

The Shadow (Vol. 2)

A novel about H.C. Andersen

PART I: THE UGLY DUCKLING (1827–1830) –

The Failure to Belong

Age: 22–25 years old

Chapter 1: The Student

The black velvet cap sat just right. It was new, stiff in the brim, and bore the shiny silver emblem declaring that its wearer was an academic citizen of the Danish realm.

Yet beneath the new cloth, the skin was the same.

Hans Christian sat in the corner of Mrs. Rahbek's fine salon at Bakkehuset. The air was thick with steaming tea, pipe tobacco, and the scent of dried rose petals. Seated around the long mahogany table were the capital's scholars and young men. Their voices glided smoothly

and elegantly across the tabletop as they effortlessly discussed Oehlenschläger's latest poems and the newest philosophical trends from Germany.

Hans Christian tried to sit still. His legs were so long that they had to be curled up under the chair so as not to trip the starched maid carrying the teacups around. Every time he shifted, the chair creaked traitorously beneath his weight.

"And our young student, Andersen?" came a sharp, superior voice from the head of the table.

It was Jens Baggesen—or one of his younger, venomous admirers; it all felt like the exact same voice to Hans Christian. The glances of the refined company turned toward him. Lorgnettes were raised, and the young ladies muffled their small, expectant smiles behind their fans.

"What says our new *poeta* from Funen?" the man continued, taking a small pinch of snuff. "You have published poems, after all. But tell us, Andersen—don't

you find that the form lacks... regularity? It seems a bit formless, doesn't it? Like the gurgling of a brook rather than a proper sonnet."

Heat instantly rushed up into Hans Christian's cheeks. His heart began its familiar, feverish drumming against his sternum.

He wriggled his long hands out of his lap, gesticulated with his arms, and opened his mouth to reply. He wanted to explain to them about the feeling, about the freedom, about how poetry was not some Latin template from Meisling's chamber of torture. But instead of the cultured, rounded words he had practiced in his tiny room, his Funen accent hit the salon like a stone through a windowpane.

"It... it is the heart's bond!" he stammered, his voice—still bearing the marks of that wretched voice crack—slipping into a high, piercing register. "When feeling fills the chest, how can one force it down into a... a mold!"

A subdued, polite chuckle spread around the table.

"The heart's bond," whispered one of the ladies with a quiet giggle. "How delightfully Funen."

Hans Christian felt his knees tremble. In sheer desperation, he leaned forward to grab his teacup, just to have something to cling to. His long, clumsy sleeve caught the edge of the fine porcelain saucer.

Spoon, cup, and hot tea spilled across Mrs. Rahbek's starched white tablecloth.

A dark, stained pool of cold tea spread slowly toward the young lady's light silk dress.

"Oh, God! Spare me! Forgive me, a hundred thousand times forgive me!" Hans Christian cried out, falling to his knees in the middle of the carpet. He grabbed his own handkerchief and began desperately scrubbing at the cloth, which only made the stain three times larger and smeared it deeper into the fine fabric.

"It is nothing, Mr. Andersen, absolutely nothing," said Mrs. Rahbek in a voice so icy polite that it cut deeper than a whip's crack. "The maid will handle it."

Hans Christian rose unsteadily. He looked at the young men around the table. They were not laughing aloud—they were too well-mannered for that—but their eyes gleamed with a terrible, muted amusement. He was a student. He had a cap with an emblem. But he was still the boy from Munkemøllestræde. He was still the strange stork that had flown into a salon where only nightingales were meant to sing.

Without bowing, without taking his leave, he snatched his velvet cap and bolted out of Bakkehuset, down the stairs, and out into the dark shadows of Frederiksberg Garden.

He ran until his lungs burned beneath his waistcoat.

By the large pond, he sank to his knees in the wet grass. The moon mirrored itself in the black, still water. Hans

Christian leaned forward and looked at his own reflection on the surface.

Nothing had changed. The long, hooked nose. The small, frightened eyes. The protruding collarbones and the hair that would never lie flat like that of the finer gentlemen.

He had become a student. Privy Councillor Collin had saved his exterior, but his interior was still an outcast, ugly thing.

At the water's edge, merely a few yards from him, a flock of white swans glided silently and gracefully through the dark. They did not need to speak with a Funen accent. They did not need to wear tight coats or worry about teacups. They owned the water, the air, and the night.

Hans Christian ran his long, crooked fingers across the cold water, shattering the reflection of his own face.

"They laugh at me," he whispered to the swans, his voice soft and dark in the nocturnal silence. "Because I was

born in a duck yard. Because my cradle stood among tailors and washerwomen.”

He clutched his velvet cap in his hands until the silver emblem dug into his palm.

Inside his head, the mocking voices from the salon slowly began to transform. They turned into a tale. He envisioned a poor, overgrown duckling—a wretched creature pecked at by the hens, bossed around by the ducks, and kicked by the housemaid because it was too strange, too large, and too ugly for their little world.

It doesn't matter being born in a duck yard, he thought, as the tears slowly dried on his cheeks, when one has only lain in a swan's egg.

He pulled his pen and a small scrap of paper from his pocket. He could not fit into their drawing rooms. He could not win their respect with Latin quotes. But he could build a world where the clumsy, outcast duckling

finally unfolded its white wings and flew above all the fine folk who had once mocked it.

