

# THE REPENTERS



a novel by  
**K. Jared Hosein**

*"Good morning. Why have you just put out your lamp?"*

*"Those are the orders," replied the lamplighter. "Good morning."*

*"What are the orders?"*

*"The orders are that I put out my lamp. Good evening."*

*And he lighted his lamp again.*

*"But why have you just lighted it again?"*

*"Those are the orders," replied the lamplighter.*

*"I do not understand," said the little prince.*

*"There is nothing to understand," said the lamplighter.*

*"Orders are orders. Good morning."*

**~ Excerpt from *The Little Prince*,  
by Antoine de Saint Exupéry**

*For my victims,  
Every damn last one of them.*

# CHAPTER ONE

*"The wheel spins,  
The ball is random  
and the House does always win."*

- The Three Certainties

Strangers. Only strangers. That is the cardinal rule I set for myself. Only strangers, I always reminding myself. And it have nothing more perfect than perfect strangers.

"I does just come out here when my family acting up at home, you know?" the girl telling me. She keep facing forward, too shy to make eye contact with me. But not too shy to hint at the level of commess going on in she broken home. She keep staring out over the hill, at the town and the highway below. Headlights shuffling across like tiny glowing ants. Or like broken lanterns being slowly shifted across tethers by some shadowy dynamo.

I don't bother to ask her how she family does act up because, one way or another, all families does act up the

same. Somebody always thinking somebody is their own private slave, and then the slave always plotting a rebellion. "I come here for the breeze," I saying, with a smile.

In the darkness, I imagine a tiny rise in her cheekbones as she saying, "How come I never see you before, boy? You come here plenty?" But the truth is, in this darkness, it really too dark to see any feature of this girl face.

I respond, "Only when I feelin' like taking in some of this breeze."

"Yeah? How often that is?"

"Not as often as your family does act up, it seem."

This time I can see teeth. I shift a lil closer to she, though not nearly so close enough for her puffy mane of curls to sweep against my shoulder. I turn my head to look at the single dreary dirt road leading up to this hill. Then to the sedges that huddling around a decaying tree trunk. A wind blowing a column of foliage into the air. One of the small leaves hook onto her locks. Before she could even react, I here reaching my hand to pick it out. In a same timing, my fingernails brush against her scalp.

Her eyes wincing. She give a slight shudder. I pull my hand away and crumple the leaf, cracking the main vein in half between my thumb and index. As close as I am to her now, the girl still a slender smoky blue silhouette, only outlined by the pale yellow light of a single streetlamp, arching a distance behind her. Her face – an antumbra with no natural illumination to tincture the browns and pinks inside.

The wind blowing again and start to activate a nearby screaming. A second wind blow past, dragging a small cloud of dust with it.

"You want to be alone?" I asking her.

She remain still, her chin tipping slightly upward to the heavens. Lost in she mind. Some fantasy of a better life, maybe. Star-gazing. Star-skipping. Star-sailing. Where I accept that it go always just be stars and breeze to me, perhaps she perpetually trying to experience a diamond in a twinkle and the Holy Ghost in each acrid night zephyr. "No," she saying in a wistful murmur, "I good right here." Funny. I smelling rum on her breath. Along with a tinge of marijuana. Though she don't really seem drunk or high. Just lost.

"You should talk if you want to talk," I say.

She shaking her head. "No," she saying, "That not necessary."

"I don't mean to me," I say, "Talk to yourself. Out loud. Tell yourself some nice things."

"You want people to think I is a madwoman?" she saying amidst a befuddled laugh. She turns to me. I turn to her. Her face looking like a solar eclipse. I wondering if she seeing my face as the same. As a black hole. A faceless man urging soliloquy. Jesus Christ.

"What people, girl?" I say, "I is the only one here. And I is the one telling you that you should do it. This is Madwoman Hill, you know. Everyone come to here to talk to theyselves."

She laughing. "I not in the habit of doing that."

"Is a real romantic evening," I say, "You should take yourself out to do some Latin dancing. Get your feet movin', it go get the good blood flowin'."

She laughing again, turning she head away and ignoring me. "I quite fine, thank you. But I appreciate the effort, eh."

"You sure you good? Because you sounding like the island sinking."

She let out a nervous giggle. "I sounding like that?"

"Yes. And it have me very concerned."

She pause, turning to me again. Another wind blowing and the low screaming from before resumes. For some reason, I feeling the bench contracting and suddenly, I sitting right next to her. "Even if you just playing the ass," she says, "It feel good to hear someone say that. Without the usual, annoying tone of condescension, you know?"

"Yes, I know."

She pauses. Then she talking again.

"You think it does get better after a certain point?"

I raise my index and rotate it. "The world is spinning. Like one of them roulette tables. All you could do is place your bets and watch the lil ball click and clack against the red and black and wait to see the outcome."

"You don't think we have no control over any of it?"

"The ball? No. But you could control how much you willin' to put down."

She asks, "How much you does bet?"

"Different people bet different."

"No," she saying, "How much *you* does bet?"

"Me? Betting is not a big part of my life, nah."

The bench shrinking more. The screaming sounding again.

"What you mean?"

"Me, I want to be the croupier. I want to be the man who spinning the wheel, the man arranging the chips."

"I woulda figure the croupier to be God."

"Nah, God just own the casino. He don't spin the wheels. God just chilling in He office, with He shirt unbuttoned and He belly showing. He holding them big fat cigars between he teeth and swivelling in He swivel chair. He know all the chips go back to Him eventually. Cos, no matter how you want to cut it, girl, the House does always win."

"The House does always win," she repeat. She clicks her tongue. The gruff barking of a dog sounding from somewhere down the tract. It slowly echoes. I bat a mosquito away from my arm and my sudden movement startles her a little. But she quickly regain her composure, looking back over the crawl of headlights below. "How you think someone could get to that level? To be the croupier, I mean," she asking me.

I answer, "I think they does instantly become one at the exact moment they figure out how to be one. You have to be able to turn that wheel no matter how much the people risking. It have no hesitating if a person put their life, their children, their soul on the line. It have no hesitating, even knowin' that person could destroy another human life just by you turnin' that wheel. But three things remain certain. The wheel must spin. The ball is random..."

"...and the House does always win," she finishes my sentence with a sustained hum.

I smile and pause. Then I slouch. "I think it does get better. When I think 'bout small things like cutting cucumbers and melongene and sipping some tea in the morning, all the other shit could just wash away. Things probably never really as bad as we does perceive them. You know? Not like we is all caterpillars in waiting to turn into butterflies, eh. Things could be much worse, I sayin."

"The hell you talkin' bout, mister?"

"You think I dunno what I talkin bout?" I say.

She sucking she teeth as she bend forward, elbows on knees. She hanging she head down as if she going to vomit. "I not saying you dunno what you talkin' bout. But *I* dunno what you talkin bout. It hard to imagine worse situations for me right now."

I click my tongue. "If you say so, you say so."

"Nobody believe me," she muttering, "They look from the outside and they don't see the cuckoo's nest. They see the big house but not the broken home. Nobody believe me. They just see the roof over the head." She pouting and standing up now, kicking some dirt up. She stamping the ground. Blades of grass crunching beneath the soles.

She still nothing but a silhouette. An antumbra. A breeze ruffling them curly locks, having them flutter like thick black ribbons in front of she face. Her palms raise up and already ball up into tight fists ready to cuff the air or some other stupidness like that. "You can't go through life like that," I telling she, "Thinkin' that somebody owe you something. *Nobody* ain't owed *nothing* in this life."

Her calmness come abrupt. She unclench her fists and hunching over now, dizzy. A wind blowing again, initating the screaming once again. I get up from the bench and put my palm on her back. Even so close and she face is still nothing but shadow. She throw her arms around me and pressing her forehead against my chest hard enough to feel like a head-butt to the sternum. I wheeze a lil. I half-expect she to sob but she just lay there for ten seconds, scraping the back of my shirt, before letting go of me.

"When you get home," I tell her, "Plant your feet 'gainst a nice cool wall and take a long nap."

The screaming sounding again. I turn my head, now noticing the swing set in the vicinity. The seat dangles back and forth, as if some phantom child moping on it. Going scream scream with each graze against the corroded steel and paint. "Come," I say. I grab her hand and walk her over to the swing.

"You have a cigarette?" she asking me as we walk. Her voice light, almost in delirium.

"No," I lie.

She sits on the swing and I get behind her. She positions herself and holds on to the ropes. I give her a light push. Just a tap. "You *rell* weird, boy," she telling me. I sense the affection in her tone. I push her again. She saying, "You better than my friends, oui. They woulda just run away by now. Everybody hate me, you know."

"Well, I don't hate you."

I push her again.

"Yeah, hoss, but you don't *know* me."

"I know," I say. I push.

"It go be nice to get married here, eh?"

"Marriage should be someplace pure. Is kinda dirty here. The grass need cuttin'. And too much dog-shit pile up all over the place."

"Fittin' for my life then, eh? Walking down an aisle of knee-high grass and dog-shit." She laughing.

I say nothing. I push. She go quiet. I push again.

"It feel good to have somebody not just walk away when I get like this," she saying now, her tone solemn. "I glad you not an ant. A drone."

I smile. I push her. Two stray dogs scamper past, chasing some ghost. "This right here," she says, laughing, "This is a damn adventure for me right here. This probably the most interaction I had with anybody in a while."

I push. "Positive interaction?"

"Yes."

"Tell me more 'bout the dog-shit wedding you want to have."

She laughs. "Okay." I push her twice while she is still thinking. "It go have to be raining. Like we talking 70% humidity and up."

I pushing.

"All the guests go get wet."

I pushing a little harder.

"Then they go all leave, you know?"

I push a little harder. She talking louder.

"Because with the place humid like that and all that dog-shit like that, they decide it just not worth it."

I push a little harder. She grips the ropes tight as she arcs up and down.

"None of it!"

I push a little harder.

"We go have a runaway groom!"

I pushing harder.

"Oh, fuck my virgin life! Fire bun it to hell!" she start screaming in delight.

I push my hardest.

"My life so shitty!" she yelling, laughing and crying at the same time, "Just kill me now!"

I reach for the butcher knife in my pocket. I step aside. I holding it now, arm extended, blade forward. She coming

down. She arcing down. Here she come. Here she come. She arcs down and connects with it. I pull the knife out and stab her again. And again. And again. Then I cut her throat.

Then the dogs scamper past again, still chasing the ghost, always two steps behind it.

# CHAPTER TWO

*"Sooner or later, they all scream."*

- Judah Weir

Judah chuckling.

When I come down to the room, it already pitch black, just like how we like it. *Always do it in the dark*, Judah always saying to me, *Because it is always darkest before the dawn*.

"Stupid girl," Judah saying, "But you are a stupid boy too. Very sloppy. Too sloppy. But I would not blame you too much. It was your first kill. We are all sloppy for that one."

"I just didn't care, boss," I say. I take my scalpel and make an incision along the body strap-down to the table before me. A smooth quarter circle along the left pectoral region to the base of the left external oblique muscle. I notice Judah waste no time in excising the flesh surrounding the pectoral regions. Where was supposed to be smooth skin tissue and nipple was just damp, bloody craters. Not like

Judah at all to do excisions so quick. "What did this person do?" I ask.

I hearing him chuckle. "He did enough to end up here." In the same breath, he ask, "Were you planning to kill her before you did it?" he asking me.

"No," I saying, side-stepping along the table.

"Did she anger you?"

"No. I thought she was a nice girl."

"Did something else anger you?"

"No, Judah. I did not plan anything. I just did it." I try to speak more proper out loud around Judah. Judah just have a properness about him. Proper attire. Proper etiquette. Proper language. He don't even use contractions.

"What were you doing with a butcher knife in your pocket then?" he asks me.

"I just put it in my pocket that night. I didn't aim to kill nobody with it."

"Uh-uh-uh," Judah says in that kindergarten teacher tone, "You did not aim to kill *anybody* with it."

"I didn't aim to kill anybody with it," I correct myself. I pause. I then say, "As soon as she went on that swing, I knew she was not coming off alive."

"We will just accept that it was your destiny to kill her that night," Judah says, "And that it was her destiny for her head to look like a human Pez dispenser." He laughs.

I get to making another incision along the body along the biceps femoris, right down to the ankle bone. I trying to do it as slow as I could. But no response. I hearing the breathing, so he is still alive. But not even a gasp? Not even a shudder or a wince? I jab the scalpel into the Achilles tendon. No response still. "Patience," Judah says.

"I am trying to make him make a sound," I say.

"Patience," Judah repeats, "He is resilient. But so are we, right?"

"We should start amputations."

He makes a gentle shushing sound. "Not yet. Let us not be hasty. We have time. They always make a sound eventually. You know this. Do you not?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to hear the story of Emil Syrový?"

"Yes."

Judah sets down his scalpel. He begins to talk, "Emil Syrový lived in a tiny wooden cabin with his Mama and his Papa along the outskirts of the High Tatras in Czechoslovakia – you know – when it was still called Czechoslovakia. They had no neighbours. Emil did not fend well in school. He was a fourteen year old with the mind of a five year old, the teachers said. He was well-behaved, but he would always feel like a child of a lesser God. He stayed home and helped his Mama with the cooking and helped his Papa with the hunting. Emil was no good at school but he was good at shooting that double-barrel shotgun. Papa had a tattoo of Ouroboros on his arm – the serpent that swallowed its own tail.

"Papa was an alcoholic. He hit those whiskey jugs and he hit them hard. Every Sunday, Emil and Mama found themselves bent over the table with welts on their naked backsides. It had just become a routine. Something to be expected. For Emil, it was simply a flogging. For Mama it was sexual foreplay. Eventually, Mama became pregnant. Knowing he did not have the funds to support another mouth, Papa drove her to the nearest abortionist. Unfortunately, it

was too late for the procedure. Emil looked forward to a baby brother or sister.

"Emil remembered getting up one night to Mama sobbing and another strange sound he could not identify, as he had never heard a crying baby before. She had given birth. Papa had delivered the baby himself. Emil watched from the slit of the door left ajar. The baby was draped in an old bloody cloth, used to clean the chopping boards, still smelling of seasoned lynx. Together, Mama and Papa took the cloth and placed it over the baby's face until the crying was no more.

"The next morning, a Sunday morning, Papa explained to Emil the concept of a still-birth and asked him to help bury the baby. They shovelled snow together and buried the baby in the cold. Later that night, Papa drank his share of whiskey and Emil walked into the room with his pants already around his ankles and leaned over the table. Mama followed. The whipping routine was longer this time. Blood was drawn. Papa then picked Mama up and hauled her onto the bed. He was more aroused that night than any of the other Sundays. He even forgot to close the door.

"Emil looked at his Mama and Papa go. Only one solitary candle supplied light to the room, forming a penumbra over half of their bodies. He listened to them moan and he could hear the ghost of the baby through the window. He could hear it howling for milk from beneath the tufts of snow outside. He walked into the room. He could smell the perspiration. He watched for a minute without them noticing. He grew an erection. And for some reason, he felt like vomiting and ejaculating simultaneously. The Dies Irae had come.

"He took the shotgun off the wall, pulled up a chair and sat down. It was only then that Mama and Papa saw Emil. He signalled for them to keep doing it. Papa protested. Emil cocked the shotgun and that sharp metallic click resounded. Keep doing it, he told them in slurred Slovak, or he would shoot them. So they did. A smile crept across his face. He gave his orders. Harder. Pull her hair. Slap her. Bite his neck. Scratch his back. Mama began to cry.

"Emil had already begun to masturbate. Two minutes after, he shot his father's head off. Mama screamed. She had also been hit in the thigh by some ricochet. She fell out of bed. She clawed at the floor, holding the blooded sheets against her chest. Emil placed his foot against her neck. She could feel the hot steel against the back of her neck. She stayed still. Emil grabbed her legs and put her to kneel with her elbows on the ground. He kept the barrels against her head. He did not hesitate to lose his virginity to his mother. After he was done, he shot her."

"Imagine the human capability to do that," I say.

"Fascinating, is it not?" Judah says, "Emil escaped. Nobody had figured a fourteen year old boy to be capable of such a thing. They had always just assumed he was missing. On Emil's twentieth birthday, I found him somewhere in a town called Poprad. He had changed his name to Jan. He had married the daughter of a meat store owner."

"A marriage cut short," I say.

"I looked at him. He had not killed again after that. However, he had fantasised many times about stabbing his wife and children to death and wading around in their blood. But he simply took solace in bringing his hatchet down on

blood-stained slabs of beef and mutton. Emil thought he had escaped. But the truth is, there is no escape from your past."

I hearing him cracking his knuckles. He then saying, "He did not do anything to warrant himself the label of a bad husband, however. And he certainly was not a bad father. But he thought he could leave a patricide and matricide behind. He thought simply calling himself Jan could save him." He pauses. "Are you listening?"

"Yes."

He speaking soft now. "You might think you are finished with the past. But the past is not finished with you. Emil did not make a sound until I was half-way through amputating his right arm. See, they all make a sound. Sooner or later, they all scream. Do you know where Emil is now?"

"Heaven."

"Yes," Judah says, "Emil Syrový is an angel now. Unfortunately, his mother and father are not. See, they did not have the pleasure of meeting Judah Weir." He pauses. "Smile, son. We are doing the work of God here. Slowly, but surely. Did you only kill strangers, by the way? Did you ever kill anyone out of anger? Did you ever have a reason to do so?"

"I had a good reason to kill one of them."

# CHAPTER THREE

*"Better bring a raincoat."*

- Beegee

Somebody need to take care of that dog. The dog I referring to is that Rott, Chopper, that Mr. Mohan does keep in he yard, chain up to he white picket fence, which, I believing, is not nearly as secure enough to hold Chopper back if he ever get provoked. All it going to take is one fierce thrust to snap that peg and then that dog not only going to be freed of any rein but he could easy-easy leap out of the yard and cause a bacchanal in this neighbourhood.

Chopper have a wicked temper and despite Mr. Mohan's contention that Chopper not rabid, I disagree. I does see the bugger everytime I walking my own dog, Beegee. It was Mouse who name him Beegee. Beegee is one of them small dogs. Me and Beegee always go the same route, down the length of the sidewalk to the savannah with the yellow poui trees, past the abandoned car on Chaconia Trace, across

the road where I could see the squatter's settlement from the distance, and to the renovated children's playground.

