

# Long Lies the Shadow

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MAIA

Arcadia Books Ltd  
15–16 Nassau Street  
London W1W 7AB

[www.arcadiabooks.co.uk](http://www.arcadiabooks.co.uk)

First published in Great Britain by The Maia Press,  
an imprint of Arcadia Books 2011

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-906413-77-4

Typeset in Garamond by MacGuru Ltd  
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by

Arcadia Books gratefully acknowledges the financial support of Arts Council England.

Arcadia Books supports English PEN, the fellowship of writers who work together to promote literature and its understanding. English PEN upholds writers' freedoms in Britain and around the world, challenging political and cultural limits on free expression. To find out more, visit

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Arcadia Books is the *Sunday Times* Small Publisher of the Year

For Brent Michael Allis  
18th July 1964–28th February 1986



## 1. GIN

When she woke they had already buried him.

Gin lay in the small white room, watching the doctor's mouth move as he told her. And for once she was grateful to the ancient Hasidic laws, the quick burial that saved her from having to face his father's broken stare, his mother's swollen eyes. She did not have to stand and watch his weeping wife and sons, nor answer unspoken questions, clear the confusion as to why she had been there at all. Was she the reason for his silence in his last two days of life? And if she could have borne to get past the guilt, the rage, would she have been able to so glibly lie? To deny her past, her part in his life, and his in hers? He, who once so savoured honesty, what would he have said? Lie? Protect his family yet again? She would have, for that.

A moot point. *So unusual for a BMW to roll.*

But how would she have been able to stem her own pain and look into his wife's eyes, pretend it was his wife's name on his lips as he died?

Perhaps they could have found some mutual comfort in the truth, the shared pain. But then she realised, with a small shock, that even now if she mentioned Leila there would be questions as to who Leila was. What irony that even at his death, she, Gin, was still the only one who knew. At least she had allowed him honesty at death. She held onto this as the only comfort. Held fast, to silence herself, and any shame.

Gin lay in the hospital room and relished the semblance of peace. She was allowed no visitors in the first days and, indeed, expected

none. Later when, of all people, Viv arrived, Gin said little of consequence, still drugged and uninclined to the weariness of talk while Viv's chatter assumed an air of desperate cheer. Inevitable that her family would call Viv, when Gin herself would have been content alone. She fell asleep, waking to an empty, dark room, lit only dimly by the lights from the mountain.

The doctors came, and went, and came again, each time with updates of her progress that she found herself indifferent to. She lay there, gazing out the window at the immovable mountain. She would be left with a slight limp, they said, and she thought it inappropriate to laugh. Was that all? It seemed obscene that his death should mark her so little, and she was glad for the news. Her leg would probably ache in London's winter, they said. Overwhelmingly she longed suddenly for hard, grey rain and the hustle of a wet Saturday afternoon market. The African sunshine could never capture that. Lying alone in the small white room, she remembered why here the irrepressible sun could depress her with its falsity, how it could burn and be bright when all around was pain and poverty. In England she would be able to resonate with the coldness that sat now in her soul.

But for now, she is here, in Cape Town. For now, beneath the mountain's watch, she will slowly repair. Ignoring the hollow ache, the need to mourn, to cut her hair and rend her garments, to cry and keen. To kneel over the ashes of all she thinks forsaken, lost, or dead.



## 2. *GIN*

It is her fourth day in the small white room, a time twice as long as they had spent together. There is a knock. Light but firm, and unnecessary since the door is always left ajar. Not quite so private a room, it seems.

“Miss McMann. Miss Virginia McMann,” says a voice, and it is not a question. He enters despite her silence, her lack of invitation. “I’m Nick Retief.”

He is a tall white man, in his early thirties, some five years younger than herself. Hair like hers, more blond than brown, and in need of a trim.

“Detective Sergeant Nick Retief.”

She notes a touch of emphasis, a touch of pride perhaps, and wonders at this most peculiar of South African anomalies, a man with an Afrikaans name but an English accent.