Chapter 2: Riborg

The sun burned over the Funen hills in August 1830, but to Hans Christian, Funen was no longer the mud of Munkemøllestræde. It was an enchanted realm of lilac bushes, half-timbered houses, and green meadows.

He was twenty-five years old and visiting his old schoolmate Christian Voigt in the sleepy little market town of Faaborg. It was here, in the sun-warmed merchant's estate—where the scents of dried spices, coffee beans, and old oak filled the rooms—that she entered his life.

Riborg Voigt.

She was Christian's sister. She had gentle brown eyes, dark curls framing a plump, smiling face, and a voice so soft and kind that it instantly numbed all of Hans

Christian's customary anxiety. When she extended her small, warm hand and welcomed him, he felt a jolt run through his body, as if lightning had struck his slender sternum.

For the first time in his life, a young, beautiful woman looked at him without laughing.

Over the following days, Hans Christian lived in a feverish haze. They took walks by the sea, gathered wildflowers, and he read his new poems aloud to her. Riborg listened open-mouthed. She did not find his Funen accent comical; she called him "a poet" with a genuine, virginal awe that made his heart swell.

He forgot his long legs. He forgot his worn-out shoes. He saw himself in her gentle gaze and believed he had finally found the human being who would hand him the key to a real life.

But Hans Christian heard nothing when reality whispered.

He did not notice the small, cautious hints from his friend Christian. He did not see the golden ribbon Riborg wore on a fine chain around her neck—a ribbon that concealed a small miniature portrait of Poul Lacoppidan, the young forester to whom she was already secretly engaged.

A few days later, they sat in the sunlit garden. Riborg leaned forward and handed him a small, dried rose.

“Keep it, Mr. Andersen,” she said softly. “As a keepsake of Faaborg.”

It was too much for Hans Christian. The cork popped from his pent-up, desperate mind.

He tripped over his own feet and sank to his knees in the gravel of the garden path before her. He grabbed her skirt with his long, trembling hands. His face was pale with terror and manic love.

“Riborg!” he cried out, his voice cracking into a high, tragic shriek that sent a flock of sparrows flying from the hedge.

"I cannot live without you! You are my soul, my poetry, my salvation! Tell me you will be mine! Command me to die for you, and I shall do it!"

Riborg stepped back in sheer horror. Her gentle brown eyes widened in fright at this gigantic, strange man writhing in the gravel like a wounded bird.

"But... Mr. Andersen," she stammered, blushing to her hairline. "You must not... I am engaged! I am to marry Lacoppidan!"

The words struck Hans Christian like an axe blow to the forehead.

Engaged.

He remained lying in the gravel. The world collapsed around him. The light of the sun went out, and the flower garden transformed into a barren, ice-cold landscape. Riborg stood above him, trembling, and handed him a small, folded piece of paper—a note on which she had

hastily written a final, kind, but absolute refusal to halt his fit of madness.

“You must never speak of this again,” she whispered, fleeing into the merchant's house. The door shut with a small, definitive click.

Hans Christian rose slowly. His knees were covered in white garden dust.

He looked down at the small paper in his hand. *“I can only care for you as a brother,”* it read in her fine, rounded handwriting.

He did not accept his fate like a mature man who shrugs his shoulders and moves on. Hans Christian was a dramatist in his own life. He took the refusal, wrapped it in tissue paper, and tucked it into a small leather pouch that he hung from a cord around his neck—right over his tense, pounding heart.

(There, against his bare skin, that leather pouch would lie for forty-five years, until he lay on his deathbed in 1875 and instructed his friend to burn the letter unread).

He left Faaborg in the mail coach that same evening. As the carriage rattled away, he sat alone in the dark, pressing the leather pouch against his chest.

He was twenty-five years old. He had been rejected by the stage of the theater, by the salons of high society, and now by the woman he believed was meant to save his soul. He was a strange bird that had tumbled down into the middle of a goose yard, where everyone else had already found their mate.

In the swaying carriage, he pulled out his pencil.

He cried no more. The pain was too vast for tears; it had to be transformed into cloth, into feathers, into a fairy tale.

In his notebook, he began sketching the story of the poor, bullied hatchling. He wrote of how the other ducks pecked its neck, how the maid kicked it, and how it fled into the dark marsh, alone with its cold and its longing.

"It doesn't matter being born in a duck yard," he wrote, as his tears slowly caused the ink to run on the paper, "when one has only lain in a swan's egg!"

He would never have Riborg. He would never have a wife or a home in a merchant's estate. But he would force the entire world to weep over the ugly duckling—and finally bow to the swan when it spread its mighty wings over the water.

PART II: THE LITTLE MERMAID (1831–1834)

The Failure to Be Loved

Age: 26–29 years old

chapter 3: The Travels

The iron-rimmed wheels of the mail coach cut through Italy's white dust like knives.

It was the spring of 1833. Privy Councillor Collin had secured the grand travel grant from the *Fonden ad usus publicos*. The message had been unvarnished: Andersen had to go out. He had to see the world, learn foreign languages, steel his fragile nerves, and behave like a grown man.

Instead, Hans Christian traveled through Europe like a flayed child of sorrow.

In Paris, the roaring clamor of cabs, boulevards, and pleasure houses had frightened him out of his wits. In Rome, the scorching sun beat down on the ancient ruins, where the smell of warm dust, donkey manure, and wild flowers hung like a heavy, intoxicating haze over the streets.

For other young men, the Grand Tour was a pursuit of art and freedom. For Hans Christian, it was a sensory nightmare.