That there is Beegee preferred route. If I ever make any wrong turn, he go be tugging the leash to show the right way. He just lead the path and I just let my feet follow. He like the playground. Maybe he see it as a kinda utopia. As soon as he reach, all the children does rush to pet him up. Maybe that is heaven for Beegee. Then he does dive onto a tuft of grass and roll, roll, roll, barking with glee.

Beegee doing he business on the grass. He don't like me to look when he doing he business. I turn my eyes left and there is Chopper. He glowering at us from behind Mr. Mohan gate. Eyes pale and grey and want to cut right through me. He licking his own twisted, grimacing rictus and leaning slightly forward with all the fur on he head standing up. He stretching the chain taut just to glare at me and Beegee.

I turn my eyes right, across the street from Chopper. Children scampering and giggling on the playground. Some swinging on their swings, sliding down the slides. Some twirling on their merry-go-round. Some skipping in circles, some ringing around the rosey. And all the mothers all sit in a row on the benches. They have their legs folded and they bad-talkin all the other mothers who not there.

I turn back to Chopper. He still peering from behind Mr. Mohan gate. The chain stretched so firmly now that he beginning to choke. Gag, gag. He hacking and gurgling now as he barking. He licking his snarling mouth again. Like a vagrant at a buffet. I finding it bizarre that nobody else seem to care that just one snap of a white stake peg down in the dirt could lead to the violent mauling of a child.

I is the only one who thinking somebody need to take care of that dog?

A cold wind blows. I look at the sky and see a flurry of keskidees flying overhead. And a few crisp fallen leaves whirl along another eddy of breeze. Rainclouds beginning to form. "Like it going to have rain tonight, Beegee," I say.

"Better bring a raincoat," Beegee says back to me.

I look back down at Beegee and see that he finish up his business. He glancing up at me with a sheepish expression, raising up he ears and wagging he tail. I do the neighbourly thing and take a black pet-cleanup bag out from my pocket. Using it as a glove, I scoop up Beegee business. I turn the bag inside out, tie a double knot in the neck and toss it away in a nearby garbage can. No more dog-shit.

Chopper snarling at me. He lugging his body around and, for a second, I actually think he going to get loose this time. I bracing myself, tugging at Beegee's leash. Chopper keep flailing around and the wooden stake he tied to beginning to wiggle. Just one snap and the beast would be out of its cage.

I look at the playground. The mothers all quarrellin with their toddlers now, pickin them up from the grass. A lone mother sitting with she arm extended, shifting a baby's pram as she reading some old dog-eared fashion magazine. A girl prancing back and forth on the grass with a crimson streamer fluttering behind her. Three children standing in a triangle facing each other, and letting the breeze swivel their paper pinwheels. A man watching his son fly a kite. The son barely holding onto the reel. A couple of old fat people jogging. In the distance, a Shirts vs Skins football match roaring on and sweating out the evening.

And not one man Jack facing my way.

I wonder if they all just willfully turning away, purposely ignoring this massive danger.

What wrong with these people? I think.

"Beegee!" A woman's voice.

I look behind me. Mouse is petting Beegee with one hand and holding little Jay against her shoulder, hoist up by the crook of her elbow. I find myself smiling like crazy. She wearing the orange top with the floral patterns today. And she giving off that pine oil disinfectant aroma. Probably just finish wiping down the furniture. I try to imagine the kind of furniture she have. The most spotless upholstery. I could imagine Mouse having good taste in everything. I bet all the paintings nailed just right. Pretty paintings.

"Mouse," I trying to talk, "Mouse. How you going?"

She smiles, shaking she head. She know she done with the whole Mouse thing a long time now. She real name is Michelle but she is always Mouse to me. She saying, "Look like it going to rain later, boy."

We look at the sky together. Then Chopper start barking again. Beegee barking back, feeling like he is a badjohn. Jay start to cry. Mouse start rocking him in her arms like a cradle. "Shh," she saying in the gentlest voice, "Shh, baby. Sanjay, the big bad dog quite over there. You safe here with mommy."

"Somebody need to take care of that dog," I say. I keep my eyes on Chopper.

"You think he rabid?" Mouse asking me.

"I talk to the owner already. He say how he carry the dog by the vet already. He say the dog perfectly fine. Say the dog big and mean and bad. But the dog not rabid."

"Well, if the vet say so." She still rocking Jay, but looking at me now. I looking back at her. I find comfort in the deep creases beneath her eyes. I always did. Ever since I know her, I could camp out in them creases.

"Well," she says, "I going now before this rain come down."

"Me too."

I watch she walk off. I suck my teeth and start walking Beegee home. We zig-zag along the sidewalk, circle round a lamp post, cut across a dirt path by a weed-infested abandoned house, sidestep the open man-hole and dodge a queue of joggers coming towards us.

When we reach home, it already dark. I untie Beegee and let him scurry around in the yard. He chasing ghosts, as usual. I drag the soles of my shoes on the ground. "Mr. Mohan didn't carry that dog by no vet," Beegee says.

"You think so?"

"You know what the others tellin' me?"

"What?" I sit on the lawn.

"How it had a couple of schoolboys was tormenting the dog. Like pushing a branch in he face. When they was done with their fun, they walk off their merry way. And two minutes later, they was no longer merrily walking. No, they was running, bawling, with piss leaking down to their socks."

"Chopper bite them?"

"No. They outrun him."

"But he coulda bite them?"

"Yeah. But all he do was chase them, though."

"So if he had catch them, he woulda bite them?"

"Aye. I bet he wasn't going to lick them, brethren."

I strumming my fingers against my thigh. He then add, "And you want to know what else I hear? Didn't have no leash on Chopper when Mr. Mohan went to get him back."

"What that mean, boy?"

"It mean he sic the dog on them. He untie the leash and let him chase their ass across the street."

"You joking?"

"That's what I hear, boy."

I scratching my nose. "Anybody else know about this?"

"Look. Somebody need to do take care of that dog." I think bout Chopper ripping into a little boy's intestines, wearing them like some kinda necklace. I go in the house and lie down in bed. I staring at the ceiling. I close my eyes and I get a weird feeling. Déjà vu. This is familiar. I know this story. This is the man-bite-dog story. This happen already. This is a dream. I dreaming. I look at the timer display on the clock radio but everything is just a blur. I get up from the bed and feel faint.

I hearing a drizzle now. I smell the rain. I look at the ceiling and my eyes burn. I blink. I look at the room. The room seem bigger. I turn my head and gaze out the window. Although it raining, the sky looking red. Like if some fire was spreading across the world. I get off my bed and head out of the room. It quiet, boy, deadly quiet. I make my way to the bathroom and lean against the pedestal sink.

I look into the bathroom mirror. My eyes looking red. Blood red. I fill a glass with water and drink it. The glass breaks and my hand bleeds. "So what bout the dog?" I say.

I reply, "What bout him?"

"He rabid or what?" I say.

I reply, "I feel he rabid. He ain't gone by no vet."

"Well then, somebody need to take care of that dog," I say.

I reply, "I know."

I lift the toilet seat but piss all outside of it. I probably piss my bed in real. Again. I feeling like I getting a stomach cramp. The raindrops pattering against the galvanize roof. The rain is calming. I think it go be nice to take a walk in the rain.

I go back to my room and get my raincoat. I sling the raincoat over my body, zip it up, put the hood over my head. It not unusual of me to go out of the house at night. Yes, I like taking them night walks. I is the nightwalker.

I go out of the house and close the door. I take a deep breath as soon as I reach outside. I smelling the rain. I clap my hands together. I see Beegee sitting in the rain. The slick-down wet fur making him look malnourished. I smiling at him. "Where you going, hoss?" he asking me.

"For a walk," I tell him, "You want to come?"

"No. Not if Chopper there. I don't like that dog, nah."

"I ain't like that dog either, nah. Somebody really need to take care of that dog."

"I know."

I make my way barefoot down to the street. All the streetlamps light up under the reddening sky. They stand parallel to each other as the road goes. The raindrops looking like they falling more gently when in the light. They slow down to bask in the gold. I walk down the road. I see not a soul. I hearing a dog wailing. That is the only sound that cut through the curtain of raindrops draping me. No keskidees. No car engines. No loud TV noise spilling out from other people houses. Just rain, boy, just rain.

I walk down the length of the sidewalk to the savannah with the yellow poui trees, past the abandoned car on Chaconia Trace, across the road where I could see the squatter's settlement from the distance, and to the renovated children's playground.

Chopper still tied to the picket fence in the front yard. He shuddering as the rain wet him. I walk down a narrow path around a thicket that lead up to the other end of the Mohan house. I take my sweet time, brushing along it cautiously so as to not get my raincoat hook up on any thorns or barbs.

I scale the fence from here. I cut my foot on a bottle shard as I land. I don't feel a blasted thing. I look at the Mohan house. I look at the windows. Both blacked out. I don't think Chopper spot me yet. I pry at one of the stakes of the picket fence until it comes loose. I looking at it and I noticing a large rusty nail protruding from one of the ends. I hold the stake and secure it in my grasp.

Yeah, I know this story. This is the man-bite-dog story.

The rain falling heavier now.

I make my way around the side of the house to get to the front yard. I see Chopper. He raise up his ears. He already bearing his teeth before he see me. But his body trembling. He begin to bound and hurdle towards me. But the chain keep him from reaching me. And the stake I hold is long. It should reach him while keeping me at a distance, safe from harm. But even if I come closer to the dog, he always one step away from me. He cannot win. And I cannot lose.

Because I is the one spinning the wheel and the House does always win.

I wait for Chopper to realise these facts. I looking at him as he licking his mouth again. He want to sink he teeth into my flesh and drink my blood and pick my bones. I wave my palm right in front of him. He still cannot reach, nah. No matter how bad he want to tear my fingers right off. He choking as he growling. Too bad. He know no better. This is his nature, to know no better.

He say to me, "You here to put me down, eh? You afraid I eat your precious little rat and she little rat baby?" He then pause and we both stare at each other. The rain falling harder. Lightning strike. He say, "Well, what you waiting for, mother—"

And I swing the peg into his side, the nail scraping along the flesh, ripping a hole right into him. he heaving and letting out a shrill yelp

and i probably hit some artery or something because look at how much blood misting all over my raincoat

i swinging the peg again and again and i swing it bout twenty times because i can count about twenty holes in he body by now

he yelps

but the rain catching his yelps

and no one can hear him

die

you rabid dog

you rabid dog somebody needed to take care of you

you

bleeding

rabid

fleabag

filthy mongrel

i swinging the stake into him and the nail dripping with  
blood

you dead now

he quiet now

you dead now

you better be dead now

i think he is dead now

you better be dead now

good riddance to a rabid animal

now everyone will be better off all the little girls with  
the barbie dolls all the boys flying kites all the mouses and  
jays of the world is safe now

dog you better be dead

i making sure yes

i bashing his face in with the meat of the plank some of  
his teeth come out ha ha ha look at the teeth on the ground

i stave him in the ribs

the rain is washing the blood off my raincoat but i still  
smelling of dogs blood even

i can smell it

i can smell it through the rain

i feel hungry

look the light come on

mohan your dead dog is dead

your dog dead come see him

i fling the stake away

i close my eyes

count

two

three

take a deep breath

# chapter four

*call it the greenhouse effect or whatever*

- the old man

i exhale

there is a coolness in my palm. i raising my head from the table to see the glass of rum. or whatever it is. am i drunk? my head hurting. some muffled party song playing in the background. everything blurry. but everything look familiar at the same time. just shapes. soft out of focus shapes. a bowl of grapes appear before me

i take one and eat it. i eat the grapes then the grapes eat me. the grapes feed away on my insides and what a lovely symbiosis it is turning out to be

i think bout waking up

i think bout people waking up and praying to god and kneel before their ten dollar calendars with dead jesus on it or putting the milk or flowers or whatever on the lingums outside. scrubbing up leftovers of ash and feelin so grateful for the day

always secretly wished i could wake up and know what  
it like to be grateful to wake up

and know how grateful i should be feelin for even bein  
able to feel grateful for wakin up

i have to be drunk yes

a hand reaching out and picking up a grape. i looking  
at the man attached to the hand. he smiling at me. white man  
looking to be about fifty. he head not completely grey yet. lil  
crows feet forming by his eyes. he wearing a cheap suit and  
clip on tie but still managing to look sharp in it. his hair  
cropped short and he smelling like a mix of alcohol and  
vanilla.

so i wake up, he saying, and everything

the stove

the phone

the lights

and the plumbing

EVERYTHING, he saying, workin properly. the carpet  
was vacuumed and no more holes in the ceiling. all the  
clothes washed and starched. and even SOMEHOW im still  
lying in bed but im feeling washed and scrubbed clean hair  
combed and nails clipped

i squint my eyes

he saying, i also woke up on a bed instead of on the  
floor. my whole life just turned around and that was the last  
straw. i decided to dump the bastard right then and there and  
things have been normal ever since

im sorry, i say, i dunno what you talkin bout

he looking at me squinting he eyes. he look at my  
glass. you drunk on grapes, sweetheart, he asking me, cos you  
ain't touch your drink yet

who are you, i ask

he laughs a fantastic laugh. he saying, you LUCKY i  
am a decent moral man

who the hell is this person

i see myself in third person for a second. just slump  
over a bar with a row of men chatterin to each other and  
tracing fingers along each other sleeves. bullermen. and then  
me looking like a dirty runaway youth with sweat stains on  
my armpits and no money in my pocket

what your name again, i ask the man

lets not go there sweetheart, he sayin, its much more  
thrillin if we just remain strangers. dont think. dont  
deliberate. youll enjoy life more. its just like how they say,  
the ongoing WOW is happening right NOW

do you have aids, i ask

do you have a condom, he asks

yes

then im totally std free, he saying, laughing up that  
fantastic laugh. just have fun, he say, have a gay old time

i look at him

he move his eyebrows funny. have a gay old time, he  
saying, you know? like the flintstones.

what you talkin bout, i ask

have a gay old time, you know, he say, flintstones  
song. whatever man, he scoffing, lighting up a cigarette. you  
need to lighten the fuck up. he reaching out the cigarette to  
me. the smoke rising

i take a pull. my lungs get hot

lemme tell you a story bout my friend george, he  
saying, georges mother was always telling george to look  
right then left then right again when crossing a street. george

believed that EVERYTIME he crossed the street by looking right left right he would be fine. and of course he applied this philosophy to everything in life. so one day george came across this street. everyday street. he looks right. then left. then right again. and he crossed. then he got run over by a car speeding down the sidewalk behind him.

i bust out laughing coughing up smoke and feelin tar runnin up my throat

the man looking at me slightly amused. thats a true fuckin story, he chucklin saying, shakin he head

i still laughing

the man start laughing that fantastic laugh

i stop laughing when a young man next to me grab another older man by he tie and planting a big kiss on he lips. i suck in some smoke and blow it their way

them having a gay old time

look at those two faggots, the white man saying, cant even wait to get it on. making me sick. everyone in here is just in heat. places like this could give me cancer. call it the greenhouse effect or whatever

i sense jealousy

the other two men finish their kiss by now. the older man lickin his lips. the younger man just watchin. and the white man watchin both of them

he looks married, he saying, look at him. probably going to shit out his liver later and his kidneys tomorrow. forget bout the pancreas. thats already gone brother. sky high cholesterol. probably has children too. wifes probably a blimp. and hes going to go home later tonight and fuck the hell out of her ha ha ha what a depressing life.

he raise up his glass to the man. cheers!

he saying now, i never bothered to get married. i never even bothered to get a girlfriend. not like the rest of these old faggots. cos i know there was going to come a point it was either fuck or walk. and i aint fuckin. all these sad old men in here. theyre all in the decline. they know they wasted it all on pussy theyre pretending aint pussy. they know its too late. and lemme tell you, young man, there aint nothing worse than too late. just flies on the spiderweb

have to go piss, i say

i get up and stumble across the room. the room is just shapes blurry shapes and muddled features continuously getting bigger and smaller with each step i taking

i enter the mens room and its still just shapes and fog

i run up to the sink

i gag

i hawk

i vomit a bucket of gunk

and then some more

I feeling better now. I look at the vomit, formed into the shape of a brown decomposing butterfly along the white ceramic. I watching as the butterfly decaying and sliding down the drain. Two dogs scamper past my feet, lift their legs and pee on my shoes. Faceless men adjusting their crotches near the urinals. Bodies fat, thin and crooked all lined up juicing out neverending streams of urine.

I could smell it.

I go back to the bar and sit next to the white man. He sitting with the cigarette hanging off the corner of his mouth and running a safety clip under his fingernails. I still tasting the vomit in my throat. "Want to be my father?" I ask him in a whisper, "You could adopt me."

He raising his eyebrows. He turn to me, taking a drag on his cigarette and puffin the smoke out the side of his mouth. "That depends," he saying, "What kind of child do you think I want?"

"Obedient."

"Ask me a question, son."

"Daddy, how come you look at young boys funny sometimes?"

"Well, son, daddy is a little tired of women nowadays. Daddy thinks being with a man could be more stable for him."

"How come, daddy?"

"Women are volatile. Women are like the weather. Good weather on some days, bad weather on some days. So many things can affect them and daddy is tired of that."

"What kinda things you talkin bout, daddy?"

"Children, clothes, diet, self-assurance, progesterone, oestrogen," he saying, taking another drag, "Daddy is tired of having to deal with all of that, so daddy likes looking at men now."

"But sometimes you does be looking at me too, daddy."

"Daddy does no such thing!" He stifling a laugh.

"I does watch some videos, daddy."

"What kind of videos, son?"

"Dirty videos."

"Where did you get those?"

"From your closet."

"You shouldn't be watching those things, son. At least, not without your daddy to put it into context for you."

"The men does be doing things in them videos. And I hear people talk bout them things and they say how them things is wrong."

"Don't listen to those people, son."

"It make me feel guilty."

"How so?"

"Because it make me want to do them things."

"Do you masturbate to the videos?"

"Not yet."

"Have you ever masturbated, son?"

"No. I dunno how to do it."

"Do you want daddy to show you?"

"Yes."

"Yes, *who*?"

"Yes, daddy."

Suddenly, I finding myself in some hotel in Port-of-Spain. Everything once again is just blurry shapes but I can tell is a hotel I in now. It have that hotel smell. Bright golden light filling the room but it still have this unbelievable dankness to it. Making me feel uncomfortable like a budding jock itch. Or as if I just shit my drawers. Subhuman panting coming from outside the window. Outside the window is just blackness. Just nothingness. Just nothingness bursting out of nothingness.