He seems unperturbed by her continued reticence to speak. “I’m investigating your —” and here he falters slightly, “accident.” He says the word as if it is foreign, as if it exists in a world he seldom inhabits. A world of unconnected incidents and random events, as if his own is certain and assured, where every action is determined exactly by a clear and measured motivation.

Gin blinks at him. Waits. He seems to wait also. Unhurried. Eventually she says, “Yes, Mr Retief?” the question formed in almost exactly the manner in which he has said *accident* to her. And indeed, to herself, her voice sounds thinly accented with an exaggerated Englishness, summoning her years in England so as to separate herself from him, and his Afrikaans name.

He squints slowly back at her, as if deciding something. “Miss McMann,” he says again.

His eyes, she notices, are gunmetal grey, but when the light hits them, they opacify to blue.

“Can you tell me what you remember?”

She wants to laugh at him. She has thought of nothing else.

“I wanted a coffee,” she starts, and then stops.

*Empty coffee houses lined the street; it was too early in the morning. She was longing for the froth of a London cappuccino, but would have to wait instead for the strong black filter of the hotel breakfast. White linen curtains twitched in the breeze, caressing the window. African air was already warm against her skin. And where to now, she mused? Simon was still asleep, an unruly black mop of hair, greying. She was touched by nostalgia and an ache she could call yearning. These moments were just that. Moments, and not forever. Once, a long season ago, she might have dreamed of forever. But time was passing. She tousled the mop and, never an early riser, he grumbled.*

*“Hello,” she said, sweetly. Wanting to brush the hair from his eyes.*

*He stretched and yawned, ran his fingers through his hair. “You sound so English.”*

*Was it compliment or slur, a reminder of her treachery, or his? Did he miss his wife that morning? She was unused to the duplicity, the complication of feeling. Yet it did not feel like it ought; she was more happy than guilty. As if time were an affirmation. As if she had prior claim.*

*They drove out early after breakfast, sexual tension sated, an ease between them. He had lied about being here, about being with her, he said. She was strangely moved at his need to protect her as much as himself. She held no illusions, discovering a lightness to her limbs that morning, an unusual joy unfettered by the future, fruit of an elusive search. The sun glinted silver on the sea, its reflection imprinting on her retina, overpowering. They drove first to Rondebosch, the leafy suburb.*

*He showed her Grove Road, where he had lived, a walk away from the university. She took him over the small hump of a bridge, past the little gallery of shops that in her memory always made her tingle in its proximity to Jonnie. She did not mention Jonnie, wondering if Simon would still be jealous, still feel a kind of fury for the only other man she had ever loved. But she showed him the house in Observatory, its colonial façade intact despite the Cape winters. They walked like lovers ten years younger. Amidst stalls in Greenmarket Square they held hands, secure in anonymity. Had coffee on the sidewalk in Seapoint.*

*So unusual for a BMW to roll. His hands gripping the wheel.*

There is a patter of noise on the window, rain tapping gently on the pane. Detective Sergeant Nick Retief has stayed silent, waiting for her to continue, and Gin turns her head to look out at the mountain. The coffee at breakfast, Simon's face as he made love to her; these are not details that interest this man. The weather has darkened the mountain, and wisps of cloud have shrouded its peak.

Gin starts again. "We drove around the city," she says.

*On a whim, Simon took her to Kornfeld and Gold jewellers. She picked a sapphire ring close to the colour of her twin brother Gabriel's eyes, close to the colour of her own.*

*"It matches your eyes, Ginny," he said as he paid for it. He was smiling.*

*She felt the thrill of walking into the shop owned by their families, the thrill of no one knowing who they were.*

*He whispered to her and his voice was full of laughter. "Something to tell the grandchildren," he said. But his eyes were serious and sad.*

*Years before he had said this same sentence, in a tiny hotel on the coast. Hope had lived full in her chest then.*

*Today, said Simon, he had something to tell her. Something he should have told her years ago. She was startled, curious.*

*A white car, heading directly at them. They were already round Kloofnek, ready to sail down the high-set suburb of Tamboerskloof.*

“There was a white car,” says Gin. She thought the memory was clean and clear. Only now, in the retelling, does she realise how fractured it is. She thinks slowly, stupidly, how unfair it was to have an accident, when they had already rounded the coast, past Llandudno and Hout Bay, safely.