He lived in a small, sweltering room on Via Purificazione. Every night he sat by the open window, listening to the street live its own forbidden life. Men sang serenades beneath windows, women's laughter chimed behind heavy shutters, and in the shadows beneath the arches of the Colosseum, he saw men standing close—far too close—whispering in the dark and touching one another's shoulders with a hesitant, feverish intimacy.

Hans Christian's throat constricted.

In his own chest, he carried a chaos he dared not put into words. He was twenty-eight years old, yet his body remained unbroken, untouched, and imprisoned. He longed for the soft touch of a woman, just as he had longed for Riborg, but when he saw the buxom Roman girls in the street, he shuddered with anxiety. And when he looked at the handsome, dark Italian artists with their

unbuttoned shirts and strong shoulders, he felt a jolt of an entirely different, terrifying, and forbidden attraction that made him sweat with shame beneath the bedsheet.

“God preserve my pure soul,” he whispered to the dark wall of his room. “Let me not fall into sin.”

God may have heard him, but the terror of the flesh did not release him.

When the other Danish artists in Rome—the cheerful painter Albert Kuchler and the strikingly handsome sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen—went to taverns in the evening to drink heavy, red Frascati wine and laugh with the local girls, Hans Christian backed away.

He fled back to his room. He could not endure their raw mirth. He could not bear being the strange, gangly Dane sitting in the corner, blushing every time conversation turned to love.

Instead, he produced his writing paper.

His only refuge was his quill. With almost manic speed, he filled sheet after sheet with long, impassioned, and desperate letters to Copenhagen. He wrote to his friends, he wrote to the men of the theater, and above all, he wrote to the Collin family.

His letters were no cool travel diaries. They were distress signals from a drowning man.

"I long so dreadfully!" he wrote, the ink blotting on the paper under his trembling hand. "The world is so vast and cold, and I am so alone in it. Write to me! If you do not write, I shall believe you have forgotten me, and then I will die here in foreign lands!"

When the letters were folded and sealed with red wax, he went out into the Roman night and dropped them into the postbox. But the very second the paper fell into the darkness, he shuddered with regret.

They would laugh at him in Copenhagen. Jonas Collin would shake his head at his lack of backbone. And Edvard... Edvard would merely knit his brow in contempt at this cowardly, overly sensitive wretch who could never learn to act like a man.

Hans Christian walked down to the Tiber's black, muddy water. He looked down into the current swirling beneath Castel Sant'Angelo.

He had traveled to find himself, but he had only become more of a stranger. He was a fish thrown onto the warm sand—unable to breathe in the real world, and lacking the ability to swim back into the deep where he belonged.

Chapter 4: Edvard Collin

When Hans Christian returned home from Italy in August 1834, his legs trembled with a new, consuming fever. It was caused neither by cholera nor Roman street filth. Its name was Edvard.

Edvard Collin was the Privy Councillor's son. He was three years younger than Hans Christian, but in every other respect his exact opposite. Edvard was trim, proper, and cast in the coldest mold of the Copenhagen civil service. His dark hair was always combed without a single stray strand, his tailcoat fit impeccably across his shoulders, and his gaze behind sharp spectacles was dry, controlled, and devoid of illusions. He treated emotions like figures in an account book: they had to balance, and there must never be a surplus under any circumstances.

To Hans Christian, Edvard was everything he himself lacked. He was security, solid ground beneath the feet, patrician calm.

And Hans Christian loved him with a desperate, suffocating ferocity that terrified them both.

In the large Collin home on Stormgade, Hans Christian was a frequent guest, but he was always there on sufferance. While Edvard worked on his legal documents at the heavy desk, Hans Christian sat on the very edge of

his chair. His long fingers drummed restlessly against his thighs while his gaze devoured the younger man's profile in the candlelight.

"You work too much, Edvard," Hans Christian whispered, his voice trembling faintly.

"Someone must do the civic work, Andersen," Edvard replied without raising his eyes from his papers. The scraping sound of the pen against the sheet was the only rhythm in the room. "The world does not consist of poems and castles in the air."

Hans Christian rose slowly. He walked behind Edvard's chair. He felt a terrible, pent-up urge to rest his large, bony hand on Edvard's shoulder—just to feel the warmth of his body, just to hear his breathing quicken slightly. But his hand hung suspended in the air, trembling and useless, before he sank to his knees beside the desk.

Edvard froze in his movement. He set down his quill and looked down in irritation at the tall figure.

"What is it now, Andersen?"

Hans Christian gripped the edge of the desk. His eyes were bright with unshed tears, and the words tumbled out of him in an amorphous, pleading stream.

"Edvard... we must be more than friends. You must let me be everything to you! Let us address each other as *du*. Let us cast away this cold, formal *De*! It is armor between our souls! When one cares for a human being as I care for you, a formal *De* is like a sword in the chest!"

To offer the informal *du* was, at the time, the deepest sign of intimacy and spiritual brotherhood between men. For Hans Christian, it was a declaration of love, a ruthless surrender.

Edvard sat completely still. His face transformed into a mask of cold granite. He drew his hands back beneath the edge of the desk, out of Hans Christian's reach.

"You misunderstand our relationship, Andersen," Edvard said. His voice was icily calm, unpleasantly clear, and devoid of any warmth. "I have an insurmountable aversion to saying *du* to men with whom I did not grow up from childhood. It is a feeling in my nature that you must respect."