This must be hell.

I hearing running water. And faint music. The white man taking a shower. I lounging on the bed. I hearing a voice telling me something:

*the boy is lying in bed*

*the boy is barefeet*

*the boy is desperate*

*the boy is isolated*

*the boy is doing something bad*

*the boy is in trouble*

*the boy is going to get some licks*

*the boy is going to get some blows in he clothes*

A slam. The white man come out naked. His hair dripping wet. "Take off your clothes, boy," he telling me.

"I not sure I want to do this again tonight, daddy," I say, "I fraid."

"No reason to be nervous, son."

"But I shame, daddy."

"Every boy does it, son. Take off your pants. Let daddy help you get hard."

"No!"

He rushing up to me. He come on the bed and hold me down. I still seeing soap suds runnin down the sides of his body. He lickin his lips. His skin brushing against mine and it feelin like scales. Almost reptilian. Flaky grey skin. He start unbuttoning my shirt and lickin my chest hair. "No, daddy, no, no, no."

He plantin a curve of kisses from one collar bone to the next. "Daddy, no, no. This wrong, daddy."

"Shut up," he snorting like a horse.

I floppin like a fish beneath him. "Get off me, daddy, I frighten." I lookin up at the ceiling fan rotating around the golden light. It look like a hawk circling the desert sun. He feel like a giant snail crawlin over my torso. He lickin me like a thirsty dog lapping up a water puddle. I arch my neck. "Stop, daddy. Stop. Stop."

I lookin at the window now. I lookin right back at me. Silently. Unblinking. A mannequin version of me watchin

with dead eyes this naked white-legged, white-bodied rotting creature latching onto me. He rubbin his palms over my nipples, pinchin them. "Daddy."

He kissing my belly.

"Daddy. I scared."

"Be a man! Be a man, you faggot!" he yelling, rubbin his palm against my balls.

I lash his hand away and lunge myself on him. He run to get his belt on the floor. He start whippin the room like a madman. He whippin the carpet. He whippin the mirror. He whippin the bed. "Daddy's going to beat you, boy!" he bawling, "Daddy is going to whip your lil behind!"

He hit me three or four times on my back before he toss the belt away and pin me down again. This time, on the ground. The mannequin outside the window still lookin. I submit this time. I spread myself out. Arms out. Legs apart. I let him take my pants off. He start kissin and lickin my balls. I looking at him. He desperate to get a erection outta me. It not happenin, though.

Cos I don't like men. *I is no bullerman.*

"You not my daddy," I telling him now. He still lickin my scrotum. "You not my daddy. My daddy dead. You is some fraud. A faker. A liar. You not my daddy."

He stop lickin. He lookin up at me now. He have the most fantastic puzzled expression. I grab he head between my thighs and start kickin him right in his nose. He start gagging. I shiftin my elbow along the floor, draggin both me and him across the room. I trying to reach the belt. I reach and reach again until I get it. I release him.

I get up fast while he still on the ground. I hold both ends of the belt in my hands. I wrap it round his neck and I

start pullin. We fall backwards on the bed. Two naked bodies slippery with sweat. I pull the belt harder. He still breathing. He not dying. He still kickin. I think his neck snap but he still kickin. Is already too late for him.

*And it have nothing worse than too late.*

One whole minute and he still living, still clawin at the belt locked around the veins in he neck. I look round the room. I looking at the hawk circling the sun. The window gazing into nothing bursting out of nothing again. The dresser mirror reflecting nothing. The room getting bigger. I hearing bone after bone breaking but somehow he still alive.

I finally let go. He fall to the floor and start to tremble. Then he get back. He head tilting to the side. Like a snapped twig. He wheezing. It have a big red splotch around his nose. Speakin words not meant for the human tongue now. I take a step back. His skin getting paler. His eyes dead but his body still moving. He groaning with each step he take.

The lights fading fast

darkness now

this must be hell

i only hearing the groaning *ungh ungh ungh*

i start feelin my way round. i pawing at everything. i bounce my knee against something. and i feel a hand grab my balls and start twistin them so hard the pain shoot through my whole body. my eyes watering. i bite my tongue and it start to bleed

*ungh ungh ungh*

he coming he coming

the man who think he is my daddy coming

he coming to beat me

i feel around more.

*ungh ungh*

i push a door open

i hearing running water. the shower still runnin

the groaning getting louder and faster *ungh-ungh-ungh*

i feeling round the bathroom. i pass my hand over the toilet. i hug it. i hearin him *ungh ungh ungh* he coming

i shove my face in the toilet water and i start climbing

in

*UNGH UNGH UNGH*

a hand grab my foot

it pullin me

*UNGH-UNGH-UNGH UH UH UH*

my heart beatin fast

my head and neck already in the toilet water. i breathe in the water. i drownin. i kickin my foot. *stop daddy stop stop no daddy no no let go daddy i frighten daddy*

i take my head out of the toilet. i getting drag out of the bathroom. i grab onto the base of the sink. his grip getting stronger. *no daddy stop*. i hearing a clock ticking and i hearing a clock winding down at the same time

*UNGH-UNGH-UNGH*

i kickin and kickin and kickin

like a baby kickin in the womb

then i kick and snap something. and i hear a loud squeal. the hand let go of my foot. i rush back to the toilet. i push my head in the bowl. then my neck and the rest of my body. i hearing the groans still. *ungh ungh* but muted by the waters. i swim and swim until i see a light

i swim towards the light. brilliant white light. i reach the surface and i take a deep breath. and i open my eyes

# CHAPTER FIVE

*"I suspect even the fish dream about drowning."*

- Judah Weir

The lights is already turned off.

"You wet the bed," Judah saying as I coming down the stairs. He say it without any accusation. Not like how it was back in the orphanage. Sister Bulldog use to share out licks everytime someone mess up the sheets. Whether it was piss, shit or stale tea. Nevermind your parents and only real link to your past gone forever. The bedsheets of St. Asteria must be white and nice.

But, just to say, I did stop peeing the bed ever since I leave St. Asteria. I dunno what happen here.

I taking my time going down the stairs. Not easy to go down stairs in the dark like this, you know.

"I had a nightmare," I say.

"We have all had those." I hearing glass squeaking. I figure is Judah wiping he glasses. I dunno why he would need

glasses in this darkness, though. He then ask me, "Is that why you wet the bed? What was your nightmare about?"

"I was trying to remember. It is very vague to me now. You always forget these things when you wake up. I think it had something to do with a man I killed a couple of months ago."

"Who was the man?"

"Some man I met in a bar. I think he thought I was a prostitute."

"Ah, a homosexual. Did you kill him because he was a homosexual?"

"No," I say.

"It is unfortunate how much the so-called *Holy Books* distorts things. They say a man should be killed because of his homosexuality."

"How is it supposed to be, then?"

Judah chuckling. "God does not have a problem with homosexuality. God is much different from the God that is written in any scripture. In fact, God stands against many of the things that people would consider moral or even neutral. The recent wave of technological progress is one of those things God is firmly against. He also advocates the killing of the deformed and the disabled. He encourages suicide, polygamy and abortion. And discourages the ingestion of any drug or liquor. That includes the red wine your priests are so fond of imbibing."

"What else?" I ask.

Judah take a breath. "God sees the Eucharist as useless, the Vatican City as a squandering of funds and Buddhism as utterly ridiculous. He sees praying as useless, as he never listens to or answers prayers. He assures me no television

evangelist will make it to heaven. Neither will any suicide bomber, iconoclast or encourager of genocide. A person who avenges their loved ones through murder or any means of torture will automatically enter heaven."

"What about me?"

"If you help an angel do God's work, that person will automatically enter heaven."

For some reason, I feelin nothing as he saying this.

"Tell me more about your dream," Judah saying.

"The man in it was very aggressive. And he was very lonely. I was trying to kill him in the dream. But he wouldn't die. I strangled him for what felt like hours and he was still living. He just wouldn't die!"

"Maybe you have a conscience after all. That is a good thing. That means it is not too late to realise your past faults."

"I just woke up with my heart beating very fast," I say, "I don't think my heart ever beats that fast except after a nightmare."

Judah laughing. "Nobody ever really gets used to the nightmares, do they? You would think people like you and me, who have tried our best to murder our emotions, would have little to no problem with nightmares."

"But you're an angel," I saying, "Since when do angels have nightmares?"

"Son, let me tell you something. I suspect even the fish dream about drowning. Even the birds dream about vertigo. Nightmares are just a reminder that we are all unprepared for what is coming to us. Even God has fears."

"What does God have to fear?"

"You," he say, "And this whole world you live in. Humans have exceeded God's fears and are going to wipe

themselves out in less than two hundred years. Humans went and got the entire world in a big damn hurry. God abandoned this world many times before. Something always brings Him back. Even He is not sure what that *something* is. Perhaps guilt? Who knows if God has no idea?"

"What is He like?" I ask.

"It is hard to describe." I hearing a knife sharpening. "In a way, He carries Himself like a bullied child. Constantly sulking and sauntering off by Himself, across the golden shores. On some days, He is big. On some days, He is small. On some days, He wishes He were just a human. He envies you all, you know. That is one thing you men were right about when you told your stories. God *is* indeed a jealous being."

Judah open a drawer and put the knife away. He then say, "God is not jealous of any other gods, however. He just wishes He were a human sometimes. Heavy is the crown, I guess," he say.

"Are we amputating today?" I ask.

"No. We are healing him today. We cannot let this one die yet." Judah sets a bowl down on the table. "Open your mouth," he tellin the man on the slab. "Snack time."

I reaching my hand in the bowl. Big, fat grapes. I eat one, then I slip one into the man mouth. Then I pour water down his throat. Judah washing his hands. I put on my gloves and begin stitching up the slice wounds I had make. We use no anaesthetic when we doin this. As soon as the wounds now beginning to heal up, like as soon as the fibrin appears, we slice them right open again. And then slice some more. Hopefully, Judah go let me use the blowtorch too.

For easy cases, we do the *slow slicing* method like what we doing now. Just making small cuts every day. Cut off little pieces of flesh as the hours go by. If the person not begging by a couple-ah days, we use the *fire amputation* method. We take the blowtorch and burn off body parts with it. Fire is really just another kinda knife. The three sections of the finger is usually the first to go. Then the metacarpals. Then we might burn off the bicep. Then the ligaments between the humerus and radius and ulna. And so on, and so on. The process is usually real, real slow cos if we take off too much too fast, the victim will just dead of shock or blood loss. Judah teach me how to tie the tourniquets fast to avoid too much bleeding.

And he did always remind me, "A man only has two arms. Cut them off too quickly and you will find that you have wasted two good arms."

For the real hard cases – well, we only ever had one hard case here in Trinidad, eh. It was a man call Benedict Awai. The news people had never find out about Benny. I not sure how much people know bout Benny and how much destruction he did do. I think he listed as a missing person and that had create a outrage that yes, yes, them bandit get another good law-abiding citizen. That them black people killin out them own kind again.

Benny use to drive a taxi. He favourite passengers was primary school girls. Once they get into that taxi, they gone. He rape and kill every last one of them. One time, Judah say, the girl had she seventy year old granny with she. Benny had done rape two of them and make the granny watch as he cut the girl up.

I don't like to watch the news, nah. The news does just anger me. Drive me to kill more. I see all the police constables just sittin and quackin like ducks and it make me want to hang them upside down by their own entrails. Jokey police, I tellin you. It make a man just want to kill just to see what them would do. To see what them *could* do. *Nothing*. It had plenty times I wanted to set a police station or two on fire. But, that woulda be too easy. I don't enjoy killing from afar, anyway.

In a sense, I did respect Benny. He was like me. Like me, he only like strangers. Like me, he coulda cut a child throat right open. Like me, no police coulda find him. And it seem, the more he kill count increase, the more clueless everybody get about the situation. But Judah find him somehow. Look, I dunno if Judah was just talkin out he ass when he say Benny was responsible for all them rapes and murders.

But then again, Judah find me too.

"God gives me divine guidance," Judah does say.

When Judah say he find Benny, Benny spit in he face. Judah, with all he class and properness, just take out he handkerchief and wipe the spit off and knee Benny in he groin so hard that he faint. Benny was strong. We make so much square cuts we coulda play chess all over he whole body. We take the blowtorch to he right arm. Right through all the ligament and bone. Man couldn't make a sound. We hold he mouth open and torch he teeth. He grunt a lil but Judah say that wasn't enough. A couple days after, Judah had take the saw to the man until he was nothing but a chest and a head. And still manage to keep 'im alive.

I had to tie them tourniquets real fast. I tellin you, keepin a man alive is harder than killin him.

By now, the man had stop cussing at we and laughing and spittin blood in we face. The man was now saying he sorry for all that he do. He sorry, he so sorry. That he deserve to go to hell. *Just kill meh*, he did say, snivelling like a asshole, *Just end it*. But Judah still wasn't convinced this man had repented.

I never understand it, though. To me, if you beat a man too long he go tell you anything you want to hear. He go tell you he was the mastermind of the 1990 coup-de-tat. But Judah was the one deciding whether he was hearing total and utter honesty in the screams or not. But Judah leave him alone for a couple days. And while me and Judah play draughts and drinkin Mauby upstairs, the man bawl for two days and two nights straight. "What did you do to him?" I did ask Judah.

"Sooner or later, they all scream," he tell me, breathing hard. Up to now, I have no idea what Judah do the man. Even when Judah turn the lights back on, I couldn't tell. The man look like hamburger meat with all them cuts and abrasions on he body. He look like a giant bloody human steak with a head attach to it. Some kinda alien, he look like.

"He will make a fine angel now," Judah did say.

I remember what I was thinkin after we kill that man. When me and Judah had now start out, I didn't believe nothing he say. He was givin me free food and free board in Mouse neighbourhood in exchange for my ability to torture and feel nothing and I had just went along with the whole "God hand" nancy-story he give me. I never feel like I had no real concept of right and wrong. And, accordin to Judah,

apparently *nobody* have any real concept of it. Might as well have no right and wrong to begin with, eh?

But I think deep down I does really just believe Judah is like Man-Man from a book Mouse had give me to read back in the orphanage – *Miguel Street*. Man-Man was a kinda village madman who always try a coupla times to run for public office. And every time he run, he get exactly three votes. Man-Man vote for heself, but not one man Jack know who the other two ever was. When Man-Man find he was losing too much, he eventually try to stage he own crucifixion and tell everyone to pelt 'im while he was on the cross. And everyone pelt 'im. He then bawl them up for pelting him and ask to be let down from the cross.

Judah Weir is Man-Man if Man-Man had manners and a killin streak, I feel. Is like Judah always want to run for public office. I not sure where the whole God thing come in. Maybe he does sell heself that story so he go feel like he doin the public some kinda service. Like he cleanin up the rubbish on the street every mornin. Garbage like Benny Awai. *The repenters*, he does call them.

And I is the two anonymous jackass who would always vote for him.

I remember how I find Judah. Or, to be more truthful, how he find me. I was kinda living on the street back then. Just for a lil while, though. Eat out of a coupla garbage cans and scrape together a few dollars to buy food from this Chinese restaurant every once in a while. The lady coulda hardly talk a lick of English but she was one of the nicest ladies I ever meet. And now that I thinkin bout it, I glad I didn't kill she.

Because when I walk into that empty restaurant that night and I hear that jinglin you does hear after you walk in a store, I coulda be certain that lady wasn't goin to be living five minutes from then. I spend a minute lookin through the assortment of three different kinda noodles and three different flavour of meat through the glass and this lady only smiling at me whole time. And I just there thinkin bout this lady life. She probably was born in some poor Chinese village halfway round the world. And she and she husband get married by some pond somewhere that swarmin with mosquitoes and moths at night. And all the moments of sippin green tea and bikin to school and dumplings slippin out from chopsticks. The whole preparation of movin here. Smokin tobacco with strange shiftly men. All the paperwork. The long journey.

And that that whole road, all them moments, every single last one, lead she here to me. Destiny manifest, it seem. For I was the phantom chasing she for all these years. I was the end of the line. I was the God of Death.

"I come back, 'kay?" she did tell me, still smilin, "You call me when you ready order, 'kay?"

And don't get me wrong, eh, I never say I never wanted to kill the bitch. I just get delayed by that deluge of thoughts and images. If it wasn't for that daydream, she woulda already be dead with a butcher knife through she left eye socket. And I would already be long gone.

But before I could even grab the handle:

*jingle jingle*

The door had open and a tall, slim white man walk in. He was wearin a dark blue suit and a white tie and the man couldn't look more foreign, I tellin you. You could smell it on them John Bulls. You could smell the starch and see it in

their eye. And he had look right in my eyes, givin' me a timid lil smile. Then he had speak something in Chinese. Mandarin or Cantonese, one of them. The lady face start to light up bright-bright. And then she speak back something in Chinese. And so on and so on. Then he tell her something and she laugh real loud and start to blush.

"I'm sorry," he had tell me, "Were you ordering?" He voice was smooth. Real smooth. I remember wonderin how it would sound crackin with fear.

"Still decidin," I did say.

"Do you mind if I cut in front of you?"

"No."

He was standin like English summer night air was trap in he dress shoes. He look like somebody who go speak in long thoughtful pauses. He eyes couldn't stay one colour. One second, they blue. The next second, they grey. The second after that, they green. Then blue again. Something was off bout the man face, though, and I was tryin the whole time to pinpoint it. It was only when he look like he was raisin he eyebrows at me that I realise the man had no eyebrows. But he had hair on he head. Jet black hair in a side part. He bony face was lace with veins.

It wasn't long before he was out the door with he styrofoam container of noodles and vegetables. I had make a bet with myself that he was goin to be dead before he could finish half that meal.

I waited one full minute before I start followin him. The street was dark and empty except for a couple cars park up along the sidewalks. Even for bein in Port of Spain at ten in the night, this was a oddity. Or probably just good luck. He was eatin as he was walkin. And after three minutes of

followin him, it was clear he wasn't goin to go in no car. Maybe walkin back to a hotel or apartment, I did tell myself.

He did then walk into a dead end road. End of the line. Didn't even have no houses in this road. No inhabited ones, anyhow. This is a spot where all the pipers come to get their fix-up. Where all the chirpin crickets could see and hear them shameful selves. The John Bull sit down by a drain, dust off he pants, and continue eatin. He was lettin the mud creep up the sides of he shoes. I was hearin a man in the distance shoutin cuss words from far away. Then a brown tailless cross-eye cat rub up against my ankle before disappearin behind a abandoned house.