*Back in the city, swerving. His hands gripping the wheel. The white car closer, her world starting to tilt. So unusual for a BMW to roll.*

“Is that all?” asks Nick Retief.

She hears a caustic dissatisfaction in his tone. Gin closes her eyes. The accident is a blur. She can only remember the urgency in Simon’s voice, his eyes.

*The mountain tumbling to meet them, his hand outstretched to her. Through heavy-lidded eyes, like a lover, she looked at him, his hand outstretched to her.*

*“Ginny,” he gasped, like a lover, when making love to her. Urgently, his hand outstretched to her.*

“Is that all you remember?” repeats Retief, although his tone seems kinder than before.

She cannot bring herself to tell him Simon’s final words. What does it matter now if he called a name? So she nods, awkwardly, silently, at this man. Like a child, chastised, instead of a woman of thirty-nine.

*Then, “Leila.” Like a message.*

*His hand outstretched to her.*

Nick Retief turns to leave. She imagines he is as contemptuous of her faithless memory as she.

His voice sounds harsh again to her now, echoing off the stark walls. "I'll come again in a few days. Perhaps you'll remember more then." A pause. "And you will need to make a statement at the station."

After Retief has left, Gin watches the raindrops increase against the pane till they streak in rivulets down its length.

*She did not think of Simon dying, all that loss. It was her soul soaring free, looking down at him. The beach at Clifton, the palm trees at Camps Bay. Hot searing sun. Was it the sun she felt burning her skin? The road, sign-writing itself across the brown earth, the cool mist of foam at the edge of the ocean. Washing-powder-white clouds. The city, sparkling below. Up, up into the blue sky, sapphire-blue like Gabriel's eyes, sapphire-blue like the ring on her hand. Her hand, outstretched to him.*

Simon will walk the passages of her soul forever. No bond will be broken now; there is only this eternal longing. And the horror replay, over and over again, with its missing pieces, till it fades in sleep but returns to her restless in dreams. A second time in Cape Town he will haunt her. She wakes to find him her first thought, grief soaking her skin like sweat. It is not as expected. She has waited for the enormity of guilt, but it has not come. Not even with visitors, not even with the flowers from his family, the bouquet of white an offer of forgiveness and understanding, if only she will proffer more than silence, give some sort of explanation. It is as before, as if merely an ocean or a continent separates them, as if a phone call or a plane ride could reunite.

She remembers their first parting, first loss.

*His voice was warm and deep. His eyes would not meet hers. Simon had*

*held her so gently. And gently, he had let her go. She had sat for a long time on the three stone steps, sat in the afternoon shade for a long time after his car had pulled from the cobbled courtyard. Something was lost between them. And a week later she herself had left, packed up her battered blue suitcase, closed the door.*

*He is leaving her again. She is losing him, for the last time.*

Perhaps, thinks Gin, the love is there still. Perhaps it could not leave, though the lovers had. It must be there still, in the little flat. On a good day, perhaps it could be glimpsed. Like incense wafting through the air. Like dust in sunlight. At first, this thought depresses her, but later it is comforting. By then she is up and walking, the promised limp more evident with fatigue. The doctors fuss her less, the nurses more.

Nick Retief visits once again, but she is asleep, and she wakes to find he has left a note, and an incongruous bunch of stiff proteas on the table. The note is brief; she is vaguely surprised at the even strokes of black ink, demanding her presence at the station on her discharge. The bouquet lasts the rest of her stay, and when Viv comes to fetch her, when Gin is well enough to leave the small white room with its view of the mountain, she takes the rigid flowers with her.

