

FROM A
SHADOW
GRAVE

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**PAPER
ROAD
PRESS**

ONE

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ALL GHOST STORIES START with endings, but you are a woman, not a story; a woman stumbling your way into adulthood in a world of music and hunger. Let's start with you, not with him. Let's start with, perhaps, the music you play on your gramophone that you won't sell even though you should, because music eases the pangs of hunger more than the money it's worth. Let's start with how you dance in the park on the damp grass with your friends when you can't afford to go out, or the smell of the leather seats on the long train rides between Napier and Wellington.

Your house is on Mortimer Terrace, close enough to walk to the pictures on Dixon Street. Now that most of your brothers and sisters have left, you no longer feel squashed; you have a room to yourself except for when there are visitors, and in the morning you sit at the table before your mother wakes up, listening to the tūi calling from the trees behind.

Your father has finally agreed to let you leave school, and it's as if years of tension have just fallen from your body; your muscles loose, your joints no longer heavy. You begged

over and over, not thinking it would happen, and then one evening he said that as long as you worked and paid your keep, he wasn't going to stand in your way.

You were never the sort of girl who hugged your parents, but you did then, fighting back tears. No more shame for how your letters came out crooked or back to front even though you could have sworn they were right. Never again would a teacher bang angrily on your desk when you failed to read a passage, desperately willing the letters to return to the paper and not dance around above it.

You'd tried telling them once that the letters wouldn't stay still, and your teacher told you to stop being ridiculous, that you were just lazy, and maybe you needed to point under the words with your finger like you were still a young child.

After that you pretended not to care.

But now all that is behind you. You have no illusions; you know things will not be easy, but there's a difference, in your mind, between things you have to work hard at, and things you will never be able to do no matter how much you try. You already have some housekeeping work lined up, and you're asking around for more. One day – if you can't be a film star, which you suppose at this point, you can't – you want to work in a shop, like one of the girls on the make-up counter at Kirks.

There's a future for you, where once you could see none.



You've been out of school for two years when you meet George Coats. By now, you know for sure that you can never be a film star, and the skin on your fingers is raw and brittle from scrubbing floors. You take work when you can get it, and you give most of your earnings to your parents as board. On good weeks, you have enough left over to go to the pictures; on bad weeks, you struggle to string jobs together and have to walk instead of getting the tram. The Depression is setting in, and the newspapers carry reports of men in America throwing themselves from skyscrapers, mothers in Europe pushing wheelbarrows of worthless cash.

But this is Wellington, and what happens here is less dramatic. The unemployment lines get longer, and people who would once have paid you to scrub their floors now get down on their own hands and knees. You're secretly pleased that they'll discover how hard it is.

George is assigned to the public works near your house, building the road through to Durham Street. Your mother sends you to deliver pots of tea and even baking – when there's money for extra sugar – to the workers, because she says it's good to remember that there are always people having it harder than yourself. You grumble, but it's the only thing she tells you to do that you do without real complaint. The men crowd around you and tell you you're a pretty young thing; it makes you feel special.

George makes you feel even more special. You're used to being thought of as plain as well as slow, but he takes a shine to you, always has a smile and a wink as he takes his

tea. He asks you to go to the pictures and you blush and quietly say yes.

“I don’t know many people round here,” he says. “I’m so lucky to have met you.”

You look at the newspaper to see what’s on at the Kings, but he says he wants to take you to the Paramount because they have sound there now, and he’ll walk you there. Your heart leaps and you plan how to get yourself ready.

Your make-up bag is sparse; a couple of lipsticks you shoplifted on a dare, a bottle of nail polish, old eye shadow. You will make do. You remember what your friend Eileen told you about make-up when you go with a boy: that you should wear just enough to look like you’ve made an effort with your appearance, but not so much he can tell what you’ve used. So you apply a soft pink to your lips, fasten fake pearls around your neck, heat your curling iron in the fire, and make just the ends of your hair curl inwards. You look in the mirror. You could almost like yourself.

After that, you and George meet often on weekends and go for milkshakes, and you save any spare pennies in a tin under your mattress so you can go to the pictures. You go to the Paramount or the Kings, depending on what’s playing and where the cheap night is. You see *Hell’s Angels* and *Anna Christie*, and you fall in love with everything you see.