He was humming a song I did know but couldn't remember the name of. Still can't remember. It had remind me of Mouse.

I did walk up to him. He was then lookin up at me and saying in that suave tone, "Goodnight, stranger."

He wasn't halfway through the meal. I was goin to win the bet. Until I swing the knife and I miss and he end up stabbin me in the side instead. I remember the pain shootin up to my face and my eyes beginnin to water. I remember whimperin like a hungry dog for a second. Just a second. I didn't collapse. I was workin real hard not to fall backward. "You are not doing it correctly, boy," he then tell me with a tired smile on he face.

I had my palm slap down on the wound. He was runnin the bloodstain knife under he fingernails before he put it back in he pocket. He did then hand me a handkerchief and tell me to keep the pressure on the wound and assured me that it was just a flesh wound. "The name is Judah Weir, son," he was saying, stretching out he hand to me, "And I am an angel

mercenary. If you do not mind, once you stop bleeding, I have a business proposition for you."

He put he hand on my back and lie me down flat in the middle of the road. I was lookin up at the stars. He light two cigarette and give one to me and was tellin me bout the abandoned house. "Do you know about this house?" he was tellin me. He tell me bout the Crichlows. The father would always cut heself shaving and sit outside reading the newspaper with some soft kaiso playing on the radio. On the weekends, he go bring home a small block of mora from the woodworks and sit down on Sundays with he small carving knife. He carve mythical creatures, mostly, or at least he own interpretation of them. He carve plenty duennes. Duennes was children who did dead before they could get baptise. Them used to be naked, only wearing wide hats. And their two foot used to be facing backwards. The mother always find them thing was so grotesque and always askin him why he have to carve them ugly thing.

When the mother wasn't sweepin away the curls of whittle-down wood from the porch with she cocoyea broom, she was tendin to she vegetable garden and she poinsettias. And the daughter was always hole up in she room, doin God knows what. The son use to come and go whenever he did please. Judah tell me how they had a bead curtain at the front door. And that never let the lawn grow higher than they big toe.

When I did see the lawn, it coulda wrap round my waist and swallow me. The poinsettia garden was long dead. The windows was shattered, lookin like cracked teeth. The house was fallin apart. "I could feel my mind breaking the first moment I stepped inside that house," Judah was saying,

"It is a hell of a smell when the body's natural odour intermingles with that of week-old feces and vomit. The stench of clothes unwashed for years. It is toxic in there. Even the sounds are poisonous. The sound of thirty men snoring in unison and gagging while cockroaches and spiders scuttle in and out of their nostrils. You would not think humans could volunteer to put themselves in such precarious positions."

He place he hands on the back of my neck and my back and put to sit up. Then he put me to stand up. I keep the pressure on the wound. It wasn't bleedin so much anymore, though. He pat my back and together, we walk inside the house. I remember the smell. It was the worst smell I did ever smell. It was deep and nasty. It smell like if you put your head in a latrine and suck in the air for a minute straight. There was at least twenty bodies splayed out in one room alone, sleepin like baby pigs, rootin in their own shit. One was even sleepin face down in he own shit. And two look like they had choke to death on their own vomit a couple days ago. Nobody had bother to move the bodies.

"How it get like this?" I had ask.

"How *did* it get like this?" he correct me. Like a true John Bull. "The son was involved in the early cocaine trade. The parents knew about it but did nothing. A bad deal went down one day. The son ended up killing someone important. And, in that game, as you should know, the retribution comes tenfold. If you end up killing someone important, expect everyone important to you to be killed." He looked at me then. "The parents are fine, though."

"What?"

"The parents are fine in heaven." We walk across the livin room and I see the wooden duennes Judah was talkin bout. They was all line up along a counter. They look like the only things that was intact from the house's former life. Everything else was done destroyed, pawned or decomposed. "It makes me sick," Judah did say, "This place makes me extremely sick. Does it make you sick?"

"I don't know."

"These men and women were children once. They were children who probably said funny things at one time in their lives."

I remember thinkin bout my childhood. And I couldn't remember one funny thing I had ever say back then.

"The bodies you see here," he was tellin me, "are just shells. They are incapable of repenting or feeling anything beyond bodily pleasure and anguish. There is a place for people like this. An astral plane of existence, called Avichi, where obsession continues but satisfaction is impossible. It is a place of regrets. It is a place for things done that should have been left undone and things left undone that should have been. This would be a fitting limbo for this pig sty. I think you would agree."

I twist my mouth. He then did say, "It is too late for these people. They are long past the turning point. It is too late. It is too late. And there is nothing worse than too late. The sun can shine all it wants on this house. Nothing will ever bloom here. The world is better off without this house." He did then turn to me. "Here is my business proposition. If you burn this house down, I will let you stay at my home for the next few days. I would like to take you in like the stray animal you are and train you to do some tricks."

"What kinda tricks?"

"The best kind of tricks." He did then pause. "You will be working for the most powerful employer ever known. God Himself, my son. And God treats his workers right."

"What God have to offer me?"

"What *does* God have to offer you, you mean? God can offer you a house in a small but very charming neighbourhood where a certain young woman has just moved in. Michelle Pierre. I think you know her. Would you not like to be close to her?"

*Mouse.*

"All I have to do is set this house on fire?"

"For now, yes. Set it on fire with everyone in it."

"That is all?"

"You will be burning many people alive. People who once were children – daughters and sons."

"That is all?"

He smile. "The kerosene containers are outside."

I did take the kerosene and splash it all over the walls. All over the floor. All over the heads of the snoring creatures inside. The stairs. The waist-high lawn. The collapsing porch. Through every nook and cranny. On the big brown stain where the fridge use to be. Then I take one last drag of my cigarette.

And before I flick the cigarette right at the centre of the living room, I remember thinkin, *Mouse. I coming, Mouse. Going to camp out in the creases under your eyes again. Just like old times.*

And I laugh like mad til my face get hot.



# CHAPTER SIX

*"Saving nickels, saving dimes..."*

- Linda Ronstandt, Blue Bayou

The only thing I hate bout having to make a man into a repenter is that I not allowed to leave Judah house until the deed is done. It usually don't take so long. Maybe two-three weeks for the most, I go say. Judah does live way in a big house up in the Northern Range. I remember back when I was in St. Asteria and I used to look at the houses on the mountain and wonder if they does ever come down. Whenever I driving up here, I does feel like the car going to tumble off the side of the mountain. At night, when all the houses turn their lights on, the mountain does look draped with some kinda satin pincushion. Father Anton tell we once that only wicked men does live up there.

I guess he wrong if Judah is really one of them angels. God's mercenaries.

Judah have no neighbours. Everybody does kinda keep to themselves up here. If you wave to anybody, them just going to watch you hard, like, "Get your blasted dutty hand down!" You does barely find anybody in their frontyard here. They always perch atop their verandahs like sparrow-hawks. It much different from the other parts of Trinidad, where everybody does want to macco each other business and want to know what this one doing or who this one bulling or who mother is a jammette and who father is a pantyman. If you walk through Port of Spain on a normal day, it have so much sounds. And you always have to be stepping over vagrants sleepin all over the sidewalk. And dodging vagrant shit. And it always have them pipers begging at the traffic lights and cussing you up when you give them nothing. And cussing you up when you give them but not enough.

Up here, it just quiet. And it does smell like trees. Down in the city, it does smell like shit sometimes. That is when the rain fall and the wind blow from the dump and over the streets. You really have to hold your nose. Up here, you sniff as loud as you want. It was a new kinda atmosphere up here.

The only times we coulda go down the mountain was if we ever run outta food. I think that only ever happen once, though, and it was when we was making Benedict Awai a repentor. We run out of food because he was takin too long. Remember, we have to feed who we bring up here too, so they don't die. Water and surgeon materials is also essentials. We have to have plenty tourniquets and plenty alcohol to clean wounds. Judah does always make sure to have them small bottles of morphine in the house. Sometimes a person could die unexpectedly from shock when you amputating.

We does try to avoid that. Usually, for them people, we does just go with blunt injuries and crack bones one by one. But just in case we need to amputate, we keep the morphine handy.

At night, Judah does lock me in my room. All my room have is a small cot, a window to let some oxygen in and a small TV hook up to a old Playstation with only one game that seem impossible to play, so I don't bother. Sometimes I does think it purposely programmed to be unbeatable. The TV itself does only blast static. And apparently I does get new sheets if I pee the bed. And he does just fold up and throw away the pee-stained sheet. That much better than what Sister Bulldog used to do back in St. Asteria. She use to wash it and hang it outside to dry for the whole place to see.

And, just to repeat, I did stop peeing the bed ever since I leave St. Asteria.

I hate being away from Mouse when I have to hole myself up in this blasted house for two weeks straight. But then I think bout not even seein she for twelve years straight, and somehow two weeks does seem longer than that.

When I did agree to join Judah in he mission, he repay me by buying a house in Mouse neighbourhood. I remember the first time I see she there. She look so different. She was darker and was wearin a sleeveless and I coulda see she bare shoulders. I remember she was hanging up clothes to dry. Towels, sheets, pants, jerseys. She was pinnin them to the lines. She arms was raised and I coulda see a hint of hair under she arms. A radio was playing one of them American songs. I not too big on music, except *Blue Bayou*. That is the only song I really know. When I rememberin she hanging up

the clothes, I does like to remember *Blue Bayou* playin on the radio. The woman version.

Especially the part where she singing: *Saving nickels, saving dimes / working til the sun don't shine / looking forward to happier times on Blue Bayou.*

She give me a look, you know. It was one of them looks where she turn away but then look again. And then turn away again. I dunno if she did recognise me or not. I was going to tell she hello one time but I say I woulda wait a few days. I walk past she house a few times during the next couple days.

One time, she was opening the gate for a man who look like he was comin home from work. I figure that was she husband. And I was right, cos she give him a lil kiss when he get out the car. Another time she was hanging up some wind chimes and everytime a wind blow, they go clink. I don't think she did like it because two days later, she was takin them down. The next time I pass, she was bathing a dog. A small dog. White with brown spots. He was waggin he tail as she spray the suds off him. Then she kinda step aside as he shake off the water. And she run up to him and was drying him off with the towel and sayin, "My baby nice and clean now!"

I make a stop before going home, and I remember standing up in the store and thumbing through my Monday money. I only had a lil more than four hundred dollars remaining. Not nearly enough. I reach in my pocket for the cellphone. Judah give me a number but he tell me call me only if is concerning business or if is an emergency. See, how this does operate is that Judah go call me when he find whoever he need to find next. And he go call my cellphone

and I go drive up to see him up in the Northern Range. No matter what I doin, no matter where I is, I have to find my ass up there whenever he call.

Every Monday, I does get five hundred-dollar bills from Judah in an envelope in the mail. That money is for groceries, CD's, magazines, gas, any supplies I want to get. That include money I go spend I want to go to the cinema or a football match or anything. But I don't go them things, anyway. The house and car already paid in full. I remember waking up one morning and just seeing the car there. It was a slightly beat-up Lancer. Judah tell me he didn't want me driving no fancy car that could draw attention.

Anything that go cost more than two hundred dollars, I had to write a letter to request. We talkin bout any appliances or expensive paintings or rugs or TV sets or computers. That include things that I can't find in stores here or things that have to be imported from abroad. All I have to do is get a piece of paper and write "Fridge" on it and I getting the most top-of-the-line fridge deliver to me by next Monday. The only things I couldn't ask for is drugs or drug-related items or alcohol. I couldn't ask for guns either.

I think one of the first things I did write was *CD Player and Blue Bayou*. And the next Monday, I wake up to find the CD player still sealed in the cardboard box with two CD's sitting comfortable on top. And a note.

The note say, "Be more specific about artist next time."

I look at the CD's. One was call "In Dreams" and it had mostly black artwork with a man with glasses and a guitar smilin at me. The man was apparently name Roy Orbison. The next one was call "Simple Dreams" and it had a more colourful artwork, with gold and pink and a black-hair

woman in a nightie sittin with she hair tie-up and lookin in a mirror. Apparently the woman name was Linda Ronstandt.

But yes, that is how it does work. I doesn't need anything expensive, though, so I doesn't ask for anything expensive. I never grow up around anything expensive so I wouldn't even know what to ask for.

Except that time I was countin my money in the store and lookin at my cellphone, fully knowin the discretion I shoulda use. But I still I dial Judah number.

"Judah, he's staring at me."

"Who?"

"He's looking right up at me."

"Who are you talking about?"

"This dog. I need to buy this dog. And I have no money."

I remember the long pause. "Wait until Monday." And I remember he voice. He was soundin annoyed like hell.

"I need the dog now. I cannot wait."

"Where are you?"

"*Pet Madness.*"

"What are you looking at?"

"White dog with brown spots. Pom-Pek. Blue cage."

"Delivered Monday."

"Thank you, Judah."

"Hello?"

"What?"

"Am I going to have a problem with you obeying the rules next time?"

"No."

"Good."

And he did then hang up.

And I did wake up the followin Monday to find a load of dog shit in my slippers. And a lil dog wagging he tail next to it. He had a red collar and a leash tie around the living room table. The collar come with a small note attach to it. It had read, "Shots already administered. Do not neglect him. Answers to no name yet."

I didn't wait. I take him out walkin immediately. I walk him right up to Mouse fence. I stop and was peeping inside. She wasn't there. So I tell myself I go walk around the neighbourhood again and come back. It had a girl who wanted to pet him so I let she. She ask me to make sure to remember she when the puppies come. I tell she I ain't go forget. When I reach back by Mouse, she was there hanging up clothes. She own dog was jumping up and pawing at she legs. Tongue hanging out like it thirsty. My own dog see him and start to cause a ruckus. Woof, woof, he was goin. Them high-pitched puppy woofs.

Mouse dog come running up to the gate and sniffing. Mine pullin at the leash so I walk him up to the gate. Two of them sniff each other, waggin tails. It take Mouse a minute or two to notice. When she come up to the gate, she was barely even lookin at me. She stoop down and say something to the dogs but I wasn't really paying attention. Her hair was tie up in a ponytail and she was still in she nightie and I coulda see she collarbones. I coulda see more if I wanted to but I didn't want to look. I remember feelin like I was goin to turn into water and collapse and splash all over the sidewalk.

She finally look up at me. The smile quickly faded, and then reappeared. But it was pretending this time. I was wonderin if she did remember me, or if she would want to remember me. She look at the ground and I coulda see she

blinkin a couple times, like she suddenly get blinded by a bright vision. She then look at me again, with the fake smile, and say, "What's his name?" She had to say it twice cos the first time it come out, it was just a breath.

"You know, I didn't decide that yet. I only get him today and I was tryin to figure out what to call him. What is your dog name?"

"Bugs."

"What kinda name is that?"

She was laughin. "I really dunno, nah. And Bugs is not after the bunny, eh. He used to just eat plenty bugs, so we end up callin him that. My husband and me."

"You want to name my dog?"

She twist she eyebrows. "How I could do that? Is your dog."

"I really not good at naming things." I then paused. "He look like he like to eat bones. I should call him Bones?"

"No!" She was laughing again. She look at the dog right in the eyes. The two dogs was still lookin at each other, waggin tails. I was lookin at Mouse and waggin my own tail.

"If you can't think up a name, I have no choice but to call him Bones," I did say.

"No, don't!" She talkin like I about to ruin someone life.

"I tell you, I not good at naming things."

"I can see that!" She then pause for a while. "Name him Beegee. He look like he could be name Beegee."

"Thanks, Mouse."

And then I see she get pale. All the blood drain from she face. She look up at me like with she mouth half-open,

curling down at the sides. Her eyes went dry. With a whisper, she ask me, "Who are you?"

"Joshua," I say, "Joshua Sant."

She put a palm over she mouth and kinda bite down on it. "You was from..."

"Yes. From St. Asteria."

I watched as the palm slowly slide up she face to cover the eyes. And she saying, "Oh God." And I could remember the way her tongue falter before she say "God" and how her voice linger on that word for so long.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

*"I regret to inform you that it only gets harder from here on out."*

- Sister Mother

The people put me in St. Asteria after my parents get killed. Nobody was ever too sure what really happen. All they know is that one day the neighbour hear some commotion from the house next door, ring them up, get no answer, then went over to peep. To see what? A lil three year old boy wading around in a puddle of blood in a ransacked room. Sister Kitty tell me that I coulda be *repressing* memories about what happen. But I being honest when I say I really cannot remember them memories. I joke a couple times and say how it was probably me who do it. But nobody ever find that kinda jokin' around funny.

I never really bother to follow up on any of it. My parents' names apparently was Ishmael and Meera Sant. Ishmael did dead of two cutlass wounds to he chest. I never

see it myself but I remember picturing a big bloody X when they first tell me that. Meera get stab multiple times in the neck. I think she was rape too. I only saying that because when they pull me aside in the chapel room that day to tell me bout Ishmael and Meera, it feel like some details was missing. So I did assume she did get rape.

I remember sittin on the pews with Father Anton to my right and Sister Mother to my left. And Father Anton had he hand sling over the back of the bench. Sister Mother was sittin upright, lookin at the crucifix almost the whole time. I cannot remember how old I was when they did tell me all of this. I think probably nine.

I remember Father Anton tellin me right after, "All of that only for a lil bit of money."

"Sick world," Sister Mother did say, shaking she head. She did then turn to me and say, "I regret to inform you that it only gets harder from here on out."

Sister Mother was a old white lady with the strongest jawline I ever see. She did have unusually smooth skin for a old lady. And she used to come in the room with eyes that look like steel. She was very tall and very thin. A woman tall like that, you woulda expect she to be bosey-back, but she always make it she business to stand and sit up straight. And she make it she business that all of we, the children and the rest of the nuns, all follow suit. do the same. She hair, if she even had any, was always cover up by she nun headdress.

She definitely didn't come from Trinidad, with the way she use to talk and the music she use to listen to. During dinnertime, she use to put on this old American and British music on this old record player she had. I cannot even remember any of the songs. I never really pay attention. I not

sure if anyone ever really did, nah. We was too busy tryin to sit up straight and chew seven times before swallowing. We use to count it. Sister Mother use to count it too.

"Sometimes I feel like it hopeless," I use to hear Father Anton tellin she, "I try to teach them to be good. But they still going to go out in a world that is not."

And she use to reply, "We aren't preparing them for this world, Anton. We prepare them for the world after."

