sight.

After a few more precious seconds passed, I, too, began running, trailing my roommate. My breathing was harsh in my ears as I ran down the drive, leaving the stone lions behind. I entered the trees, the air beneath the boughs dank and dim and slightly chill. There was a damp, organic smell to the oaks, an earthy scent like ground coffee. I glimpsed Fritz ahead, his T-shirt a white blur, and then he was gone again. I ran after him, my feet and legs registering each impact with the pavement. I felt uneasy, as if I were missing something, or about to. I couldn't see Fritz. Ahead of me, the drive straightened into a short stretch before the final curve, and after that curve, the trees would fall away before the playing fields. The road was empty — no Fritz, no anybody. An invisible hand threatened to squeeze my heart, my stomach. My lungs began to burn as I started sprinting. It wasn't just that I wanted to catch Fritz. I had the distinct feeling that I was chasing him, that I had to catch up with him, before something caught up with me. The trees loomed around me; the road seemed to buckle at my feet. I would have sworn something was behind me, but terror seized me at the thought of turning around to look. To say that I thought the lions had finally leapt off their perches and come bounding after me would sound insane. But I ran up the last hundred yards of that driveway as if I had to outrun whatever imagined thing was pursuing me, or be caught and suffer some horrific fate.

I burst out of the trees and into the wide, sheltered bowl of the playing

fields, gasping like a man emerging from a forest fire. I stopped and bent over, trying to catch my breath, hands on my knees. My pulse sledgehammered in my temples. I looked up to see the drive stretch before me and up the Hill, a good quarter mile of asphalt bordered by the track, the golf course, and various dotted stands of trees. Fritz was nowhere to be seen.

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