George likes music as well, and sometimes the two of you stand in a shop doorway just to hear the last of a song on the radio inside. He can make you laugh, make the lingering demons of your childhood melt away. Your

childhood was being told you were stupid by your teachers and lazy by your parents, and more than that you seem to have been born with a voice inside you that tells you how bad you are, tells you that you're stupid or ugly or worthless at every turn. For the first time, here is someone who contradicts that voice. He can't silence it, but you hear now that you're pretty, as well as ugly. That you're charming, not manipulative. That there are lots of different ways to be clever. When you're with him, it feels like you want to be alive.

After you see *Age of Gold* he kisses you, briefly, on the lips. It's the sort of kiss that is quick enough that those around you aren't scandalised, but very definitely a kiss of romance. The sort of kiss that would make your mother throw a fit if she knew, and you look anxiously around for any possible carriers of gossip.

It wasn't your first kiss, but they had just been boys, boys who would kiss any girl, say they liked you, and move on to someone else by the weekend. You'd kissed boys and you'd kissed your friend Hannah Eriksson, just as practice of course, so you knew what to do when you kissed a boy for real, but you'd never kissed a man before. You have a man now, and you glow with satisfaction.

You kiss in doorways or behind trees, darting into lanes, anywhere you can steal a moment to yourselves. It makes you feel grown up, light-headed like you're on top of the world, and the melancholy that has haunted you for so many years dissipates. It stays away for hours, stays away

until you're back home alone in the room you used to share with your sisters. Then the voice creeps back to say you got everything wrong, and he couldn't possibly like a silly, ugly girl like you.

But when you're with him, it's all excitement and raw energy. He sneaks you into the boarding house sometimes, locks the door of the bunk room he shares with three other men, and when your parents are out you let him into your bedroom.

"I've got some news for you," he says one evening as you're buttoning up your blouse. "I'm being transferred."

Your face betrays your fear. As soon as you'd found someone who cared about you, he leaves. He sees your panic and laughs.

"Oh, don't worry your pretty head. I'm only going to Mount Victoria, working on the tunnel through from Hataitai. You can walk over and see me. It won't even take you an hour, and I wouldn't say no if you wanted to bring me some lunch now and again."

And you do. You scrape margarine onto white bread, try to put some meat in there when you can and if not, a smear of jam or a slice of cheese. Every day feels harder, but you tell yourself that if it's hard for you, then it's far harder for the men out on the work projects, doing backbreaking, heavy work all day on too little food.

Your trips to the pictures grow less frequent, though you put aside money for them even when you don't have enough to eat, because you feel they sustain you more

than food. The glamour of the screen, the excitement of the first talkies, the lines you repeat under your breath as you try to sleep; movies have become as much food for your soul as music. When you can't afford a milkshake or a movie, you walk. You walk along the waterfront or up over Mount Victoria or Brooklyn Hill, around the Botanic Garden by the cable car. George holds your hand in public even though people give you disapproving looks, and you're at once hungry for him and confused. You walk up and down the city's hills, and you feel both free and captive all at the same time.

It's on one of these walks that you stop in the park on Brooklyn Hill, sit on a low wall for a bit, and he takes a breath and confesses his past.

"Phyllis, there's something I need to tell you, and you mustn't be mad at me darling because it was a long time ago but you still need to know."

"You're married," you say instinctively, and cover your mouth as soon as the words are out, as if you could force them back in.

"Was," he replies. "She died."

"Oh..." Your earlier accusation melts into guilt. "I'm sorry."

"There's more. I have children, six of them. When she got ill, we had to put them in an orphanage. There was no-one to help, and when I lost my job ... you can't keep a family on relief work, and there'd be no-one to keep house and take care of them anyway. I visit them on Sundays.

One day, when things are better, I'll get them out of there. Until then, at least I know they're being fed."

"That ... that's really hard," you say. It takes all you have not to exclaim, "*Six?!!*"

He shrugs, stoic. "They're well looked after. We do what we need to."

"Do you have a photo?" you ask.

The pictures he produces are crumpled and faded. He leafs through a couple to find one with just the children. All but the youngest – who is grinning cheekily – look like they're desperately trying to force smiles. It must have been just after their mother died.