Hans Christian gasped for air, as if choked. "But... we are like brothers! I give you my soul in my letters!"

"Your letters are overly dramatic," Edvard interrupted dryly, taking off his spectacles to wipe them. "You demand something of me that I cannot and will not give. I appreciate your talent, Andersen. But I do not care for that sort of... exaggeration. Let us remain on formal terms, as befits educated people."

I do not care for that sort of thing.

The words fell like heavy iron-clad nails against a coffin lid.

Hans Christian remained sitting on the hard floor. He looked at Edvard's clean, smooth hands as they calmly picked up the pen again and continued writing on the legal document as though nothing had happened. The dot above the *i* was placed with a precise, dry stroke.

The door had been slammed shut once more. Not by the porter Siboni at the theater, not by Riborg in Faaborg, but by the only man to whom Hans Christian had offered his naked heart.

He rose slowly. His long back was stooped, and he felt more deformed and more alienated than ever before. He was a creature from the seabed that had strayed onto land, only to discover that the humans he loved found his language incomprehensible and his love repulsive.

Chapter 5: The Silent Pain

The silver cutlery clattered against the fine porcelain in the Collin family's dining hall on Stormgade.

It was the summer of 1836. Sunlight streamed through the tall windows, illuminating the long, set table. The aroma of roasted capon, fine wine, and starched damask tablecloths filled the room. Around the table sat the head of the family, Privy Councillor Collin, surrounded by his daughters, sons-in-law, and the city's finest citizens.

In the center sat Edvard Collin. His face radiated a rare, muted happiness. At his side sat Henriette Thyberg—his new fiancée. She was delicate, sweet, and proper, with gentle blue eyes and light curls falling gracefully over her shoulders. Edvard leaned toward her, took her small white hand in his, and whispered something quietly into her ear that made her blush and laugh softly.

Sitting directly opposite them was Hans Christian.

He sat squeezed into his chair like a silent, overgrown ghost. His long, pale fingers clutched his silver fork until his knuckles turned stark white. His shoulders were drawn all the way up to his ears, and the black cravat tightened around his throat like a length of invisible rope.

No one looked at him. The party's chatter bounced merrily back and forth across the table—they spoke of political reforms, the theater's new plays, and the upcoming wedding. Edvard raised his wine glass and toasted his father-in-law. His gaze swept right past Hans Christian without stopping, without blinking, without the slightest crack of recognition.

"I do not care for that sort of thing."

Edvard's cold rejection echoed in Hans Christian's ears like a church bell ringing over a funeral.

He looked at the couple. He saw how Henriette rested her head against Edvard's shoulder. She did not need to beg for a *du*. She did not need to write long, desperate letters from Rome or fall to her knees in the gravel. She was a part of their world. She was made for the parquet floors, the salons, and Edvard's dry, bourgeois affection.

Hans Christian felt a terrible, icy pain rise from his chest and lodge in the middle of his throat.

He wanted to scream out. He wanted to leap up, slam his fist onto the white tablecloth so the glasses shattered, and cry out his passion, his jealousy, and his bottomless solitude to this polite company. He wanted to tell them that he had given Edvard his soul, and that they were trampling on a living heart.

But his lips did not move.

His throat was closed, bound tight by a hundred years of bourgeois decorum and his own paralyzing terror. If he spoke, they would laugh. If he screamed, they would call him mad and throw him out into the street filth once more.

He was mute. In the middle of this loud, happy gathering, he was so terribly, absolutely mute.

He set down his fork. His food was cold and tasted of nothing. Inside his own mind, he felt a transformation take root—the familiar, feverish process where pain exceeds the limit of what a human can bear, and turns into poetry.

A little mermaid, he thought, as tears burned behind his closed eyelids.

He envisioned her so clearly. A creature from the dark, cold depths longing to ascend to the light and the human world. A creature who had surrendered her beautiful, clear voice—had her tongue cut out by the sea witch—in order to gain legs to walk on. To be able to step upon the earth among the fine men.

Every step she took on land felt like walking on sharp knives, so that blood seeped from her feet. And why? To win the prince's love.

But the prince loved another. A beautiful, proper girl from a neighboring kingdom. The prince patted the mute

mermaid on her dark hair and called her his "little foundling" while marrying the other woman. And the mermaid had to stand at the wedding celebration aboard the ship, dancing for them with bleeding feet and a broken heart, unable to utter a single cry of lament.

Hans Christian looked down at his own large, bony feet beneath the table.

It was his own blood flowing. It was his own voice that had been cut away.

When dinner ended and the guests rose to move into the coffee parlor, Hans Christian slipped out into the dark entrance hall. He took his hat, stepped out through the gate on Stormgade, and walked down toward the canal.

There, by the black, still water under the moonlight, he pulled out his notebook.

He wept no more. The pain had become pure, crystal clear, and inevitable. He pressed his pencil against the

paper and began to write the fairy tale of the little mermaid who did not get her prince, and who could not cry her agony out to the world—but instead had to dissolve herself and become foam upon the sea.

PART III: THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

(1835–1842) – The Failure to Become Famous

Age: 30–37 years old

Chapter 6: The Breakthrough That Doesn't Feel Like One

In May 1835, a thin little booklet lay on the counters of Copenhagen's bookstores. It bore the unassuming title *Fairy Tales Told for Children*.

The cover was gray, the paper cheap, and the price set so low that even poor folk could afford it. It contained four short stories: *The Tinderbox*, *Little Claus and Big Claus*, *The Princess and the Pea*, and *Little Ida's Flowers*.