### 3. *VIVIENNE*

It is time to fetch Gin from the hospital. Viv stares at the mirror, pulls at the skirt that falls loosely about her angular hips. She has lost more weight, she notes absently. She touches her eyes briefly. Fine lines. So long, so long. So many years since Gin had truly been part of her life, so many years since they had been friends. Viv closes her eyes to block out the thought. What will Gin think of her now? What will she make of her life?

*At Viv's first visit, Gin had been drowsy and drugged. She lay pallid and still, those blue eyes glassy, elsewhere. It had been easy for Viv then. Easy to sit in the chair across from the bed. Sitting in shadow, into darkness, while Gin slept. Easy to study this stranger, this scarred ghost, who was once her friend.*

Viv pulls the car out too sharply, too quickly. A horn blares behind her, the driver throwing up his hands in exasperation. She waves him an apology and pivots her ankle on her high heel, pushes the accelerator to the floor. At the traffic light, she slows to catch the amber, and lights a cigarette on the red. She rolls the window down to the afternoon heat, and the smoke from her cigarette lifts and coils, sliding out, a cloud in the clear blue sky.

*Jonnie. What to say about Jonnie?*

A beep from behind. Green. Viv takes off more slowly this time, unwilling to close the distance between herself and Gin, her unexpected guest. It was natural that Gin's sister would call her after the

accident. Natural that, as always, Issy remained oblivious to Gin's feelings, still ignorant of any acrimony between Gin and Viv, still unaware it had been years since they had even spoken.

Viv turns into the squat concrete of the hospital car park and stubs her cigarette out in the ashtray. She turns the rear-view mirror towards herself, smooths at her long brown hair. Lipstick. Somewhere. She fumbles in her bag. Scarlet is all she finds. Appropriate. She waits for the guilt and the hurt to overwhelm her again.

*Jonnie.*

She smears the colour across her lips. Her mouth feels suddenly dry.

*Gabe.*

She checks her appearance again, and sighs. Too many people lie between her and Gin. It is bad enough to look into Gin's eyes and see Gabe's eyes looking back at her. Now to meet those eyes again, with Jonnie's name as yet unsaid.

Viv takes a deep breath, and gets out of the car.

*On Viv's second visit, Gin had been awake. By then, Viv had packed Gin's clothes from the hotel, the sumptuous Mount Nelson with its palm trees and faded pink walls, set in sun beneath the slopes of Table Mountain. A tourist's hotel, she had thought, settling the bill, sifting through the mundane chores that continue unabated after tragedy, after death.*

*"Hello, Viv," Gin had said. A hand, stretched out to her.*

"Hello, Viv," she says again now.

Awake. But not alive, thinks Viv. Gin's restless eyes search the room, as if she has forgotten something. A mind searching for what is unfinished. She turns to look at Viv. *Help me*, the eyes say, *help me*.

"*Hamba kakuhle*, Miss Virginia," says one of the nursing assistants from the doorway.

Viv watches as the woman grabs Gin's hand, wishing her to travel



well with the traditional Xhosa greeting. Gin leans forward and hugs the woman briefly.

“*Enkosi kakhulu,*” says Gin, thanking the woman in the same language. Their hands linger, pale white folded into rich black. Gin’s left arm is still bandaged, covering the burns of hot metal, where the mangled car had melded to her flesh. At the edge of white gauze, Viv can see pink skin, healing.

Nurses gather round to say their farewells. Viv stands and waits, holding onto Gin’s suitcase. Gin must have been an ideal patient, she imagines. Quiet, compliant, uncomplaining.

Eventually, Gin walks somewhat lopsidedly towards her. Viv is taken aback by the extent of her limp.

“I’m sorry to take so long, Viv,” whispers Gin.

Viv smiles at her, trying to convey warmth.

Gin takes her arm. “I need to lean on you a bit, if that’s all right – don’t let them see,” she pleads, her voice still low.

Slowly they wind their way through wide hospital corridors to the car park outside. Gin’s gait seems to straighten with the walk. Something bothers Viv about Gin’s appearance. It is not age or injury, she thinks, but something vague and undefined.