And I remember she tellin me, "I'm not going to lie to you, Joshua. It's going to be hard. Those men who killed your parents took away everything your family would have ever been in this life. But they saw the Lord in you. The fear of God struck them and they couldn't touch you..."

And Father Anton was still mumbling, "Just for a lil bit of money. All this nonsense..."

And Sister Mother was still sayin, "You're still alive. You're still in control of your fate. You didn't choose to come here to St. Asteria. But you could choose where to go from now. God strikes fear into the hearts and minds of the wicked. And protects the meek..."

"Are you angry, Joshua?" Father Anton interrupted.

"No," I say. And I really wasn't but I don't think I coulda ever convince the man otherwise. During my whole stay at St. Asteria, the man never look like he age a day. He was even taller than Sister Mother and probably the tallest man I did ever see. The colour of he skin did look kinda paler coming down to the end, though. But that is not saying much, for how black he was. What was funny too was that he had the whitest hair and beard. It look like he smear a whole set of chalkdust on he face. And he used to always wear the same round reading glasses, even when he wasn't readin. They use

to get slightly darker in the sunlight. Sister Kitty say it was to hide the worry in he eyes.

Father Anton show me a picture of Ishmael and Meera. It was a wedding picture. The wedding dress and tuxedo look real cheap. He had short hair and she had long curls. And he had narrow eyes and she had big eyes. He was tall and she was real small. And they was both smiling. And nothing did seem familiar. Father Anton thought I woulda remember them if I did see the picture. But I didn't. But the two of them did look nice enough. But I just couldn't look at the picture and feel what them wanted me to feel. And, for a second, I feel like I coulda see into my own barren stare. Like I was outside lookin in.

I just shake my head.

"How come you asked about them?" Father Anton ask me.

"Rey tell me to ask," I did say, "Rey wanted to know."

"You didn't want to know too?" Sister Mother ask me.

"I don't think bout it."

She and Father Anton exchange glances and then they both put they head down and the three of we pray to God.

I went back to my room and tell Rey all the details about the killings of Ishmael and Meera Sant. He was quiet at first. And then he say, "How you feel when they tell you?"

"Normal."

Rey was already at St. Asteria when I first come. And we livin together in the same room since that. It seem Rey hardly grow a inch after that. He was the smallest boy in St. Asteria. And the big glasses didn't help he image either. He head was round just like he glasses. And he was always tryin to grow a curly dougla afro but Sister Mother would always

trim it off. When I did first come, all we had to sleep on was mattresses on the floor. Then Sister Mother finally get through to getting a donation from the Government, so she could buy some bunk beds. Other children use to fight bout who getting to sleep on top and who getting to sleep underneath. But Rey and me just decide to switch top and bottom every week.

Rey father use to beat up he mother. And one day, he beat she too hard. And when he realise what he do, he went out in the back and get some weed killer and drink it. Father Anton show him a photograph of he parents but Rey had the same reaction as me. And I coulda imagine him havin the same barren stare, like how I had imagine mine to be. He just watch the photograph and shake he head. Nothing. Didn't know who them people was. To he, them was just a plain and simple homicide-suicide case.

He did only ask because Rico use to tease him bout it and tell him how he hear he father was a drunkard and a wife-beater. And Rey get tired of Rico knowin more than he.

And that was that.

"Normal for me too," Rey say. Then he quickly change the topic. He say he did hear some news from the older boys. He tell me, "I hear we getting a new one comin in next week."

"True?"

"Yeah, boy." He was smilin.

"Why you smilin so?" I did ask, "I hope she replacing Sister Bulldog."

"I don't think so. But hear this: I hear she young. Real young."

"Young, how? Everybody here old, boy. Them does say Sister Kitty young and she like forty years old."

"No, boy. I hear this one like twenty years. And real pretty. Them boys say they see she talkin to Sister Mother."

"What she name?"

He shrug he shoulders. "I dunno. But Sister Kitty don't really like she, I hear."

"Why?"

"Not sure, nah." He then let out a lil laugh when he say, "Guess what them boys callin she already when they talkin bout she?"

And it was fairly obvious but I still let him have the delight of tellin me. He say it slow and with a chuckle, "Sister Mouse."

Then when the next week come, Sister Mother call all of we to the living room. Both the boys and the girls. See, how St. Asteria was structure down, the boys use to live in the right wing and the girls use to live in the left wing. It had a upstairs too. But that was for the nuns. Father Anton use to live in a nearby building. Nobody was allowed to go upstairs unless a nun was with them. That didn't stop Rico and Quenton at all, though. Them used to go up there all the time. The funny thing was that it didn't even have nothing up there. Them used to just go because it was against the rules. Rico and Quenton was the two oldest boys in St. Asteria. They woulda be like twelve and thirteen around the time I talkin bout.

It never had a night that the nuns was sleeping in any other place than upstairs. They had to live there. So when the new young nun come the next week, she come dragging a big suitcase to the living room. The other nuns kinda titter at she.

They was probably wondering what she had to bring so. Sister Kitty especially was smirking like mad.

Sister Bulldog, Sister Mother make all of us clean up nice-nice for the new nun. And she spray we up with perfume and tie white ribbons in the girls' hair. She make us stand side by side – boys on one side and girls on the next side – and make us say in unison, "Welcome, our new sister."

She smile at us and say, in a little voice, "Thank you very much." And kinda do a small curtsy. She was younger than I was imagining. She look like she coulda be twenty, if so old. She had bushy eyebrows, a small nose and lil sinks in she cheeks when she smile. The rest of she head was cover up with the nun hood. And she was small. Short. And thin like a afternoon breeze could blow she over. She look small like some of the girls in the left wing. Tiana was taller than she, even. A small woman like that dragging a big suitcase, looking like she arms go pop off. She did really look like a mouse.

Sister Mother did then say, "This is our new addition to the St. Asteria family, ladies and gentlemen. Her name is Sister Michelle Pierre and we are very grateful to have her here to help out."

"You lookin real small, girl," Janine did say, "How old you is?"

As Mouse was about to reply, Sister Mother lift a quick hand up with a heavy shush. She then tell Janine, "Don't speak out of time, Janine. There will be much time for questions."

Janine puff up her mouth. "Sorry, Sister."

Sister Mother then whisper something in Mouse ear. I coulda imagine Sister Mother tellin she, *I regret to inform you that it only gets harder from here on out.*

"Jerrick! Joshua!" Sister Mother call out, "Help Sister Michelle with her briefcase! "

Me and Rico take the briefcase from Mouse. He push heself to do most of the carrying, though. But he was kinda knocking the suitcase against the steps as he carrying it up. I notice Mouse kinda put she hand over she mouth. She mouthing, *Stop*, over and over but the word couldn't come out. "Jerrick!" Sister Mother finally say, "Be careful with her belongings! Joshua, help him!"

So I hold one end and Rico hold the other end and we carry it up. Mouse follow up. She shoulders less tense now. We carry the suitcase in the empty bedroom. Rico take the suitcase and flop it down on the bed. Mouse was lookin around. Rico sit down on the suitcase and was peepin at her. I was watchin she too. "She real young, boy. I could bull that good," Rico say with a stupid smile on he face.

I look at him. And then he look at me, still grinnin he teeth. "What you think?" he ask me.

I didn't say nothing.

He ask, "You think she ever take prick before?"

He look back at she, one side of he mouth curling up. "I don't feel she ever even see one before, nah. Or probably she fraid it. What you think, boy?"

I still didn't say nothing.

He turn to me. "Wha' happen? You is a dumb-dumb or what? You is the one who parents get slice up? And you does bunk with the boy with the drunkard daddy who cut he wife throat and then drink poison."

I look at him.

"What you lookin at, boy?" he ask me, "You feel you could do me something?"

"Thanks, boys," Mouse's voice then ring out. She sounded tired. She come in the room. The room was small and she didn't look too glad. The paint was flakin off the wall. Didn't have no window. But Sister Mother make we scrub and mop the floor, bat away the cobwebs and dust the shelves and dresser the day before. Ever since I was at St. Asteria, I never see anybody in this room before. The door was always lock.

Rico jump off the suitcase. "What is your name again, young man?" Mouse ask him, already trying to talk like Sister Mother, "Jerrick, right?"

"Jerrick Cuffey," he say, smilin with one side of he mouth again, "But everybody does just call me Rico for short."

"I prefer Jerrick," Mouse say. She then look at me. "And what about you?"

I remember how my throat did gone dry at that moment. I trying to talk but nothing coming out. I trying to move my tongue. For a few seconds, I feel like I couldn't even breathe. I did close my eyes. Then I had count to three. Then I had take a deep breath. Then my name finally manage to come out, "Joshua Sant."

Rico let out a lil laugh and shake he head.

She smile at me. "Want to help me unpack, Joshua?"

"Yes."

She then turn to Rico and tell him, "You can go back downstairs, Jerrick."

I look at him. He wasn't laughing again. "You don't want me to help too?"

"No," Mouse say, givin a lil smile, "I'm sure we could manage here. No need to burden yourself. Go downstairs."

Rico then leave the room and make he way to the stairs, kinda stampin he foot from step to step on the way down. Mouse tell me as she was undoing the suitcase buckles, "I dunno what I was thinking, packing all this junk. I don't think I ever learn how to travel light."

When she flip the top open, it was mostly books and ceramic figurines. I did never really care for books, so I didn't recognise any of the names. Rey was the one who use to always be coopin up in the study. He use to try to encourage me to read but I never bother. "So much books," I remember sayin.

"Do you read?"

"No." I remember feeling a lil guilty then. I did never feel guilty about it before. Not when Father Anton and Sister Mother tell me I not expanding my imagination enough. Not when Rey tell me I is a dumb-dumb because I does never read.

She look at me with this serious face all of a sudden. "How old are you?"

"Ten."

"Ten years and not reading! You are missing out on so much! What is the last thing you read?"

"Just my Maths textbook." She let out a small sigh. I know the sound of relief when I hearin it. I didn't understand the look back then. But when I think back on it, I think I understand it. Everybody, every visitor, does always assume the worst. They does assume none of we could read. And

they does never want to ask direct. Like askin is some kinda sin. Like not knowin how to read is some kinda sin. At St. Asteria, I guess it was a sin because all of we had to know how to read, or else we couldn't read the hymns for Sunday morning.

"Books take you everywhere – come help me take them out, Joshua – they take you to so many places you will never go – yeah, just lay them down on the bed like that."

"Places like where?"

She hold up a book for me. "This one – Moby Dick – this one takes you across the ocean on a sailboat, hunting down a great white whale." She search through her suitcase again, "This one is called Gulliver's Travels. This one takes you to a place where everybody is so small... so small that you could hold them in your fist."

"It have nobody so small!"

"Yes, there is. They all live in a place called Lilliput. And if you want to go there, you can just open this book and start reading." She was flippin through the pages in front of my face.

I help her lay out the books on the bed. I also help her put the ceramics on the dresser. It was mostly swans and different kinds of birds. But mostly swans. Some of the other figurines was craft out of shells. I ask her where she buy them. She say how she make them sheself – how she father use to go underwater diving and use to bring back baskets of shells. And she didn't know what to do with them, so she start making frogs and turtles and rabbits out of them. It even had a big butterfly one. "I have to take them anywhere I go," she tell me.

As we lay them on the dresser, I see her eyes get a lil wet. I was going to ask if she okay but my tongue freeze up again. She tell me, "Thank you, Joshua."

I was siftin through the books. It had one that catch my eye. It had a boy in he jammies in outer space. The title was printed: *The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*. She see me watching it. And then her face light up. "The Little Prince!" she say, "You will like that one, Joshua. You will go so many different places in that one!"

"I could borrow it?"

"Only on one condition."

"What?"

"No dog-ears when I get it back." And then she laugh.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

*"Time runnin out. So we just havin we fun."*

- Rico

I remember bein confused by *The Little Prince* while I was reading it, and even more confused after I had finish it. It was bout this boy who used to live on a small planet who was jumping from planet to planet and meeting people who live on them. These planets was real small too. I could imagine them bein no bigger than this same room Judah lock me in. Except they was round. And the planets usually only had one person on it. Maybe the Little Prince could hop into my room one day.

I went to talk to Mouse bout it. After dinner one night, I ask her to explain *The Little Prince* to me. I remember she face. Bright pink. I believe she was in utter surprise that I had actually read the book. The first thing she ask me was what I thought of it. And I tell her that was why I askin for she to explain it, because I didn't really understand. She tell me to

form my own interpretation of it first, and when I could tell that to her, she could give me her own interpretation. "And that is how we can learn from each other," she did say, smilin at me and touchin my nose.

So I went and read it back. I decided that my favourite character was the lamplighter. The lamplighter was one of them people who live by himself on he own planet. The lamplighter was given he job a long time ago to light the lamp at night and extinguish it come morning. Not hard, right? The twist here is that the rotation of the planet speed up over time. And at the point the Prince meet the man, a day and night only used to last a minute. But the lamplighter say, "Orders is orders", and he keep lighting the lamp. Every minute, he had to either light the lamp or put out the lamp.

I like the lamplighter for the same reason the Prince did like the lamplighter. It was cos he was the only adult who care about something other than himself. When darkness come, the planet could trust the lamplighter to clear the gloom. Father Anton was a lamplighter. Sister Mother was a lamplighter. Mouse was a lamplighter. And now when I think bout it, maybe Judah want to be a lamplighter too. When darkness come, he want the planet to know it could trust him to clear the gloom.

I take the book to school to try to read it out. I never really talk to anybody in school. Only Rey. He was in the class next door to mine, so I only coulda talk to him recess time and lunch time. Most of we at St. Asteria used to go to the same primary school. Even Quenton and Rico at that time, even though them was so old. Both of them was in their last years in primary school. Father Anton had manage to buy a van to drop all of we to school. On some days, Miss Walker

used to help drop some of we. But normally, Father Anton had to make two round trips to get all of we to school on time.

When lunch time come, Rey come to check me and was caught off-guard by me readin the book. "Since when you does read?" he ask me.

"Sister Mouse lend this book to me," I tell him, "I tryin to understand it."

He look at the cover and shrug. "I dunno that one."

It did feel good to actually be doin something with my time at recess. The rest of them children used to run around the grounds like wild-horses and come back smelling nasty. The whole class used to smell for a whole hour after recess and lunchtime. I normally use to just sit in class. But Miss Susan use to tell me to go outside and try to play with the other children. So I use to go outside and just sit near some steps at the back of the school and wait for the bell to ring.

That day, though, it was raining real heavy lunch time, so it didn't have no wild-horses stamping up the place outside. It had some boys play-fighting inside and some girls playing with each other hair, trying to weave plats into them. I remember sittin at the corner of the class, trying to read. Miss Susan close the windows so no rain would come in. And every time lightning strike and thunder roll, all the girls would scream. Rey was next to me, lookin out the window.

"It have somethin weird bout the rain, eh?" he was tellin me.

"What weird bout it?" I was sayin, keeping my eyes on the book. I was reading bout the Little Prince shouting out in the desert and hearing he echoes and thinking that it is actual people talkin back at him.

"People get glad when it have rain. People get vex when it have rain. It have people who hate to get wet. And it have people who would go and dance in the rain. People say that rain suppose to be sad. But then people say that we need rain for the plants to grow."

He keep talkin but I wasn't really payin attention to him, though. and I think he did realise that, so he stop. Miss Susan notice me reading the book. She face turn bright pink, just like Mouse's. She say, "Joshua! I love that book! I never think I would see someone in my class reading that!"

And she was talkin and talkin. But I didn't really acknowledge she. And I think she did realise that, so she stop. The bell ring and lunchtime was over. And I still had three chapters to go.

What happen after school is something I hate to think bout. It was still raining. And it probably had some mean traffic because we was waiting for probably a half hour and Father Anton didn't come yet. Rico and Quenton had wander off somewhere. The rest of we just sit near the wooden steps of the Standard 3 classroom, huddling together kinda. I was trying to use this time to finish the three chapters but I keep getting distracted. Everyone was talkin too much. Especially Rey, who keep talking bout how he have to start studying for End of Term exams.

So I wander off, with my bookbag strap round my back and The Little Prince in my hand, my thumb acting as a bookmark. I walk round the building and to the library and annex. And I hearing heavy breathing. So I walk to the back of the annex. Here, I see Quenton shoving he tongue down a girl throat. I had barely get a glimpse of she face but the girl

look like she was in Standard One or Two. But she wasn't fighting it, although it had look so. She was enjoying it. She was just struggling to keep up with him. He had his hand up she skirt and although I couldn't see she face, I could see she white panties.

I did just stand there, watching. Even though it was none of my business. Then I feel a hand slap my shoulder. I spin around and I remember the look on Rico face. He mouth look like it was somewhere between a smile and a scowl. "You like to peep?" he did ask me.

I didn't say nothing.

"You going to tell somebody? Why you watching me so, boy?"

I still didn't say nothing.

He grab my collar and start hiss in at me. "I don't like the way you does be lookin at me, nah. You is a kinda pantyman or what? Don't look at me, boy! I not pretty for you to be eyeing me so!"

I still didn't say nothing.

Rico was getting vex. He make a fist and show it to my face. He was expecting me to flinch and I didn't, and that make him more vex. He look at my hand and see the book. He snatch it from me and start flipping through it. He start laughing. "What is this faggot shit?"

he then start to rip out the pages  
all the pretty drawings and words

he rip and rip and rip and rip

and teeeeeear right through the planets and the wind start blowing them across the yard. the rain falling and wetting up the pages. i remember letting out a scream. rico let

me go and i start running after the pieces of pages. i collect as many as i could.

i zip open my bag and i start stuffing them in there. everybody watching me. everybody confused.

I remember looking at them through the rain. I was standing in the middle of the concrete yard, palms to my sides, with the rain leaking off my hair and down my cheeks. Everybody was just watching. It was Rey who run through the rain and take my wrist and bring me back to the steps. Nobody ask me what had happen. And Quenton and Rico come stand near the steps a few minutes after. I coulda feel Rico looking at me, but I didn't look back.

About two minutes after, Father Anton had reach. In the van, I didn't say anything when Father Anton ask me how I get wet so. He ask me if something was wrong. I say nothing. He was good at noticing when people when something was wrong. And if you didn't want to tell him anything, he use to respect your privacy. He would just give you a kinda look, nod he head and go back to he business.