Hans Christian had written them in a rush, almost as a distraction while sweating over his "proper" novels and plays. He had written them in the language he used when speaking to children—without Latinate flourishes, without pompous theatrical gestures, but with the oral Funen cadence that had hitherto been mocked in the salons.

The reaction from the capital's learned lovers of fine poetry was crushing.

In the journal *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur*, the reviewers seized their quills with pure contempt. Hans Christian sat in his modest room at Nyhavn 20, reading the reviews aloud to himself. His voice trembled while the rain drummed against the windowpane:

"One can only regret that a poet with Mr. Andersen's talents degrades himself to publish such old wives' babble... These little stories are formless, linguistically shameless, and void of any educational morality. No

cultured mother will put such nonsense into the hands of her children.”

Johan Ludvig Heiberg, the undisputed tastemaker of the Royal Theatre and the absolute monarch of refined aesthetics, shook his head mockingly in his salons.

“Fairy tales?” Heiberg laughed over coffee as his elegant wife, Mrs. Johanne Luise, lit a cigarette. “Andersen writing for children? That is the most distasteful notion yet. A grown man sitting around inventing stories about talking dogs with eyes as big as the Round Tower! It is theatrical childishness!”

Every time Hans Christian submitted a new dramatic work to the theater management, it returned with the same dry justification: he lacked cultivation. The theater still did not want him.

But down in the street, something remarkable was happening.

When Hans Christian walked through Copenhagen's narrow lanes, he felt faint tugs at his coat tails. Little boys in wooden clogs and girls with dirty aprons stopped on the cobblestones. They pointed at his tall, awkward figure with wide, spellbound eyes.

"There he is!" whispered a small boy near Gråbrødretorv.
"There's the man with the dogs and the tinderbox!"

The children did not care about Heiberg. They knew nothing of poetic meter, Latin grammar, or bourgeois aesthetics. They understood the language that the scholars called "old wives' babble." They understood the language of wonder, magic, and the little man.

In their drawing rooms, parents tried reading the stories aloud, only to discover to their own astonishment that they too were entranced. Beneath the simple words about princesses and tin soldiers lay a bottomless sorrow, a biting satire, and a profound, adult knowledge of human nature that the reviewers were too blind to see.

The books were snatched off the shelves. The little booklet had to be reprinted again and again.

Hans Christian sat at his desk, looking out over the masts of Nyhavn. He held the newly printed booklet in his long hands.

It was the breakthrough. It was the success he had thirsted for ever since stepping off the mail coach in 1819.

Yet it tasted like ash in his mouth.

He had wanted to be the great tragic poet. He had wanted to be the celebrated actor who brought the pit to tears at the Royal Theatre. He had wanted Heiberg's admiration and Edvard's respect.

Instead, they called his life's work "children's nonsense." The scholars patted him on the head like an eccentric, peculiar uncle who was good at entertaining the little ones at family gatherings, but whom no one took seriously when the adults spoke of real art.

He had become famous, but he had become famous for the wrong thing. He was still the outcast bird—now simply a bird fed milk crumbs in the garden while the real birds sang in the forest.

Chapter 7: The Grand Drawing Rooms

Now the doors were open. But it was not the royal gate Hans Christian stepped through—it was the servants' entrance to the drawing rooms of the rich.

By the late 1830s, H.C. Andersen had become a fixture in Copenhagen's most powerful bourgeois salons. Among counts, baronesses, and shipowners on Kongens Nytorv and Bredgade, his presence had become the latest fashion statement.

"Andersen is here!" went the cry whenever his tall, stooping figure crossed the polished parquet floors.

Yet they did not want to listen to the man; they wanted to be entertained by the curiosity.

“Read for us, Andersen!” shouted a corpulent baroness, clapping her small, jeweled hands. “Read the one about the little snail! Or make your paper cutouts! Cut out a little dancer for my daughter!”

Hans Christian bowed low. His back was bent at a practiced, humble angle. He took his small scissors from his pocket and lit a candle on the long table. While the company drank their heavy port wine and ate sweetmeats, he stood in the middle of the carpet, feverishly cutting into fine paper. His long, rough fingers moved with an eerie, almost magical swiftness.

Then he read aloud. His Funen voice rose and fell, he gesticulated with his arms, wildness entered his eyes, and he bent his body into tragic shapes to spark their enthusiasm.

The company applauded delightedly.

"Truly a natural talent!" whispered an elderly gentleman, draining his glass. "Strange fellow. A bit like a trained ape, wouldn't you say? But remarkably entertaining."

Hans Christian heard it clearly. He felt the gazes. They did not see a poet by the grace of God. They saw an exotic parrot in a gilded cage, whose tail was pulled to make it sing before sending it back to its wretched room in Nyhavn.

When dinner was served at the grand dining table, he was placed at the very bottom—all the way down with the tutors and governesses. No one asked for his thoughts on politics or philosophy. His sole task was to provide lively entertainment until the grown gentlemen retired to smoke their cigars in peace.

He was naked in the middle of their gilded splendor.

When he returned home to his dark room that night, his hands trembled with a suppressed fury.

He tore off his fine, rented evening coat and threw it onto the floor. He looked at himself in the mirror. There he stood—a middle-aged man who had spent his youth bowing, scraping, and dressing up in borrowed feathers to please a society that deep down despised him.