Viv turns the car into the late afternoon traffic on de Waal Drive. Cape Town sprawls below them through the haze of February heat, a blurred mix of beiged-out buildings, silvered motorways, blue sea and sky. The mountain retreats from them as they drive. The city speeds by, the verdant suburbs of Newlands receding to the brown edge of the Klipfontein plain.

Fruit and flower sellers litter the roads at junctions. Some of them rap at the car window to gain attention. “*Only ten rand, merrum, five joosey oranges!*”

Gin sits quietly, as if absorbing this city anew. Viv, having expected awkwardness, feels relieved. She lights another cigarette, rolls down her window, and switches on the radio.

She is pleased to get home, pleased the girls are away and there is none of their usual mess. They sit in the lounge, drinking rooibos tea while Gin tries to tell her about the accident. Gin's blue eyes darken as she talks. Her gaze flicks from the floor to the framed photographs of Viv's daughters and back again. Viv stays silent, making no comment, trying to make sense of the stumbled recall. She touches Gin's arm when she seems to struggle for breath between sentences, touches Gin's trembling hand as she apologises and starts again. Time appears to have warped oddly for Gin. She speaks Simon's name quickly, lightly, as if to say it otherwise would be to taste it, to feel it on her tongue like salt from tears. Gin's account of the accident itself is garbled and rushed. She shivers violently, and Viv imagines she remembers Simon, beside her in the burning car, dying.

The tea is cold and Viv rises to make a fresh pot. The kitchen is dark, the sun having already abandoned the rear of the house. She switches on the kettle, notes the lack of groceries in the house, but is thankful again for the absence of her daughters. They are with her mother and stepfather on the flat plains of the Klein Karoo. It will be easier for Gin, she thinks; it may give her the time and space necessary to heal, without constant reminders of past pain, past loss. And the presence of Viv's children could not have failed to remind her.

The kettle starts to boil, and Viv busies herself with the new pot. She needs more tea, and the milk is low. Reaching for fresh cups in the half-gloom, she knocks the sugar bowl to the floor. She tenses, shuts her eyes, anticipating the noisy crash of porcelain, yet it falls almost gracefully, cracking cleanly. The crystals hiss out across the terracotta tiles.

She had been saddened by the news of Simon's death, and slightly shocked at his being here in Cape Town, his being here with Gin. Gin's presence in the country was not a surprise in itself. Viv had known she would fly out for her father's funeral. Issy had told her that Alexander McMann had died, had asked if Viv would be coming

to the funeral. But Viv had declined, unwilling to upset Gin further, and, she admits to herself now, unwilling to face her.

She sweeps at the sugar. In the immediacy of helping Gin, she had hardly thought of Simon Gold. After all, she had hardly known the man. Even after her brief contact with him, when in desperation she had sought him out for help, she had known him no better for it. There was no further reason to stay in touch thereafter. They lived different lives in different cities. She remembers black hair, grave-dark eyes. He had been courteous to her, and patient while she had tried to explain he was the only doctor she knew who did not also know Jonnie.

*Jonnie.* His name sits constantly between her and Gin.

Yes, Simon Gold had helped her. Because of Gin. But Viv suspected he would have helped her despite that. There had been a brief spark in Simon's eyes when he asked about Gin. It had flickered out as abruptly when Viv admitted she did not know, and he had not mentioned Gin's name again.

Viv throws the cracked bowl in the bin. Neither she nor Gin takes sugar so it is no loss. She wonders whether she ought to mention her meeting with Simon to Gin. But this will necessitate explanation, and certain pain, suppressed since Viv's divorce from Jonnie.

*Jonnie.* They must clear this, she resolves.

She takes the pot of tea to the lounge. Gin sits huddled in the armchair near the window that looks out over the lawn's square expanse, the grass fresh and revived from the recent rain. The high walls keep the noisy neighbourhood at bay and the unintentional sparseness of her garden creates a serendipitous serenity. Gin smiles wanly at her as Viv pours and hands her another cup of rooibos. She hugs it between her hands. Looking at her, again Viv finds herself vaguely disturbed by something in Gin's appearance.