"That's Violet," he says, indicating a girl of about ten with her hair tightly braided, in a dress just a little too small for her, "and then there's George Junior, Edith, Ruth, Edward, and the youngest one is Gladys. I call her my monkey girl because she climbs over everything."

"You must miss them a lot."

You've never desired children, but the idea of having them so close and yet so far wrenches at you until you feel the pain he must be experiencing deep in your stomach. You see in George, in his children, in his now-gone wife, the fragments of a family, the family you wonder if you could ever have.

You're finding it harder and harder to get work. You're at home more and arguing with your mother, who wants to know why you can keep house for strangers but not pick up after yourself in your own home. Men are sent out

to do relief work, some to city works like the tunnel, most out into forestry, but for a seventeen-year-old unmarried girl in worn clothes who finds it hard to read? Nothing.

“I never had this problem with your sister,” your mother says, which she might have known was a red rag to a bull. You pick up your blouse, skirt, even your underwear, and hurl them at her one at a time.

“Maybe she’s not my sister. Maybe I’m not even yours! Maybe I’m just some orphan you took in and that’s why you don’t love me like you do the others.” The tears are coming furiously. You don’t really believe what you’re saying, but at the same time you can’t stop. You wish you were clever or pretty, like your siblings.

The arguments continue. Your mother says you’re not looking hard enough, that you don’t know how lucky you are, that you’re just being lazy, and you tell her that she’s just a stupid housewife who couldn’t possibly understand and slam the door in her face, then you open it to slam it again. You’re angry with yourself, angry and disgusted at this person you’ve become, but it always comes out as anger towards others, no matter how hard you try to hold your tongue or count to ten or ask, *Is it kind? Is it true? Is it necessary?* Every outburst stresses you more, makes you angrier, makes you want to disappear, and you don’t want to be this person, of course you don’t want to be this person, but you’re stuck in a loop in your brain and you don’t know how to get out of it. Your friends are finding jobs or getting married; Eileen’s even planning to go to Teachers’

College next year. Times are hard for everyone, you know that, but it feels like times are particularly reluctant to give you a break.

You storm out one night after one of these fights and throw stones at George's window until one of his roommates opens it and yells at you for interrupting his sleep, but George walks with you in the wind and you sit on a wall near the hospital while you cry and cry, all the hurt tumbling from your lips.

"Hush," he says to you. "It's alright. We can get a room."

He dries the tears from your face gently.

"Really?" you ask.

"Just the two of us. You won't have to worry about your mother anymore. It won't be very fancy, but you can make it nice."

Already, you imagine yourself cleaning cobwebs and hanging curtains, twirling to the music playing from the radio behind you. How you'll find old furniture and paint it to look nice and sew clothes for both of you, kiss him when he comes home from work and serve stew and bread, and how he'll compliment you on your cooking.

A new life beckons. You don't need fairytales. You don't need princes and castles. You just need a space of your own, a gramophone, and a man that treats you right.

George finds you a room in a boarding house up on Adelaide Road that accepts married couples, and you delight in the thrill of rule-breaking, of calling yourself Mrs Coats. You pack your bag secretly, throwing in your favourite

dresses, underwear, make-up, and soap. You take your meagre savings, scraped together from housekeeping work and a little you'd stolen from your sister when you were younger because you were angry with her and were sure she'd once taken money from under your mattress. You have to leave the gramophone for now, but you'll come back for it.



Your mother visits one day and begs you to come home. She causes such a scene that you get threatened with eviction. The embarrassment floods through you as you apologise and apologise, and you can't apologise to George enough, even though he tells you not to worry, everyone knows parents can be difficult sometimes.

Your sister visits and to your surprise she doesn't ask you to come home.

"Don't you worry about Ma," she says. "I think it's the stress of the Depression. She has always been a bit ... She worries a lot, but never like this."

"She's crazy," you respond.

"When people are worrying about making the rent or how to feed their children, that gets them stressed and means they can't be reasonable about other things. It's not fair on you, but it's not really her fault either."

"Well, I'm never going to forgive her."

She uncrumples a small piece of paper and shows it to you. The ink has nearly worn off, but you can

make out the words. *For the many, not the few*, says the leaflet, advertising a meeting of the Communist Party.