They pretended to understand his art. They pretended to see his greatness. But it was all a stage set, a hypocritical game of imperial garments.

He seized his quill and dipped it into the ink.

“The Emperor’s New Clothes,” he whispered to the empty room.

He wrote with a biting, ice-cold vengeance. He created the emperor—the vain ruler who thought only of his attire. He created the entire court of fine ministers, baronesses, and critics who nodded approvingly, shouting, “Oh, how beautifully it fits!” and praising the fabric’s pattern, even though there was absolutely nothing to see. They were

terrified of being exposed as stupid or unfit for their offices.

And in the middle of this entire theater of lies and bourgeois decorum, he placed a small child. A small, raw, unadulterated voice from the street.

“But he has nothing on!” cried the child.

Hans Christian smiled a dark, bitter smile as the pen cut through the paper. The fine salons had made him their fool. Now he would make a laughingstock of their entire world forever.

PART IV: THE SHADOW (1843–1855) – The Failure to Grow Up

Age: 38–50 years old

Chapter 8: Jenny Lind

She was the Swedish Nightingale.

When twenty-three-year-old opera singer Jenny Lind stepped into the limelight of the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen in the autumn of 1843, time stood still. The capital went mad. Men locked in bourgeois restraint wept in the pit, and when she raised her crystal-clear soprano, Hans Christian felt a jolt run through his middle-aged, tormented chest, as though his own broken child-mind had suddenly rediscovered its lost voice.

She was everything he had never been: loved by all, blessed by God, and effortless on stage.

Hans Christian was seized by a manic, consuming obsession. He was thirty-eight years old, his hair was beginning to thin at the temples, and his body was scarred by a lifetime of humiliations. But in Jenny Lind, he saw his last chance for redemption. He believed in his quiet, desperate heart that fate had finally brought two chosen, misunderstood children of nature together.

He showered her with poems. He followed her like a long, faithful dog through the streets, and when she traveled on, he flooded the postal service with glowing, tear-stained declarations of love.

For weeks and months, he lived in a delirium. In his letters, he pleaded for a sign, an acknowledgment, a promise that those two stars in the sky might merge into one.

The answer came in a small, scented letter from Germany in 1844.

Hans Christian snatched the paper with trembling hands in his room. His heart pounded in his temples as his eyes flew across her neat Swedish script.

“God bless my good, dear brother!” she wrote softly and innocently. “You will always have a sister in me, and I pray that Our Lord may preserve our pure, beautiful sibling love...”

Brother. Sister. Sibling love.

The words sat there on the smooth paper like cold icicles.

Hans Christian sank slowly into his chair. The leather pouch containing Riborg's refusal felt suddenly heavy and icy against his sternum. Edvard's cold, formal address echoed in the back of his mind. And now this: a sister.

She did not love him as a man. She did not see him as a lover. To Jenny Lind, he was merely the strange, harmless H.C. Andersen—a good, dear, older brother one could pat on the cheek, but never kiss on the mouth.

A terrible, freezing cold spread from his chest into every corner of his body.

He packed his trunks that very night. He could not stay in Copenhagen. He could not bear to hear her name whispered in the salons, or to see people smile pityingly at the old poet who had believed in a fairy tale.

He fled into Europe. As the train rattled through the dark German landscape and the rain whipped against the windowpane, he pulled out his notebook.

He wanted to write about the cold. Not about the summer lilacs in Faaborg or the little mermaid's warm tears, but about the pure, lethal ice that can fix itself inside a human heart.

He created *The Snow Queen*.

He created the story of the little boy Kay, who gets splinters of the magic mirror in his eye and in his heart. Splinters that turn the heart into a lump of ice, so that he can see only the ugly, the cold, and the rational in the world. Kay, who allows himself to be pulled by the Snow Queen's grand white sleigh toward her ice palace in the far North, where everything is beautiful, glistening, and absolutely dead.

Hans Christian looked down at his own long, trembling hands in the dim light of the train compartment.

He himself had become Kay. He had turned stiff with cold. Jenny Lind's gentle "sisterly words" had not warmed his soul—they had been the final splinter of ice, driving itself all the way into his innermost core.

Chapter 9: The Traveler

A trunk. A pair of worn-out boots. A long, dark cape, and an umbrella that never left his long fingers.

That was the sum total of Hans Christian's worldly possessions.

By the mid-1840s, H.C. Andersen was one of the most famous men in Europe. His fairy tales were translated into German, English, and French, and kings and princes invited him to their tables. Yet the man who ate with gold cutlery at the palace in Weimar did not own a single room he could call his own.

He was a professional guest.

For more than thirty years, he lived in a permanent state of transit. He drifted from one Jutland manor house to another, from estate to estate, from one guest room at his friends' homes in Copenhagen to the next hotel attic in Paris or Rome. Every evening he unpacked his things; every morning he packed them up again.

"To travel is to live!" he exclaimed proudly in his memoirs.

It was a lie. A beautiful, poetic lie he told the world to cover up the cruel truth: he did not travel out of wanderlust. He traveled because no one wanted him to stay permanently.

At the manor houses—Glorup, Bregentved, Frijsenborg—his arrival was initially an event. The counts and baronesses received him with open arms. But after a couple of weeks, the mood would begin to shift.