Up til dinner, I didn't say nothing. Usually, all of we would sit round this big, long wooden table and Sister Mother would ask we bout we days. She would ask we to tell she something new that we learn today, and that we should always try to learn something new each day. She ask Rey, she ask Daniella, she ask Quenton, she ask Elroy, she ask Chris, she ask Janine, then somehow skip me and went straight on to Tiana. Whole evening I was trying to tape together the pieces of pages I save. But some was just too wet. They just crumble between my fingers like fragile butterfly wings. The book was ruined.

I just eat my food, quiet. Mouse keep looking at me.

When dinnertime was done and Sister Kitty and Tiana was helping to clear the table, Mouse pull me aside and ask me if I get time to read any of the book.

I didn't say nothing.

"Joshua?" she say, looking at me, "Joshua? You okay?"

I didn't say nothing.

"Joshua? Why are you crying?"

I prop my face against she bosom. She wrap she arms around me. It was almost automatic. I feel she palm sweeping up and down my back. I close my eyes.

"Joshua, tell me what upset you. What has you upset? Who upset you?" she was telling me.

I tell her about what happen after school. I tell her about what had happen to The Little Prince. And how I try to piece it together again. How I try and fail. "I promise I wouldn't get no dog-ears on it," I did say.

She didn't seem sad bout it, though. But she was vex. She tell me she was going to talk to Sister Mother. And ten minutes later, Quenton and Rico was summoned from their room. Sister Mother put them to sit on side of the table. Me, Sister Mother, Sister Bulldog and Mouse sit on the other side. It was four against two. Four grimaces against two smiles that needed to be wiped off.

Sister Mother ask them, "Why would you do that, Jerrick? Don't you realise the value of other people's property?"

"Sister Mother, we was just having fun," he say, giving off a lil laugh.

Sister Bulldog was just sittin there with she jowls hanging out. Although none of we see it, we know she had

the guava whip on she. Whenever a child needed some licks, Sister Bulldog was the one to do it. I dunno what make the staff of St. Asteria come to that decision. But, yes, anytime somebody was in trouble and Sister Bulldog was there during the summons, bottoms were going to be red and sore at the end. Quenton was saying, "We didn't know it was Sister Mouse book."

"It doesn't matter who the book belonged to," Sister Mother say, trying to maintain she cold disposition. It had no other way to be now than steel cold.

"Time runnin out, you know," Rico say, a lil more serious now.

"Pardon?" Sister Mouse ask.

Rico take a deep breath. "I mean, look, me and Quenton is the oldest ones here. That ain't no secret. We only could stay here til we is eighteen. Then we going into a whole new different kinda hell. What you think goin to happen to we once we leave here and go into the world?"

The three sisters just look at him, silent.

He then say, "Time runnin out. So we just havin we fun."

"That kind of fun is unacceptable, Jerrick," Mouse tell him. It was only then I see Sister Kitty peeking from the doorway. Something in she face disturb me. It was the look she was giving Mouse while she was talking. This look of scorn. It make my stomach feel weird. Mouse continue, "Fun is only fun when everybody involved having it. When one person having fun and the other not, you know what that is called, Jerrick?"

Rico roll his eyes and fold his arms. "No. What?"

"Self-amusement. And you know what self-amusement stems from?"

"No."

"Boredom."

"Yes. I very bored lately." Rico say, smiling.

Mouse wasn't smiling, though. She say, "That is just another way to say, *I very boring lately*. Boredom is just your rage and indiscipline spread thin. You know, Jerrick, I think we can use you to wash dishes and scrub the kitchen floor for a week or two, Rico. Sister Katherine might like the little break. Work is the cure for boredom."

Rico stop smiling. He was now looking at me. He was trying to make he gaze pierce right through me. He kinda hit his fist against the table, using restraint at the last second. And I coulda see him mouth, "Bitch," between his teeth.

"Then that is settled," Sister Mother then say. She turned to Quenton, "You didn't have any involvement in this incident, right?"

"No, Sister."

"Then you may go back to your room." She then turn to Sister Bulldog and tell her, "Just five." Sister Bulldog nod and get up from the table and she and Rico march to the pantry. And close the door. Mouse looked surprised. I guess she was tryin she best to save him from the whip. And she did look a lil appalled when she hear Sister Bulldog yelling and telling Rico to pull down he pants.

I, myself, never had to face that kinda wrath. Mouse look at me and I coulda tell that it was in she mind to ask me if I ever did. And I know it was bothering she. But I couldn't answer a question that wasn't asked.

# CHAPTER NINE

*"To which all the scorpion could say was,  
'Because I am a scorpion, you foolish frog.'"*

- Judah Weir

"Where are you?" Judah asking me.

I listen to him. It sound like he ask that question about five times before I actually hear it. "Here," I say, and I notice my grip guiding the scalpel along the body's right shoulder blade. I was so outta it, I didn't even notice we had flip the body over. A rule I forget to mention is that we are to never actually touch the body. Not with we bare fingers. Not even with gloves. The least we could use is thick cooking mitts. Judah say the person is to feel no human touch. No identifiable physical human contact.

Before we begin work, he does usually perforate the ear drums or surgically remove the cochlea or ossicles. This mightn't cause total deafness. Sometimes the person might just hear like someone holding them underwater. He does

then spray a liquid inside the person nostrils and hold them together tight. He say this does disable the *olfactory* nerves. This does induce something Judah call *anosmia*, the inability to smell, and therefore the near-inability to taste. He does leave the tongue intact because he does want to hear what the person saying.

Then he does sew the eyelids shut with some fine thread. He does be careful not to damage the eyes themselves. And if we have to ever cut out an eye, we does only ever really cut out one. Cutting out both go kinda ruin the whole point of having them in the dark. Sometimes I does wonder how it does feel to be like the victims. Sightless, soundless. Like they just swimming in a black ocean. Sinking, sinking, sinking with no arms to make up back to the surface. Maybe they does sing to songs to themselves in their head. Songs that remind them of better times. Or they does hallucinate the calling of some distant imaginary blue whale.

When a person begin to beg or talk, you real have to pay attention sometimes. It does remind me of the gurgles of a baby. And when they realise they talking and cannot hear themselves, they does scream. Oh yes, they does scream in vain. Screaming, screaming, hoping to hear something. Anything. Screams like nothing you ever hear before. Humans making noises like animals that never exist. Humans making noises like locomotives and sputtering engines. Screaming til they coughing and spitting phlegm.

I believe plenty of them don't even know what hit them. One moment them could be spending a quiet evening alone in their home, or whatever it is these sinners does do, and the next, they find themselves slap down on a operating table, blind and deaf, with twin knives cutting discs of flesh

from their backs. Maybe the first thought they does get is that they already in Hell. Dead and gone. Maybe that is when they does begin to feel the remorse. Maybe that is the start of the repenter journey. *How this coulda happen to me?* They probably does all be thinkin. It don't have nothing left to do but spend your time thinkin if you suddenly find yourself existing in a dark void where all you feelin is the stingers of metallic wasps.

"Where are you, Joshua?" he asking again.

"Here, Judah," I say.

"You should think about what you are doing while you are doing it," he telling me, "You should not do things so absent-mindedly."

"Sorry, Judah."

"You have gotten too comfortable here. Do you still enjoy this?"

"Yes."

"I know you do not care about the mission. You may not even believe in the mission. You only care about hurting these people on this table."

"Yes. That is true." I say it without shame, without hesitation.

"Who do you kill for? What do you kill for? Why do you kill, Joshua?" he asking me.

"Nobody. Nothing. And for no reason."

"Very interesting. Would you consider yourself a natural disaster, then? Are you a tsunami obliterating every structure in your way? Are you a tornado just uprooting trees and sweeping up every passer-by? Perhaps I should call you Hurricane Joshua from now on."

"I like to kill. I kill. It is what I do."

"Ah," Judah chuckles, "That reminds me of an old story I heard. Have you heard about the scorpion and the frog?"

"No."

"There was a scorpion and a frog. The scorpion comes across a river and cannot swim but needs to get to the other side. He comes across a frog and asks for his help. 'Let me ride on your back', says the scorpion, 'The swim is not far. You will be doing me a great favour.' The frog is hesitant, but he decides to think logically. If the scorpion stings me, he says to himself, then he shall die as well. So he then obliges. The scorpion hops on and the frog swims across. Halfway across, the frog feels a piercing jolt on his back. The scorpion had stung him, regardless! Regardless of logic! 'Now we will both die!' exclaims the frog in utter disbelief, 'Why would you do this, Mr. Scorpion?' To which all the scorpion could say was, 'Because I am a scorpion, you foolish frog.'"

Even in the dark I could feel he eyes on me. He then ask me, "Are you the scorpion, Joshua?"

"Somewhat."

"What do you think should happen to the scorpion for killing the frog?"

"Nothing. The frog was foolish."

"And foolishness must be punished. Justice served."

"Yes. But the scorpion was foolish too."

"How so?"

"He should have waited until he was across the river first. Then sting the frog."

Judah paused. "Look at it from a different angle and you can say that the frog killed the scorpion. The frog knew the scorpion would sting him. The frog sacrificed itself to

ensure there was one less scorpion in the world." He pause again. "Very interesting."

He stand silent for a minute before asking, "Do you know why we are doing this?"

"To get people to Heaven."

"Yes, but why?"

"I don't know."

"We are fighting a war. We need as many souls as we can get. We have a deficit of robust, durable souls in Heaven. We only get the meek, the weak, the delicate, whereas Satan gets the most ruthless, pitiless, coldhearted ones."

"Why does God just change the requirement to get into Heaven then? Why doesn't he let the cruel, heartless ones get into Heaven also?"

"God is having some problems right now."

"How can God be having problems?"

"God became disenchanted and attempted to stop creating life a long time ago. No person alive today is a direct creation of God."

"Then who created us?"

"God had intended humanity to die out peacefully. He was not impressed with the direction humanity was going. He had become convinced that humanity would not only wipe itself out soon, but wipe out everything else. God became tired of creating life in the worst of times, in the worst of places. He felt like a murderer."

"Who created us?"

"Where God stopped, Satan picked up. And by the time God realised his negligence, it had been too late. Satan had grown too strong. The *good* souls are still sent to Heaven. The *bad* souls are still sent to Hell. That concept remained

intact. But what happens when the world changes for the worst? People follow suit. The world grows heated and good souls slowly fester and rot. Fire sprouts in the eyes. Call it the Greenhouse Effect or whatever."

"Sounds like God is the frog," I tell him.

"We are not on the losing side. Trust me. We are going to help God fix this entire mess."

"Good."

"You do not really care about any of this."

"No."

Judah let out a sigh. He say, "Pay attention to what you are doing. I want you to tear the fingernails of the left hand off, then begin severing the fingertips one by one in the space of twenty minutes. I am beginning to get impatient with this body."

# CHAPTER TEN

*"When you smile, I does smile. I dunno why.  
It kinda weird."*

- Fish

For two to three weeks every August, Sister Mother did usually arrange to send we to these people who use to call themselves the *Sunshine Project*. Sister Kitty always use to come stay with we. I was hoping Mouse woulda come too, but she turn down the offer. Father Anton use to drop in sometimes to spend the day. I was never really too fond of the Sunshine Project. The people was a little too friendly and they make we do stupid activities and team up with people we didn't like. The food wasn't good either, but I didn't care.

I think I just getting sour remembering this one year because Mouse wasn't there. And I wasn't going to see she for three weeks. I barely say a word the whole bus ride. Sister Kitty was busy trying to perk up the crowd. Make the ride a little entertaining. She use to carry around this guitar and she

coulda play and sing the songs from them Disney films. The Lion King, Aladdin, The Little Mermaid. I think she personal favourite was *Hakuna Matata*. I fed up hear that one. She did also know how to play some of them radio songs, but I did never know none of them.

I think one of them does start off, "All I can say is that my life is pretty plain." And then something about puddles and rain.

And another one have a chorus that does go like, "Strummin my pain with his fingers, killin me softly with his song." She coulda sing that one good. The girls did like that one, especially.

And if she did ever run out of the pop hits, she had a whole medley of praise hymns as backup. I use to look at her while she was singing. She use to sing with she eyes closed. I wonder if she use to imagine she was somewhere else while she was singing. If she used to imagine she was *someone* else. In another life. In another time. Because when she was done, she would open she eyes and I could see the smile falter a little. Because she wasn't someone else in another life, in another time.

So she had to be all she could be.

Sister Kitty had to be the *cool nun*. Probably that was more than enough for she, to be the *dread* one out of the bunch. Sister Mother and Father Anton was and would always be the parent figures who never coulda really get with the times. Sister Bulldog woulda always be the bitch, the *soucouyant*, ready to sink she fangs into you. And Sister Mouse was still too new for most to get a real proper opinion of. On the bus ride, Sister Kitty look very proud of sheself knowing that she was still *it*.

I know Sister Kitty all my life. But I always had a problem with talkin to she. She was too nice. Like that dishonest kinda nice. Like she had to have you look up to she for she to be nice. Everybody else did love the hell outta she. She was always the one to talk to. She wasn't a sellout or a snitch. And if somebody did get in trouble, she always try to cover up for them so they wouldn't taste the guava whip hiding up Sister Bulldog ass. Like one time Tiana Ferguson did gone home by some boy family house after school to watch TV (or so she did say!) without tellin nobody. Sister Kitty was suppose to pick she up. And Sister Kitty end up driving all over the place until she see lil Tiana towing on the front of some boy bicycle in God-knows-where. Sister Kitty just say she take Tiana to see a movie after school and it had traffic coming home, to explain why they was coming in past dinnertime.

As I say, she had to be the *cool nun*.

I not saying she was a fake. I think she did really genuinely love everyone at St. Asteria. I think she woulda lay sheself down on hot coals for most of we. And if I close my eyes, I could remember she face perfectly. Every lil gentle groove contrastin against the deep creases under she eyes. She use to watch me different from how she use to watch everyone else, though. I can't really explain it. Not even now.

Just, say, she turning she neck to look at Rey, then Quenton, then Daniella, then me, I would notice the change only round that last junction. The eyes would look deeper. The lips curve down slight and part slow. The nostrils would flare a lil. All of this would happen for just a second, before reverting to she original look. A facial tic. But it was noticeable enough, to me. I remember wanting to scratch out

she eyes just for that false one-second adjustment. That tweaking of facial features. Which was the real face? Which was the real mouth, the real eyes, the real nose, Sister Kitty?

And I remember she was lookin at me on the bus. I was so sour that day. I didn't kick up no fuss, but I did seriously, seriously, seriously want to ambush my way back to St. Asteria and jump into Mouse arms. I woulda be like a locomotive just knockin over everything in my way, snorting, hiss'n, lettin out mad clouds of steam. Sister Kitty did look at me and ask me, "What song you like, Joshua?"

I did say nothing. I just look out the bus window, countin telephone poles.

"Joshua? Tell me what song you like. And I will play it for you."

Everybody was lookin at me now. I turn my face up to look at the black phone wires, curling up and down, up and down as the bus going. Everybody was still lookin. I had to say something. The bus was goin to crash if I didn't. The bus was goin to crash and we would all be dead. She say one last time, "Josh—"

"Blue Bayou," I say quick.

"Blue Bayou?" she say. I was still lookin outside. Still countin poles. But I coulda feel the look, you know? The puzzled look. And she start up with the first few chords. And she start up the song. "I feel so bad / I got a worried mind / I'm so lonesome all the time."

But she was singin it all wrong! Not like how Mouse use to sing it. When Mouse sing it, it wasn't like that. Not at all! Sister Kitty gone and perk it up. She step up the tempo and make the song upbeat. Blue Bayou suppose to be slow, like a lullaby! She was pluckin and twangin away on the

guitar and she even urge we to clap along. No, no, no, I did regret it so bad. I shoulda say *Hakuna Matata*. I shoulda say *A Whole New World*. I shoulda say *Over the Rainbow*. Thinkin bout it now giving me a headache.

OH OH OH OH UNGH UNGH

oh god oh god oh god oh my god shut up shut up  
she ruining the song!

When Mouse did sing it for me, she does kind of let she break a lil and she does sing it slow. Like a lullaby. Not this. Not this. Singing it like this had to be a sin. When Mouse did sing it, it feel like a big red tongue tickling my ears. In a nice way. That is the first time I feel a song, as they does say, in my bones. Feel the music in your bones. Way down in the marrow. Knitting all kinda pretty curvy patterns in them. Make you light. When she sing it, my eyes does just want to roll back into my head.

But this one. This one make me roll up my toes, like I hidin them from fire ants. It make me feel like my gums was bleeding. I get a funny feeling in my teeth. The veins in my neck start to strangle me and I coulda choke. And I actually believe I could smell the song. Smelled like fresh dog shit. And the smell only disappear when the song was done. And Sister Kitty look at me.

But I was busy countin telephone poles and regainin my breath.

Mrs. Julia was the camp director. Every other year she was a nice lady. This year she was sickening. I coulda see she grin two minutes before the bus pull into the car park. And when the bus park, as soon as the door open, she stick she head in and let out a loud, "PLEASANT GOOD MORNING

TO ALL MY FELLOW CAMPERS!" She and Sister Kitty shake hands and laugh and talk and talk before we coulda come out the bus.

Sister Kitty make we line up in the sun and Mrs. Julia was rubbing she hands together, clapping them together on occasion, and prattling off about the one hundred and one things we was going to be doing for the next three weeks. Tell stories. Make T-shirts. Go hiking. Go to the beach. Go here. Go there. Make this. Watch that. Do this. Eat that. Sister Kitty was smiling bright like the sun.

I swallow back some vomit.

Three weeks.

I now remember that this was around the time Rey did start liking a girl in St. Asteria call Daniella Latouche. He was lookin at she the whole time. He didn't even sit next to me on the bus ride. He sit down in front of she and he keep turning around to peep she and giving this silly lil grin. Daniella father die instantly in a car accident. The mother survive but she get not too long after get involve with another man who end up pushin she a lil too hard one day. She fall and fracture she cranium on the kitchen counter and die in the hospital soon after. The man went in jail and Daniella get sent to St. Asteria.

So Rey tell me, anyway.

Rey was behaving funny at that time. He use to be touchin himself through he pants plenty when he feel nobody was lookin. Not flogging. Just touchin. And he use to sleep with he pants off, and hold the pillow against he crotch. It make me kinda uncomfortable bout switchin bunks with him unless the sheets was changed. And I dunno where he get them but he had a pair of grown woman panties and a bra,

and he use to lay them out on the bottom bunk, panties below and bra above, like some invisible woman was sleepin in the bed. And he go just gaze at it with this distant look in he eyes. I dunno if he did know I know. But I didn't want to say nothing. It look like a purely private affair.