“It’s not people like Ma that are the problem. It’s our whole society. Us poor folk are pushed to fight each other because it means we’re not fighting the rich people. Well, things are going to change. Uncle Ernie and I have been going to some meetings. You want to join us?”

The thought that you have a chance to do something that would horrify your parents makes you smile.

“I’m in,” you say.

The meeting isn’t as exciting as you’d hoped. You’d imagined scenes out of a spy thriller, not a room of mostly men and filled with smoke. People hand you leaflets, ask you to buy newspapers which you shyly decline. You don’t even have enough money for food. Ernie offers you a smoke and you accept gratefully. You don’t often smoke but you know it keeps hunger pangs away and it gives you something to do other than awkwardly looking around.

A speaker stands at the front to introduce the meeting and you shuffle forwards onto the edge of the bench so you can hear him through the rows of people seated in front of you. He talks about how the Depression is an inevitable consequence of capitalism, and that revolution is the only alternative to these hardships. You feel like you’re not alone.

Back home though, you can see little of the bright future they promise. George seems quick to anger, yelling at you, backing you against a wall as he shouts, and then

apologising after. You never know what mood he's going to be in from one day to the next.

You mend your clothes over and over, repairing seam after seam, and you can't understand why they're tight against your body even though you're always skipping meals. You want to be cheerful and smile your way through the hardship, you want to believe that you can bear anything with the right attitude, but sadness gnaws at you endlessly. Most days, after George leaves, you sit against the damp wall and cry.

You imagine dying all the time and you don't know how to stop thinking about it. You just want everything to stop and let you out. You imagine standing on the old wooden viaduct, spreading your arms and floating down to the traffic below or taking something from the chemist and lying down until life just slips away from you. You imagine taking a knife to your wrists and wonder if you would be brave enough, if you could muster the courage, whether it would be an achievement that would somehow redeem you from all your previous failings.

Instead you steal a bottle of wine, slipping it under your coat and edging your way out of the store. You drink it alone in your room, though it's barely midday, and wonder how it all came to this. You write to your father. You beg him for forgiveness, to let you come home. You beg him to give you consent to marry. You beg him for everything at once, but it all comes down to one thing, to get you out of this hellish situation. To bring a change to your life

even though no change you have made so far has made it anything but awful.

You don't send the letter. You push it under your mattress. You know you're never going home.



You know how the story will go, when you find out, and there's some comfort in that. You would tell him, in the story, and he would panic and ask if you could have made a mistake, but then he would calm down and say, well, what's done is done, we'll get married then.

Your mother would sew you a dress and Aunt Gina would bake a cake, and everyone would know why you married so quickly but all of them would pretend not to know, and when you announced your pregnancy a little later they would congratulate you and maybe give you some old clothes or toys their own children have outgrown.

You hadn't expected it to happen so soon, but even though you're scared, it has the comfort of a well-worn tale, and so taking energy from that you swing open the window and get rags and a bucket from downstairs and scrub grime from the walls, even singing softly as you wash your bedsheets and George's work shirts. The autumn sky is blue and clear, the wind gentle, and you feel for the first time in a long time a sense of hope. This has come a little soon, but perhaps you are blessed to have found love so young.

With the clothes on the line across the little yard, you head over to the tunnel and pull George away on his lunch break. You think it's the best time; you don't want to cause him bother before work, and if he's upset with you he'll have plenty of time to calm down before seeing you in the evening. You could stay at a friend's house that night if you needed to. Everything will be fine, you tell yourself, everything will be fine.

As soon as you get the words out you look at him pleadingly, just wanting to hear words of reassurance. You don't see his fist swing until it hits you, and then you stumble back, barely keeping your balance. You raise your hand to your face instinctively, and it's instantly red with blood.

"Stupid whore," he says, turning away already. "You should have been more careful."

You stand numb and bleeding, not sure whether to run after him or far away, not sure whether to yell back or to apologise, beg him for his forgiveness. The old mantras start repeating in your head: lazy, worthless, stupid; you dig your fingernails into the palm of your hand to try to stop them.



Back in the boarding house, you hold a cloth soaked in cold water to your face, hoping the swelling will go down and that people will believe you when you tell them you fell, or got too close to the digging and were hit by a spade, and you try not to cry. He comes home as usual and you feel your heart freeze when you hear him turn the handle. But

he doesn't look angry, just tired, very tired, his face smeared with sweat and soil.