Hans Christian was a difficult guest. He suffered fits of raging hypochondria. He was in a panic-stricken dread of

fire and always carried a thick rope in his trunk so he could climb out the window if the house caught fire. He was terrified of poisoning, terrified of being buried alive—so terrified that at night he placed a note on his nightstand that read: *"I only appear to be dead."*

In the hosts' drawing rooms, he slowly noticed their gazes turning weary.

When he complained of a draft from the window, when he demanded to read his latest poems aloud for the third time in the same evening, or when he broke into tears over a bad review in *Fædrelandet*, his hosts exchanged silent, resigned glances behind his back.

"When does our dear Andersen head home again?" the baroness would whisper to her husband at the breakfast table.

Home again. Those were the most terrifying words in Hans Christian's vocabulary. He was always in transit. He was the temporary man.

One cold, windy November evening, he sat in his guest room at a secluded manor house in Jutland.

Outside, rain lashed the windowpanes, and the wind howled through the old oak tree in the park. Inside the room, a single tallow candle burned. Hans Christian looked at his open trunk standing in the middle of the carpet like an open coffin.

He was forty-nine years old. He had no wife waiting for him. He had no children running to meet him on the stairs. He had no table where he could set his own teacup without asking permission first.

He was like a shadow gliding across other people's carpets.

He sat down at the unfamiliar desk, taking out his quill and his scissors. He began cutting into a sheet of black paper—one of his famous paper cutouts.

But his fingers trembled. He did not cut a happy dancer or a festive troll. He cut the figure of a learned man with a long cape and a pointed hat. And beside him, he cut another figure—a hollow, dark silhouette that slowly grew larger and stepped out of the man's body.

He thought of his own life. He thought of how, all these years, he had played the role of "The Fairy Tale Writer H.C. Andersen" to please the world. He had smiled, cut paper, read aloud, and bowed to the rich.

And meanwhile, his true, naked self—the lonely, tormented boy from Odense—had been trampled into the dark. His own fame had become like a shadow that had swallowed his real human life.

He dipped his pen into the ink and wrote the title to his darkest, most macabre masterpiece:

The Shadow

He wrote of the learned man who loses his shadow in the warm countries. How the shadow returns—dressed as a real, wealthy human being adorned in gold and expensive clothes. How the shadow slowly forces the learned man to become *its* shadow. And how the shadow eventually has the learned man executed, because the man wishes to tell the truth: that the shadow is merely an illusion, a copy without a soul.

“They believe I own the world,” Hans Christian whispered into the empty, cold guest room while the storm raged outside. “But it is my shadow they love. Me... me, nobody wants.”

PART V: IT'S JUST A FAIRY TALE (1856–1875)

– The Failure to Die

Age: 51–70 years old

Chapter 10: The Old Man

Old age smelled of camphor, toothaches, and cold tea.

By the early 1870s, Hans Christian Andersen had become a living monument. When he stepped onto the cobblestones of Nyhavn, men took off their hats, and mothers lifted their children so they could point at the tall, stooped man in the long, dark cape. He was the pride of Denmark, the king of fairy tales, a name that shone in every language in the world.

Yet inside the modest rented room at Nyhavn 18, the king was a trembling, lonely old man.

He was in his mid-sixties, but his body behaved like a burnt-out heap of ruins. His teeth had fallen out one by one—his famous mouth, which had once held a clear soprano, was now a painful, empty gap that made eating solid food nearly impossible. Every new tooth he lost felt like the loss of a poetic work.

“When the teeth go, the poetry goes,” he lamented in his diary in a slanted, shaky hand.

His anxiety had not lessened with the years; it had grown into an uncontrollable monster. His hypochondria consumed his nights. If he felt a twinge in his chest, it was a heart attack; if a sore on his leg itched, it was gangrene. He weighed his stool, checked his saliva in the mirror every morning, and dared not cross Kongens Nytorv for fear of a roof tile falling on his head.

But the worst dread was the dark and the silence.

At night, when Copenhagen slept and the rattling of cabs had fallen silent, he sat in his nightgown at the small table. His long, bony hands trembled with arthritis, but he could not put down the scissors.

He was making paper cutouts.

In the weak, flickering light of the tallow candle, he cut feverishly—hundreds, thousands of small figures. He cut swans with broken necks, girls dancing in red shoes, and dark, macabre trolls with gaping mouths.

It was his army against death.

“Look, my little lady,” he whispered hoarsely to a paper figure of a dancer, balancing her on his index finger. “You shall not grow old. You shall not have toothaches. You shall dance forever.”

He thought of grandchildren. Not his own—he had none. He thought of all the unfamiliar children in Germany, England, and America reading his books while their parents put them to bed. They loved him. They sent him letters with drawings and dried flowers.

Yet none of them knew him. They knew the gentle, fairy-tale Uncle Andersen that photographers made him resemble in tidy portraits. They did not know the desperate, tormented boy from Odense, who still sat deep inside the old man’s wrinkled body, screaming with longing for his father’s reading and his mother’s washing hands.

Sometimes, when the scissors fell from his tired fingers, he rested his gray head against the tabletop.

In the darkness behind his closed eyes, he was not the famous Councillor of State. He was ten years old again. He stood in Munkemøllestræde, hearing the carpenter's iron nails being driven into his father's coffin. *Thud. Thud. Thud.*

He had spent a lifetime running from that coffin. He had danced at the ballet school, sung at Siboni's, begged at Collin's, written tragedies, novels, and fairy tales—all to build a wall of words between himself and death.

And now he stood here at the end of the road. The world applauded, but the room was empty. The trunk still stood by the door, always packed, always ready. But this time, there was no mail coach to carry him away from the final, dark journey.