I think he did first realise he like she when he did see she like to read. They start talkin when she start visiting the study room in St. Asteria. Rey use to be there all the time. He use to ask me to come with him and try to get me to read, but he did stop once he find a real readin partner in Daniella. They read a good bit of the Roald Dahl books together. Two of them just sittin down, elbows on the table touchin.

I was never really interested in the study until I read *The Little Prince*. I wasn't interested in books in the study, though, unless Mouse had recommend them. She did recommend me *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck. And I did bring that with me to the camp. I think I did like anything Mouse did tell me to read. And I don't think it had one single thing she ask me to read that I didn't. Sometimes she use to ask me to write lil book reports after I was done, and she would keep them in a folder.

Rey was not the only one likin somebody at that time. Apparently another girl at St. Asteria we use to call *Fish* did like me. I only learn that when Rey had tell me. Fish was a year younger than me and I had never really talk to she before. Kinda weird when you really think bout it – when you livin in one place for so long with all these other children and you realise you know so little bout some of them. The only thing that use to stand out for me bout she at the time was that she was the fairest girl in St. Asteria. And that Sister Kitty was always huggin she up.

Not really sure how she end up at St. Asteria. I hear she parents had abandon her. I never really bother to find out anything else. Fish use to be lookin at me and tellin Crystal how I look nice. And now I use to be lookin at she to see if she lookin at me. And she probably mistake that, thinking that I like she back. And that I did like to look at her. But I could not stop lookin to see if she was lookin. And she was almost always lookin. And then giggling at Crystal when I look back.

It kind of make me wonder if she use to sleep naked from the waist down and hold she pillow against she crotch. Or lay a pair of jockey shorts on she bunk and gaze at it like it was a invisible boy sleeping there. And if Crystal use to feel uncomfortable switchin bunks with she unless the sheets was changed.

I remember at the camp I was sittin on the lawn and watching a dragonfly tryin to land on a blade of grass. But the blade of grass keep propellin it back up. Fish come and sit next to me, proppin she knees up and wrapping she arms around them. She look at me. And I couldn't help but look back. And she smile. But she didn't say nothing. She turn to look at the dragonfly with me. And then shift a lil closer to me. I feel my muscles tense up but I didn't move.

Then she lean her head against my shoulder.

And we just sit there, alone.

Late in the night that night, I wake up with the bed wet. Soaking in urine, I climb through the window. I went to sit on the grass again. It was so cool and so quiet, except for the crickets. I did wish so bad that Mouse was there with me. And I coulda lean against she chest and she coulda hold me.

And she coulda sing *Blue Bayou* the way it was meant to be sung. Sing the night away.

I look back at the camp building. I didn't want to be there. I wanted to be with Mouse. So, so, so bad. It was worse than anything I did ever feel. It was like a itch deep down that I couldn't scratch. And it was runnin through my body until I only coulda tremble and roll on the floor and gnash my teeth. I sit on the grass for close to a hour before I hear the cat.

Meow, meow.

It come up to me—a black and white stray cat—purring and rubbin himself up against my side. Slowly circling me and whisking he tail in short but sudden curls. Then he stop in front of me and meow again. I pass my palm over he head. He close he eyes with a stern expression he mouth.

Then I snap he neck.

I kinda do it without thinking. And I wasn't really sure why I had do it. I did never really kill anything before. Not outside of ants and cockroaches. Not something big like a cat. He kinda hiss at me but couldn't find enough energy to really do anything else but topple over. And kick up a lil bit of dirt on the way.

Then I went back to sleep.

The next day Mrs. Julia put my sheet to wash. She kinda shake she head at me and give a small smile and say, "Still the same, eh, Joshua?" I rush down breakfast and went outside to where the cat woulda be. But the cat was gone. And nobody was saying anything bout the cat. The dead cat with the broken neck.

I was disappointed. It was then I realise I think I was hopin that if everyone see the dead cat, the children would scream and Sister Kitty would say the camp building too dangerous and they would send all of we back to St. Asteria. But the dead cat was gone. They make sure to clear it out quick. Dead cats with broken necks is not part of the Sunshine Project curriculum after all. Instead, they give we sketch pads and nicely sharpened pencils and tell we to draw.

I had refuse to draw Mouse, even though she was the only thing I coulda think bout. I was fraid to see how she would turn out just from drawin from my mind's eye. She didn't deserve it. Distorted lines and circles. Mismatched facial features. I coulda never capture her on paper. So I draw Fish instead. I draw Fish kneeling on the floor and drawing on she sketchpad. I can't even remember what she draw. I just remember she face was buried in it. It did kinda come out lookin like she, by the way. Mrs. Julia smile when she see it and call it *an interesting portrait of creativity itself* and make some kinda joke bout capturing the essence of the artform itself in the artform.

I fake a smile.

Fish ask me what I draw and I show her and I tell her it suppose to be her. And she smile and ask if she could have it. And I give it to her. Later that day, I was sittin on the grass. Sister Kitty come up to me and was smilin real big. She tell me, "You did a nice thing for Felisha this morning."

I look at her. I didn't say nothing.

Sister Kitty sit next to me. She had a lil bottle in she hand. In the other hand, she had a cord of wire fashioned into a hoop at the end. She blow into it and a draft of bubbles come out the other side. Some of them look like they had tiny

rainbows in them. She dip the hoop into the bottle again and do it again. This time it had more bubbles. "It was very sweet of you, Joshua," she tell me.

"Was just a drawin," I mumble.

"A lot of people go their whole lives without having someone create something for them, Joshua," she tell me, the smile fading, "That was probably the first thing anyone ever made for Felisha."

"I glad then."

She ruffle my hair a lil and hand me the bottle and the hoop. "Try it," she say.

I huff and puff into it. Nothing come out.

"No, no," she say, "Gentler. Gently."

I dip the hoop in the bottle and blow a lil softer. But only one bubble come out. A premature baby. A scrawny lil thing, struggling to make its way into the world. It crawl through the air, as if searchin for a proper body. Searchin for bones and flesh. Fighting the sunlight in order to survive. All history of melancholia trap inside it. And it dwindle and dwindle and dwindle.

And then it was gone. Gone without a trace.

"I'll leave it with you. Keep trying, okay, Joshua?" Sister Kitty tell me, getting up from the grass and dustin she frock off.

On the fourth day, they make we plant fruit seeds. I think I did get a cherry tree. I really can't remember. I wasn't even payin attention. But sometimes now I does wonder if that tree did ever grow. And if it did, I does wonder if it would still be there if I go back to that same place. I wonder if anything worthwhile ever come of it. But that thought is

just fleeting. And two minutes later, I go just forget about the whole thing.

On the sixth day, I end up wandering outside the camp building again. And I lie on the grass and was looking at the sky and the stars and the moon. As I was gazing, I imagine a little prince migratin from star to star, grippin tight onto a rope that branch off into twenty different directions. A wild bird at the end of each branch, flappin and hoisting the little prince through space. Maybe I coulda find twenty wild birds and some rope and they coulda hoist me from town to town back to St. Asteria.

I wanted to howl at the moon. And yelp like a puppy. The shivers was coming back. I hug myself and roll on the grass and my toes curl up. The itch come back. The bone marrow itch. I did feel like the low heavy sky was weighing down on me. Or like a lid that prevented some sickness from spillin out. Prevented mad bats from spillin out. I did feel like spiders had weave iron webs round me. I did want to hurl hideous uproars and curses at the sky. I wanted to burn up. Burn, burn, burn like a rising ball of fire. Like a *soucouyant*. I pound my fists on the ground. Like the ground was a giant drum. Like the ground was a nail and my hands was flesh-laden mallets.

On the eighth day, all of we did gone on a field trip to see the Pitch Lake in La Brea. Rey sit next to Daniella on the bus. Fish sit next to me. And she keep watchin me. And I keep watchin she. And she smile. And I move my mouth to look like I smilin back. She trace she fingertip absent-

mindedly along the nook of my elbow. When we did get to the Pitch Lake, I did find myself strangely fascinated.

Back then, it did look massive. Like a giant pond littered with small black islands. I remember just standing on the end of the Pitch Lake and smiling. The guide tell we that the pitch was actually decayed animals and plants and soils from millions and millions of years ago. And that was all that it was. The result of time and pressure. When we walk on the pitch, we was walkin on birds and cedar trees and manicous and snakes and tee-marie plants and howler monkeys. And people. All things that fall victim to time.

And pressure.

I remember how grey the sky was that day. Not like it set up to rain. But like the Sun just feel like hiding behind the clouds that day. And I remember the guide, looking like he was going to die any day now. Black like the pitch itself. Old and malnourished as the land. Ready to join the things that will all, one day, fall victim to time and pressure and join our friends in the asphalt. All things dying and withering. All things dead and decaying.

We take off we shoes. And only wearin socks, we trek to the centre of the lake, hoppin from island to island.

And I was smilin.

And when nobody was watchin, Fish kiss me on the cheek.

On the bus ride going back to the camp, she was tellin me, "You have real nice teeth."

I look at her. She tell me, "You don't think so?"

"I brush them everyday."

"Yeah, but they nice. Mine kinda crooked." She look out the window. Maybe she was countin telephone poles. I didn't say nothing.

She turn back to me, smilin. I look back. Then she stop smilin. "You want to know something weird?" she say.

"Okay."

"When you smile, I does smile. I dunno why. It kinda weird." She was lookin out the window again. I didn't say nothing.

She say, still countin telephone poles, "Sometimes I does wish it could work the other way round too. I does feel nice when you feel nice."

"What bout if I not feelin nice?"

"Then *I* don't feel nice."

"How you feelin now?"

"Nice."

"Then everything alright."

Then I fake a smile.

And she smile back.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

*"It make me imagine: What kinda person would think to lie bout something like that?"*

- Mouse

Me and Mouse was out on she porch. I was rocking in a rocking chair. She was lying in the hammock, hiding behind a smeared haze of smoke. Rockin to and fro with her lips pursed around a half-dragged cigarette. She didn't want to smoke in front of the baby. We was both looking at a snowcone cart roll by. The man dingin the bell as he ride past the houses. Bugs, the dog, was barkin at him from behind the gate.

"Are you comfortable?" she asked me.

"Yes." She woulda be mid-thirties then and she face still look like how she look the first day she step foot into St. Asteria. She was just a few pounds heavier, and wearin a bandeau in she hair, fitted jersey and pair of slacks.

"Want a smoke?"

"No. I good."

She take the cigarette out of her mouth, holding it gently between her index and middle fingers. The evening breeze was whisking all the smoke towards the yard. "Jesus, Joshua. How old are you now? It was so long now since I see you. St. Asteria just seem like a dream."

"Twenty-five," I did tell her the truth, "It been twelve years. You leave St. Asteria when I was thirteen. You leave on a February. Why you did leave?"

She raise her eyebrows and take another drag on the cigarette. Bugs come running into the porch. After a few failed attempts to jump on the hammock, he curl up beside it. He eyes trained on me the whole time. "In the nuns' quarters, every night, we use to get served boiled potatoes, a potspoon full of white rice and some greens. If it was a good day, we would get some sauce and a lil piece of stew chicken with it. And one day, I was just lookin at all the other nuns eating. And you could hear them eating the greens. Crunch, crunch. Every night. You coulda see the wrinkles around the mouths deepening with each crunch. And one night, my teeth just get too sensitive to them."

"That is why?"

She laugh, taking another puff. "And some of you was just *rotten* little bastards. If you don't mind me sayin that, boy."

I looked at the ground. I look at Bugs curled up in a ball. He was lookin back at me. I did take a deep breath, fraid to ask the question. But I ask it anyway. "What bout me? I was rotten?"

She smile at me. A familiar smile. "No," she did say, "You was sweet. Probably the sweetest."

I smile big but I cover my face with my palms. My eyes get a lil watery but they didn't water. She then say, "Them boys, though. Rico and Quenton. Them was trouble. Them was something else. What ever happen to them?"

"I dunno."

"I remember one of them ruin my *Little Prince*. I never forgive that fucker for that." She smile. "Yeah, yeah, I know. *Turn the other cheek. Forgive and forget*. See why I was never meant to be a nun? My first ever boyfriend give that book to me, you know. He was a good boy."

"If you wasn't meant to be a nun, why you become one?"

At the same time, Bugs did get up and start to bark. And then start to scamper to the gate, wagging he tail like mad. Mouse get out the hammock and dash the cigarette end quick against the ashtray. She then pick up the ashtray and hide it behind the potted plant. The gate slowly opened and I coulda hear a rumbling engine. She run towards the dog and pick him up as the car make its way into the yard.

I stand up and watch from the porch, my two hands on the bannister. The engine switch off. The door open. And a average height Indian man step out. Mr. Mouse. A small pot-belly trying to poke its way through a flannel shirt. First signs of male pattern baldness and itchy stubble along his jawline. He look at least ten years older than she. I coulda see him mouth to she, "That is him?"

And then she nod.

And then he walk up to me with a fake smile. I know the smile was fake. I am the man to know bout fake smiles. And I am the last to be offended by them. He extend his hand to me and I look at it for a lil while and remind myself to

shake it. As we shake, he tell me, "It's a pleasure, Mr. Sant." I can't remember he name. Maybe cos I did have it in my head that he was just Mr. Mouse. I remember he talk proper. But I feel he was only botherin to cos I was here. I notice that. Some people tend to talk proper, especially in this neighbourhood, when they first meet you. I dunno why.

"Yeah." I let go.

"I'm *starved!*" he say, rubbin he palms together.

So we gone outside. And as soon as I step in, my pores raise. I remember I had once wanted to live in she room in St. Asteria, despite the dull brownness of it. The moldy, musty air floatin about the cobweb drapes. Flakes of old paint on the corners every morning waitin to be swept out. Cockroaches waitin to be smashed with brooms. It look like a cancer was eating it away. This was the total opposite. This house lay in total serenity with itself. Flesh-coloured walls with an assortment of paintings hang up on them. She tell me how she paint most of them. I tell she how I will buy one. I would pay hundreds of dollars.

But she just shake she head and say, "No, thank you. They're not for sale. I like to look at them too much." She was talkin proper now that Mr. Mouse was listenin.

It had one with a bullfrog perch upon a window sill between two white flower pots, The bullfrog was lookin straight at the viewer. The edges of the painting was obscured by hibiscus branches.

It had one of a brown-skinned woman wearin a long white dress and a wide-brimmed hat. And she had hooves for feet. *La Diabliesse*. She was lookin to the side, probably at she next victim. Seduce. And kill.

And it had one of a baby sucklin on a teat. She tell me that was the hardest one to draw, how she had to look in the mirror while breastfeeding to draw that one. I look at it for a good while. The baby's lips clinging to the mother's pallid flesh. A darkened curve along his cheek to show how determine he was to get the milk.

In a way, maybe it was good it wasn't for sale. My walls couldn't do it justice. It was perfect where it was.

Mr. Mouse was already sittin at the kitchen table, waitin on we. He look impatient, but he was still managing the fake smile as Mouse was explainin each painting to me. My eyes drift about the room as she was talkin. At the stereo system. The ceiling fan. The black and blue sheen on the big leather armchair near the TV set. The crib with Jay sleepin in it. The plastic moon and the stars and the Sun spinnin above him. The little aquarium with the fake corals and the fake treasure chest and the googly-eyed goldfish and guppies dancin around the bubbles and the scavenger and baby snails stuck to the right side of the glass. I wiggle my toes on the bristles of the big circular rug we was standin on.

We eat curry for dinner. Dhalpuri, channa, pumpkin and curry chicken. And pineapple juice. I see Mouse pourin vodka in she juice, though. As I break off a piece of the dhalpuri, Mr. Mouse ask me, "So, Sant, you were raised in an orphanage?"

Mouse close she eyes for two seconds and mumble something to herself. Then she open them and smile and went back to eatin. I say, "Yeah."

He was talkin with he mouth full. "Was it hard for you when you left there? I always wondered what really happened to children who didn't get adopted."

"It was a lil hard at first."

"You seem to be doing well now. I mean, this isn't exactly a cheap neighbourhood." He let out a small belly laugh.

"My employer pay well."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. And I am just the assistant."

"What kinda business?" he ask.

I did tell him, "Surgery. Private practice."

*Surgery of the soul.*

They raise their eyebrows. "Bravo," Mr. Mouse say, liftin he glass to me.

Mouse still look surprised. She take a sip of she drink and then say, "That's very nice to hear, Joshua. I'm very, very stunned, to say the least."

"If only more people could be like you, Sant. Imagine people nowadays have every opportunity and they just plain *refuse* to take proper advantage of it! Some of them just need a good *whacking* in the head. You know what I mean?" Mouse was lookin at him, twistin she mouth. He continue, "And here we have you. No parents. Raised in an orphanage for the better part of your days. Never even had your own room during that time. Stood through the tough times. And look at where it's gotten you."

Mouse was lookin at me again. She say, "I'm very glad for you, Joshua. It makes me wonder where the rest of the kids are now. Do you know, by the way?" She finish she drink and get up to pour another glass of pineapple juice and vodka.

"No. Dunno bout none of them since St. Asteria." I was lookin at the bright yellow walls with the hot-red oven mitts

hanging up along them. On the other side of the room, it had a plaque with a poem call the Deseredata. I remember seein it in Mouse's room in St. Asteria. I only remember the first and last lines.

*Go placidly amid the noise and haste.*

*With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.*

Mouse had come back to the table and was lookin sad all of a sudden as she was watchin me. And I think I know what she wanted to talk bout. She wanted to talk bout the Sister Kitty incident. She wanted to ask me bout it and ask me if I alright. If it hauntin my dreams. But I couldn't answer a question she didn't ask. Instead she begin to giggle a lil. Mr. Mouse look at she. She cover she mouth and face down at she plate. Then she talk, "I haven't thought bout St. Asteria in so long, Joshua. I swore it was behind me. I didn't think it would come crawling up behind me."

"Darling—" Mr. Mouse start.

But Mouse keep talkin, "It just made me think bout something. Nobody escapes. *Nobody* gets away from their past. You might think you are finished with the past. But the past is not finished with you. So you might as well tell everyone everything. You know what I mean, Joshua?"

I just look at her. I didn't say nothing.

She take another sip. Then she look at Mr. Mouse, then at me again and say, "My husband didn't even know I was a nun until two nights ago. I was so young and hasty. I hope God will forgive my hasty impulses. It was a long time now and only a few people know about those few St. Asteria years—" She eyes begin to water.