"I haven't even shown you your room, Gin. Come, bring your tea. I'll take your things."

Gin follows her. Turning at the top, Viv watches her take the stairs one step at a time, her knuckles white as she grips the banister for support.

“Thanks for this, Viv,” says Gin, as she is settled into the spare room. “It reminds me of my hospital room.” Then, as if realising the statement might offend, she adds hurriedly, “I mean, it’s light and airy... and I can see the mountain.”

Viv looks out the oblong of window at the mountain, now a dark purple in the fading light, almost a silhouette. From this angle, it resembles a recumbent woman, the one peak a shoulder, dipping to a waist, the swayed curve of hip covered lightly by a rumple of blanket.

“Have they – my dad, or Issy – kept in touch then?” Gin’s voice is hesitant as she talks of her family.

Viv does not turn around. “In the beginning more so. Less when... when I was married.” She pauses. She feels uncomfortable for the first time. “Your dad did more so than Issy. But not that much after your mom... since your mom died,” Viv talks quickly now, “and not since he got ill.” She turns around to face Gin, who is looking at the floor. “Issy rang about your dad. I’m so sorry, Gin.”

Gin nods. There is another awkward silence.

“And I’m sorry about Simon too,” adds Viv, as gently as she can.

Gin sits down heavily on the bed, leans back, and closes her eyes.

Viv takes a deep breath. “Ginny...”

Gin opens her eyes and looks at her, a direct blue gaze.

Gabe’s eyes, thinks Viv, a stab to the heart. “You know, about Jonnie and me...”

Gin looks away quickly. She rubs at her leg. “Viv,” she says, exhaling in a sigh, “it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter anymore. It was so long ago. I’m just really sorry it didn’t work out for you.”

Viv’s heart contracts. No doubt the aged pain of Jonnie pales against the raw loss of Simon. But she is relieved. She does not want

to talk about Jonnie either, but at least the effort has been made, his name said, the lingering spirit dispelled.

*Jonnie. And all for nothing.*

They both stare out of the window. Voices of children playing, shouting, reach the room. A siren sounds somewhere. Friday night in the nearby township has begun.

After a while, Viv turns from the darkening view. "I'll let you unpack... I'll get us some supper soon. Is there anything you fancy? Bunny Chow?" she smiles, referring to Gin's old favourite, a scooped-out loaf of bread, the hole filled to overflowing with spicy meat curry.

Gin shakes her head.

Viv senses her displacement, a certain inability to connect. She touches Gin's arm. "Just shout if you need anything. There are towels in the wardrobe. And a phone in the room next door. It's my office."

"Viv..." Gin rises stiffly, grabbing at the headboard for support. She moves forward and hugs Viv. "Thank you," she murmurs, "for everything."

Viv feels her own throat burn with sadness. For a moment they cling together, two wounded women.

Viv goes downstairs and takes the tea tray to the kitchen, closes the blinds, switches on the light. In the brightness, she notices some spilled sugar still on the floor. Reaching for the brush and gathering it up, again she thinks of Simon. They had met in his office, sparse contemporary rooms of high ceilings and designer art, at odds somehow with Simon's manner, she had thought. He had been so kind to her, at a time when kindness had been so lacking in her life. Afterwards, Simon had sent her flowers. Yellow roses, remembers Viv. She still must have the card somewhere, a brief *Get well* followed by the simple sprawl of his initials, *SG*.

She takes a lasagne from the freezer and switches on the oven. She walks back into the lounge and lights a cigarette. The mountain

is black now; only a thin line marks the border between it and the descending night. She draws the curtains and sinks back into the couch.

It strikes her suddenly what has been bothering her about Gin's appearance. Gin looks shrunken, realises Viv. Diminished somehow. She draws deeply on her cigarette. It is as if Gin's loss is physical. Yes, thinks Viv. Diminished. We are diminished by death.