Chapter 11: The Final Fairy Tale

The summer of 1875 smelled of dry grass blades, lavender, and the nearby sea.

At the country estate of Rolighed in Østerbro, Hans Christian lay in a large, bright bed. It was here, among his faithful friends, the Melchior family, that the journey was coming to its end. The window stood ajar toward the garden. The long, white curtains moved slowly in the August breeze like the wings of a grand, hesitant swan.

He was seventy years old. His body had become translucent and frail like the finest paper cutout, and the pain from the cancer slowly consuming his insides was dulled only by drops of laudanum.

Beside the bed sat Mrs. Dorothea Melchior, dabbing his forehead with a cold, damp cloth.

“Are you lying comfortably, dear Andersen?” she whispered softly.

Hans Christian did not answer right away. His eyes, once so wild and feverish, lay deep in the dark hollows beneath his heavy brow. He heard her voice, but it came from a distant place—as if through a thick layer of theatrical velvet.

Inside his head, there was no more dread. The laudanum and the proximity of death had swept away all the wild, tangled thoughts: the toothache was gone, the fear of fire was gone, and the agonizing ache for Edvard's informal *du* and Jenny Lind's love had ceased to burn.

Instead, he saw images.

He did not see his honorary citizenship diplomas from Odense. He did not see the gold medals from kings or the grand, gilded editions of his books.

He saw a fourteen-year-old lad with sleeves that were too short, standing in the rain on Kongens Nytorv in 1819. He saw the boy fall down the stairs of the theater while the

porter slammed the door in his face. He saw the cracked soprano note at Siboni's, the laughing boys at the ballet school, and Heiberg's mocking smile in the fine salons.

A lifetime of defeats. A long, unbroken chain of rejections, humiliations, and closed doors.

And yet, thought the old man, as a small, faint ray of light passed through his chest.

God had not given him the life he asked for. He had not been allowed to become an actor. He had not been allowed to be loved by a wife or found a home of his own. God had shattered all his human dreams one by one—but only to let something greater grow from the shards.

Every tear had turned into a pearl. Every humiliation had turned into a story.

If Siboni had not thrown him out, if his voice had not cracked, if Edvard had not been as cold as ice—then he

would merely have been a mediocre actor in a theater long forgotten. His pain had been the very fuel. His failures had been the very fabric from which he had woven his immortality.

He extended his long, bony hand over the edge of the bed. His chest rose and fell in a deep, calm breath.

He remembered the fairy tale of the mother who gives her eyes, her hair, and her heart to Death to save her child. The mother who discovers that everything one loses turns into a blessing for others.

“Everything... everything was good,” Hans Christian whispered. His voice was almost unnaturally light and clear, as if the soprano of his childhood had returned for a brief second. “It was a proud, beautiful fairy tale...”

Dorothea Melchior leaned forward and took his hand. But Hans Christian barely felt it.

He saw the curtain rise for the final time. Not at the Royal Theatre on Kongens Nytorv, but at a theater without borders, without walls, and without deadlines. A theater where the ugly duckling finally raised its head, and where the little mermaid no longer suffered in her feet, but floated upward like a spirit into the air.

He closed his eyes.

The pen fell from his hand, and the final page in his own grand, painful, and wondrous fairy tale was turned in silence.

Epilogue

On a raw, cold Tuesday in November 2026, the light from a streetlight flickered over the rain-slicked cobblestones of Kongens Nytorv.

Through the window of a small café sat a twelve-year-old girl. She wore an oversized woolen sweater, and her dark

hair fell over her face as her fingers held tightly to a worn, bound book.

It was an old edition of *Fairy Tales and Stories*.

Her gaze glided slowly across the yellowed pages, where black ink formed the story of the ugly duckling. Of how the other ducks pecked its neck, how the hens stepped on it, and how it flew out into the cold marsh, alone with its banishment and its desperate longing to be someone else.

A tear gathered at the corner of the girl's eye and fell onto the paper, precisely as tears had fallen on that same paper two hundred years before.

The girl knew nothing of 1819.

She did not know that the words had been written by a desperate, fourteen-year-old boy from Odense's deepest poverty, standing with mud on his clogs, begging to be admitted to the Royal Theatre. She did not know that his

voice had cracked, that his long legs had been made a laughingstock at the ballet school, or that the learned gentlemen in Copenhagen had called his poetry formless old wives' babble.

She did not know that the story was born out of a man's broken heart as he lay on his knees in the garden gravel in Faaborg, rejected by the woman he believed was meant to save his soul.

She knew only one thing:

As she read the words, she no longer felt alone. In the dark, in the middle of her own small world of schoolyard taunts, bullying, and the feeling of never fitting into the smooth, perfect community of others, an invisible hand reached out from the book and took hers.

Across two centuries, across forgotten theater roles, broken promises, and cold graves, the outcast boy from Munkemøllestræde spoke directly to her.

Outside on the street, people walked past beneath raised umbrellas, hurried and wrapped up in their own lives. They paid no heed to the grand, gilded theater lying like a dark temple in the fog a short distance away. Its doors had long been locked for the night, its actors had gone home, and the lights on the stage were extinguished.

But inside the café, the girl turned the page.

The man was dead. The theater had become a memory. But the shadow—the beautiful, immortal shadow he had woven from his own failures—was alive. It had found its audience, and the curtain would never fall again.