He says nothing at first, just gets out of his work clothes and into an old shirt, wipes his face and his arms over the small basin in the corner of the room. Then he sits on the bed and motions for you to sit beside him. You do even though you're reluctant, and he says he is sorry, that he just panicked, and can you forgive him? He says he thinks you should get married, and that you're a beautiful girl, and though it's not what either of you had planned, he would be proud to call you his wife.

You say of course you can forgive him, and relief floods through you. You can call this just one bad event in your life, an aberration that would soon be forgotten as motherhood approached. But you don't feel love when you look at him anymore, only revulsion. He was once the bright spot in the darkness of your mind, and now it's overgrown with weeds and thorns, blotting out any sunlit hope for the future.

"I can't do it," he says. Tears roll down his cheeks and you look at him in horror; you don't think you've ever seen a man cry. You find him one of his handkerchiefs and pass it to him. "I can't bring another child into this world when I have six already I can't support. You understand, right? I love you and want to marry you and have children with you, but I need to take care of the children I already have first."

You nod, silently. There's not much to say.

"We can have children in the future, even if you don't have this one, is what I'm saying."

The colour drains from your face. You nod silently, choking back tears. You don't feel you have a choice.

"Where will we find the money?" is all you can ask.

"I'll ask around," he says. "Now, why don't you dry your eyes and make us some dinner?"

The stew you make is mostly water, with some remnants of the lamb you've stretched out over three days, potatoes, and carrots. Even though hunger is gnawing at you, you struggle to get the food down, fear swelling in your throat. You had never intended to become one of *those* girls.

On Saturday, George heads out without telling you where he's going. The next you hear of him is a message from one of his friends, saying he's being held on charges of trying to procure an abortion. You think first of money; if he's not getting relief pay, you'll lose the room. Worse, his arrest is in tomorrow's newspaper and your brother comes to the boarding house and bangs on the door until someone lets him in and shows him to your room. He kicks open the door, bursting the lock. Your brother has always been gentle, you don't think you've ever had a fight with him, but now he's towering over you, yelling about how you've brought shame on the family and that your mother won't be able to show her face in public again thanks to you.

You want to tell him you're sorry. That you're sorry for everything you've caused, but you were lost and unhappy, so unhappy without reason that you wanted to die, and that you've been that way ever since you can remember. Crushing, desperately unhappy, and as a child you could

hide it but now you can't anymore, so can he please forgive you, can you please come home now, please?

The words stick in your throat. You stare at him, only able to blink.

"You have nothing to say for yourself?" he asks. "You're a disgrace, Phyllis Avis Symons. Well, don't you come running to us for help with that baby. Leave it for someone responsible to adopt and get the hell out of our lives!"

You only stare at the drab, damp walls. Your dress has been washed until it's so thin it's barely there at all. As soon as he leaves, you cry until it feels as though you can never stop.

George gets out a week later. Trial date to be determined. In that time, you've cleaned not only the room, but the common areas of the boarding house as well. You hoped that it might earn you some respite when, even with finding extra housekeeping jobs in the last week, you could only make half the rent.

You're careful not to argue with him. This is your fault after all. Instead you make him a decent cup of tea and unlace his shoes. He says little to you that week. Later, he asks you if you want to go for a walk, and you think this might be the end of this horribleness, that perhaps you can regain your love for him, and that love will rise above everything. You head up past the works, up the trails through the bush. You're determined to be good. You don't speak out of turn to George.

He's silent. He has a lot on his mind.

Below, the shovels are silent and still. Tufts of grass are

regrowing in the spoil. Soon the tunnel will be cut right through, the hillside scarred.

Suddenly, you realise that things are terribly wrong, but that realisation only lasts a moment before it's replaced with pain. The shovel hits you on the back of your head and you fall, you fall down and down, tumbling down the cut-off hillside. You black out, and when you begin to come to, there is something raining down on you like heavy spring rain, over your body, over your face, and it's constant and raising your hands does nothing to shelter you from it. You hear the sound of a spade. It's not raining. It's soil being shovelled over you.

You struggle against the heavy soil, hands clawing upwards even as you drift into semi-consciousness. Part of you is telling yourself that you need to move, you need to keep fighting, but the other part of you is tired, so tired, and knows you have no chance, that it was always meant to come to this, that you've never made anything of your short, pointless, little life. That you're stupid like the teachers said, lazy like your mother said, and you probably deserve for things to end like this.

It's a self-absorbed thought to be your last, but then again, you are still only seventeen.



The searchers find your hand first, where you had almost but not quite broken the surface in your desperation. There's a cry, and then others arrive with shovels.

It's a strange thing to watch your own body dug up from beneath the soil. You don't understand what's happening at first, whether you're alive or dead, whether you're above ground or below. You want to yell at them that you're here, not there, but you also want to hide from all of them, very quiet and very small. Your face looks pale beneath the soil, and your hair is muddy and matted. It's a terrible thought, but you can't help wondering if anyone could ever call you beautiful now.



You are no longer whole. You have been broken in two; victim and villain, vulnerable child and wild young woman. You are tethered to this hill, and yet you are being taken into town for examination. Cold hands and instruments and peering eyes and verdicts, until finally, you are being taken up to Karori and buried properly in a corner of the cemetery among the drifting petals of old roses.

You're too far away from Karori. Like most ghosts, you're tied to the location of your death, cursed to keep reliving it. Your spirit is on one hill, and your body lies deep within another. Your mother visits the Karori Cemetery every Sunday after church for a year, but she never visits Mount Victoria. She visits your body, but she never visits you.

You try, sometimes, to visit her, to move from this place, but you always end up moving in a circle. There's nothing solid to hold you, but at the same time escape

is impossible. It is a lingering pain, the final insult, an endless cage. Sometimes you've longed for death, real death, and you've thought, couldn't he just have killed me properly?

But perhaps it is also a resistance, the last piece of you refusing to die, clinging on out of stubbornness, out of spite. Clinging on even as George is tried and hanged at Mount Crawford Jail, and after, on through the decades.

You haunt this hillside through the lingering Depression, and into another war. The tunnel opens, and the sound of picks against rock is replaced by endless motors. You haunt the hillside as the troop ships leave and return emptier, or don't return at all. Fortifications are built on other hills for an invasion that never comes.

You feel the shudders of every earthquake, and wonder each time if the earth has finally come to swallow you up. You wish for a peaceful grave but are strangely relieved each time to find yourself still able to rise above the soil and rock and mud. You watch out over the harbour after the war, as the lights and the city grow, and you cannot grow at all.



You don't remember when you first realised that the noise of car horns through the tunnel was directed at you. At first, you thought they were sounds of greeting or of anger, anger at each other as the roads packed ever tighter with cars.

You realise now, that it is you they are scared of.

You weren't good, in the early days, at controlling your visibility. You're not sure, even now, how you do it, but with enough practice it comes to you as naturally as speaking or swallowing once did. In the early days you were seen floating around the tunnel, semi-translucent in your old dress, and was your hair brushed neatly, or tangled and bloodied? You're not sure.

You'd like to take their fear of you as power, to rise above it all. To know that they all fear you now, those who once looked down on you, the rich people and important people, the clever people, and they can do nothing to harm you. But you cannot. The car horns do not scare you away, as they like to think, but they make you feel forlorn, rejected, and despised in death as well as in life.

You are, after all, still only seventeen.

Over the decades, you watch buildings being constructed and demolished, the city rising and the cars changing, the girls heading up to school, how the fashions evolve each year. You can see only part of the city, tethered to this hillside as you are, but you know it has changed, that so many of the places where you spent your time are gone.

Every year, there are fewer and fewer people who remember you at all.



People will say that you are just a ghost story. They remember you only as a haunt, a presence that unnerves

them, unnatural and perhaps malevolent. Something that needs to be sent away. You're a memory of memories they'd rather forget.

They name you not with your name, but with the site of your murder. They don't remember any of your other stories. To them, you will never be a lonely, angry, confused teenager, who liked to go to the movies and hoped she was in love, who fought with her siblings and always had a tune in her head. You're a ghost story, and all other stories of you have been told and ended.

You deserve more stories than you get.

I hope you enjoyed this preview of Andi C. Buchanan's *From a Shadow Grave*.

This book is available in paperback and ebook, wherever good books are sold.

Find out more.