Mr. Mouse say again, "Michelle—"

Mouse keep talkin, "On my resume, there is *no, no, no* mention of St. Asteria anywhere. And I was wondering last night *why* would I omit that? Why would I keep it a secret from my husband? Was it so shameful—"

"No. You did a good thing—" Mr. Mouse say.

But Mouse just keep talkin, "It make me imagine: What kinda person would think to lie bout something like that? Did they talk about me when I left, Joshua? What did they say? *Did they talk, Joshua?* Did they talk about me like how they talked about Katherine after the incident?"

"No," I say, "No one ever say anything. I never hear anything."

"You forgive me, right, Joshua?"

"It have nothing to forgive—"

"I was so young when I join. I was just a *girl*, just out of secondary school. I just wanted to help out the children. I wanted to give back and do a good thing. But when I got there, the conditions were so awful. It was *so* much worse than I thought it would be, Joshua! It was *horrible!* I wanted to run away after the first week!" She was shudderin and tears was streamin down she face now.

Mr. Mouse get up from he chair and begin rubbin she shoulders. She continue, "I dunno what compelled me to think it would not be as hard as it was! But I stuck around and that has to count for something, right, Joshua?"

"Right."

"The first time you all went to camp, I was going to resign. But then there was that *Sister Katherine thing*. And I had no choice but to stick around. If I left, it would have been so disappointing. Two nuns leaving in one month? It *couldn't*

happen." She look at me, her eyes red and puffy. "And I had to make sure you were okay."

"I am okay."

"I couldn't let the kids lose hope. Not after that betrayal of trust. I couldn't just leave you high and dry. I wouldn't be able to live with myself, Joshua."

"When you was there, you make plenty of we happy. It only fair that we could let you have your happiness too. Everybody could live with that. It have nothing to forgive."

Mr. Mouse hand she two napkins and she blow she nose with one and wipe she face with the next one. Through the hot puffiness, a smile emerge. A real one.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

*"Why?"*

- Sister Kitty

I was gettin bout two hours of sleep a night. It was horrible. But the next two nights I spend walkin around the camp building was interesting. The first time I was lyin on the grass and lookin up at the stars as usual, when I hear footsteps in the distance. And I hearin the fence clinkin. So I get up and I see a shadowy figure leanin forward against the fence, arms extended with the palms grippin the wire. Kinda like a reverse crucifix.

When I walk towards the person, I notice that it was Elroy. I did never really talk to Elroy Morris much. He was kinda like me. Nobody never really talk to he. He never really talk to nobody. Once again, I remember how weird it was to be livin with people for my whole childhood and I did never really know some of them at all. The only communication I

had ever had with Elroy before was one or two lil nods of acknowledgement.

"Elroy," I did say.

He turn around. "Joshua," he say.

"What you doing?" I did ask.

"What you say me and you break outta here, boy?" he say. I know he didn't mean scaling no fence because Elroy was too fat for that. He use to eat less than all of us and yet he was the fattest. Sister Mother use to say that he had a bad metabolism or something. He was the only one who coulda take Rico on one-on-one and really give him a good dose of licks. But, as I did say, nobody bother Elroy and Elroy bother nobody.

I remember he face that night. Usually he lips use to be pushin out like he constantly pouting, but this time they was open—ajar—the whole time. He belly was hanging out slightly from underneath the yellow-and-white striped jersey he was wearing. And even though, Elroy never use to really talk, you coulda always read he eyes. If he was satisfied, you coulda see it. If he was vex, you coulda see it. I couldn't read them at all that night. Even when he look straight at me, I look at him and the pages was blank.

"How we going to do that?" I ask him.

"Tunnel under the fence and crawl out," he did say.

"With we bare hands?"

"Yes. With we bare hands."

"And then how we getting back to St. Asteria?"

He look at me. Lookin at me like I stupid. "St. Asteria? Fool, that is like breakin out of the pound to go stay in a *dog kennel*."

"So then where we going?"

"I don't think you goin *anywhere*. You stayin right *here*. You not ready to break out yet."

"Yes. I ready to break out. I more than ready."

"You breakin out for the wrong reasons, fool."

Which was funny because the reasons couldn't feel more right to me. I tell him, "What is the right reason? Why you want to break out?"

"Fool, what you think goin to happen to all of we? You think we goin to remain in St. Asteria forever?" I did feel a pang of sadness as he say that. "You think them always goin to want to be there for we once we pass a certain age? No. We goin to find weselves alone, fool. In the dark. With nothing. And I not going to be here when that happen."

I didn't even want to respond. I just walk away and I went back to bed. And I couldn't sleep. I was thinkin bout what he say. It was true. One day, it was all goin to end. It woulda just be a dream and the hour go come when we all have to wake up. Mouse would just become a figment of my imagination. Just a shade. She was goin to have to let me go one day and a batch of new orphans was goin to come in. And I would be alone. In the dark. With nothing.

The second night was more interesting than the first.

It had this row of logs arrange in a circle with a bundle of sticks and ash at the centre. This was what Mrs. Julia use to call the *Storysphere*. Sometimes, after dinner (or even during dinner, with we plates on we laps), we use to go into the Storysphere and she would light a fire at the centre. We would sit around it, shovelling baked beans into we mouth and Sister Kitty would strum the guitar and sing a song while we eat. Dinner, music and a fire, yeah. She liked to sing this song call *Hotel California* around that time.

After the songs, we had to tell stories. Any kinda story. But it was usually scary stories. But just boogiem-an-kind-a-scary, real-life-shit-kind-a-scary. We was told that we was safe in the Storysphere. Nothing could get to we in the Storysphere. *Only love and safety exists in the Storysphere*, Mrs. Julia always say. Usually, Quenton would tell a story about some grotesque image, like a dead man floating in the water, or a dog walking around with he head lopped off, or an old woman with fangs. He usually do it because Crystal and Janine use to get frighten real fast. Daniella use to just repeat things from Enid Blyton books she read. And Christopher use to do the same for movies. Play-by-plays of scenes from *Men in Black* and *Independence Day*.

Fish did speak that night. She talk about two dreams she had. Although I was actually listening that time, I can't remember what she say word for word. But I could remember what they was about, at least how I had picture it in my own mind.

The first dream was in a desert. I didn't imagine the desert during the day, though. It was cold. Very cold. And dark blue. And in the middle of this desert, it had a big castle. Like a sand fortress, with giant red penants on each corner tower. The desert stretched for hundreds of miles with nothing else in sight. Not even cacti. Not even a vulture. Not even a bone. But there was a piano. And a boy playing this piano, without a care in the world. Playing beautiful music. Mystic ballads, or whatever you want to call it. That was the first dream.

The second dream was about a girl who was walking in a desert and crying. Not sure if it was the same desert she had dream, but I was imagining it was. But this time, it was

daytime. Scorching hot sun. And the girl's throat was so parched that she couldn't even crack a sound while she was weeping. And with each tear that falls to the sand, sprouts a flower. I coulda tell that Fish had dreamt that it was a rose, but I like to imagine that it was a yellow flower instead of a rose. Sometimes I even imagine she naked. A young, prepubescent girl walking sunburnt and naked along desert barchans with a trail of small yellow flowers behind her. It just seems more fitting that way.

When she was done telling them, she just sit back down. She didn't smile at me. And everybody was silent for a few seconds as the fire crackled and a few cinders flicked our way. Sister Kitty was smiling, though, and she describe Fish's dreams as *deep and very, very imaginative*. Mrs. Julia said that she wish she could have dreams as inspired as that.

But that wasn't the most interesting thing that happened that night. What was interesting was seeing Sister Kitty on she knees in the Storysphere before Rico with he pants wrapped around he kneecaps. I coulda hear him suckin air through he teeth as he arched his neck towards the moon. I went and hide behind a bush. I had to strain to hear what they was saying. I think I hear him say, "It feel so *good*." To which she simply respond, "Good." But no smile or smirk or anything.

Why was she doing this? I was thinkin real hard. I actually did expect it to stop there. I know Rey tell me that usually it does stop when the fella come in the woman mouth or on she breasts. But she look left, right, left like she was going to cross a street, and then I see a pair of panties sliding down her ankles from under her long skirt. She didn't slip them right off, though. She just kinda let them hang on one

ankle, like a foot manacle, as she begin to straddle him. And I couldn't watch anymore. I just kinda look at their feet instead for the rest of the time, wondering why she was doing this.

And then I figure it out.

Sister Kitty just had to be liked. Yes. That was why.

The next day, after breakfast, I tell Mrs. Julia that I had something important to tell her. But that I had to tell her alone and it had to be a secret. At least, a secret from Sister Kitty. She had this look on her face. The fake smiles was gone. No more manipulated facial expressions. She look so genuinely, genuinely, delectably *concerned*. I guess one will be to hear the secrets of the child who enjoys speaking to nobody but his own shadow. Mrs. Julia take me into her office. Fish overhear me telling Mrs. Julia this and I coulda see her shadow from under the office door.

She pull up two chairs to make them face each other in an uncomfortably close style. "What is it, Joshua?" she ask me, sitting on one and prompting me to sit on the other. She look at me right in the eyes.

"Sister Katherine was acting strange last night," I did say, "She brought me outside in the Storysphere and she told me to close my eyes. And then I felt my pants sliding down. Then I felt her mouth on my *thing*."

Her mouth was open and she was licking the roof of her mouth and breathing hard. She was trying to do it with no sound but her chest was heaving up and down too distinct. I continue, "She bring Rico too—"

"You *and* Jerrick?" Her eyes open big.

"Yes." She went silent again. "I pulled away from her and told her that I didn't want to do that. So she turned to

Rico—I mean, Jerrick—instead and she was doing the same thing to him. She told him to be quiet and just enjoy it. Then she put him to sit down on one of the logs and she did *it* with him."

"D-D-Did *what*, Joshua?" Her voice comes out in a weak stammer.

"*It*. She did *it* with him."

"Were you *there*?"

"Yes. For the whole thing, Mrs. Julia."

"Did she *do* anything else to you?"

"No. I came back to my room after. I didn't even sleep. I wasn't going to tell anybody—"

"No. No, Joshua." Mrs. Julia had tears in she eyes now but the frailty in her voice was gone. She was nodding when she was talking. "It's good you came to me."

"I don't want Sister Kitty to get in trouble—"

"This is so *inexcusable*." She wasn't even talkin to me anymore. I dunno who she was talkin to. Maybe she was practising a speech. "I can't believe *this* happened. Leave the damn children alone! The children are already going through Hell and *this* happens?!—"

"I hope I didn't—"

"I'm *so sorry* this happened to you, Joshua."

Mrs. Julia then went and called Rico into the office. As she opened and closed the door, I see Fish peeking in, looking worried like hell. Like I was in more than just a little serious trouble. Like I was awaitin a cancer prognosis. Like I was minutes away from gettin slam with a death penalty verdict. And I remember Rico's look of utter confusion as he come in and see me. I think he knew what the topic woulda

be about and he woulda just deny it. *But what that lil faggot Joshua Sant doing here?*

She was askin him about last night. And I had to keep from laughin, the way she did keep tellin him that it was okay to talk to her. To tell her the truth. And he did tell her the truth. In a burst of frustration, he let it out in two fuming words: "So what?!" And before he could say anything else, Mrs. Julia clasp her palms against her mouth and as she bat her eyelids twice, two tears escaped. Rico turn to me. His heart was beatin fast. I coulda sense it.

Then the door open. Sister Kitty peeked inside. And so did everybody else. A vertical row of eyes along the slit of the doorway. Christopher, Janine, Rey, Tiana, Quenton and, most prominent, Fish. "What's happening here?" I remember she ask, which was met by a cold gaze by Mrs. Julia, who was motioning for her to come in.

Sister Kitty close the door behind her. The three of us was lookin at her. And then Mrs. Julia spoke as quiet as she could, even after she make everyone behind the door disperse. Sister Kitty was silent. Rico was bending over with he head hanging and he fingers interlocked at the nape of he neck . Sister Kitty look at me with her mouth fashioned into a small crinkled-up O. Her eyebrows draw in close. And then her lips start to quiver. And she say, "It was a mistake." And in the same breath, "Not all of that is true."

"Which part is *not* true, Catherine?" Mrs. Julia asked, still staring her down hard.

Sister Kitty bite her lip and wiped her eyes. She turn to look at me and say, "I would never do that to Joshua."

Rico jump in, "Yeah. That part is a fuckin lie."

"So you admit that everything else is true?" Mrs. Julia asked.

She took a couple seconds. But she nod, too weak to say yes.

"Yes, I lied," I say, "I don't want to get in trouble."

Mrs. Julia say, "Joshua, you don't need to lie."

"Sorry, Mrs. Julia. Please don't let Sister Kitty get in trouble with anyone, Mrs. Julia. I want Sister Kitty to be safe!"

"Joshua," Sister Kitty say. It was like the sound of a dying animal. "Joshua, you know that is *not true!*"

"I'm sorry, Sister Kitty. I didn't mean to tell anybody. I really wasn't goin to. I didn't want to. I'm sorry."

"Joshua... Why? Why would you do this? Why are you lying? Why are you telling tales? Do not do this. Why?"

*Because I am a scorpion, you foolish frog.*

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*"I call this place a geographical oddity."*

- Father Anton

Father Anton drive up to the camp later that afternoon. When I see his white van pull up, I hold back a smile. I was hoping Mouse had come with him but I didn't want to get too excited. But only he did come, and I didn't have no smile to hold back again. He didn't even get out of the van. He just hang out of the window and whistle at Rey and tell him to call me and Rico. Then he tell me and Rico to get in the van and we drive off.

"Where we going?" Rico did ask.

But Father Anton didn't say nothing. Some old kaiso was playing on the radio. After about fifteen minutes of silence, he finally talk, "You want me to change the station? You like this kinda music?"

I didn't say nothing. And Rico too. And Father Anton say, "Even if you want to listen to that dancehall and

reggaeton garbage, just tell me. You will see how fast I could switch this station."

But we both still didn't say nothing. And he just keep driving. He say, "You know the story of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, right?"

"Yeah," I did say.

He went on, "Jack spent all his money on the magic beans and his mother threw them out and then they sprouted a beanstalk, right?"

"Yeah," I did say.

He say, "And then he climbs up the beanstalk and he goes into this giant's house. *Fee-fi-fo-fum* and so on. And then he gets the giant's golden goose that lays golden eggs. Kind of a weird story, eh? Usually these children's stories have some kinda moral. But instead we get some mumbo-jumbo bout magic beans. When do these magic beans actually work?"

Me and Rico say nothing.

I see Father Anton's eyes facing we in the rearview. Then he put his eyes back on the road. "We try to plant magic beans in your backyard everyday, hoping one will sprout into a beanstalk one day. But the sad truth is that most of them are duds. You go out with your watering cans and water those seeds and you take your fertilizer and fertilize them everyday and nothing comes out. A dead seed. A dud."

"Is Sister Kitty going to get in trouble?" I ask.

Rico was lookin at me. Father Anton take a deep breath and his eyes fixed on me again via the rearview. Then he turn away and say, "Yes. We probably won't see her again."

I was lookin out the window for a while, counting light poles on the highway. There was no traffic. And I didn't

know where we was going. "I was reading the newspaper today," Father Anton start talking again at a traffic light, "And I was thinking about why the headlines always have bad things in it. Evil things. Never good things. And why the media likes to concentrate on bad things instead of good things. Life is full of conflict and opposition. Everywhere you turn, there is a conflict. Even fiction needs conflict or else nobody would read. Maybe that is our nature, to be divided like this. The duality of man, they like to say."

"Maybe it have more bad times than good times," I say.

"The bad times cannot happen without the good times, can they? We condemn the bad decisions and praise the good ones. When you get older, you might learn that rule in physics. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. I often wonder if that works in life. When someone starves to death, someone else gets fat. When someone kills someone, does it save a life somewhere down the road? And the other way around?"

We cross into a small town. I was lookin at the people outside the window. They shuffling about, sidestepping fruit vendors' feet on the pavement. A police officer was blowing she whistle and directing traffic at a junction. The sun was beating down hard and the entire town looked like gold. Father Anton was still talking, "You know what they say about natural disasters? Earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, volcano eruptions? They say that is God trying to maintain the status quo. *Population control*. When someone dies, they leave behind an *entire* future of resources. Food. Water. Vacancy. Employment. Animals kill each other and we just call it the *food chain*. The balanced ecosystem. What are we

doing? What are we doing, Jerrick? What are we doing, Joshua? What are we doing? *We* are the imbalance."

"What you talkin bout, man? Humans just can't go and kill each other," Rico finally talked.

"Why? Aside from the Commandments, why? If we look at the big picture, world hunger is more suffering than a quick murder."

"Because then we go just be animals!" Rico say.

"Animals know how to take care of themselves. Other animals. *We* don't. What is the difference between humans and other animals, Jerrick? Tell me."

"We more intelligent," I answer for him.

"How so? Animals don't waste their resources. We do. We destroy our own ecosystem. Animals don't. The difference between animals and humans is that humans desire. A human wants and needs. Other animals only *need*. What happens when a humans' wants and needs are two different things? We get headlines in big bold red about murder and corruption. God help us all. God help me if the people have to read about another religious affiliate *molesting children*. It's *not* going to happen, *so help me*, oh Lord. It's *not* going to happen."

Me and Rico look at each other.

Father Anton continues, "And to respond to your answer, Joshua, I have to ask: what is intelligence? How is somebody more intelligent than somebody? Eh? If something could be longer than something, we could tell by metres or centimetres. Or hotter, by Celcius. Or takes more time, by seconds. But what bout intelligence? Can something be two, three, four, five times more intelligent than something else? So, what is that?" I wasn't listening after that, so I dunno what

he say. He was just rambling on and on and on until he face turn blacker and blacker.

We was driving for about a hour and a half when I start to see the coconut trees. They stood parallel to each other, some bowing to us as we was riding past. I did gone on a few beach field-trips before and I remember always marvellin at the slanted ones, the ones that look like giant petrified earthworms either bursting out of the ground or burrowing into the sub-strata. Me and Rico was looking at the sea. A band of muddy brown and baby blue stretching towards the horizon, intersperse with mucky white foam lookin like old washing machine water. We drive past the occasional blue tarpulin tent and dilapidated brick houses, lookin like the salty remains of some kinda ancient beach temple ruins.

And we keep driving. We take lefts and rights and backroads and one-ways until the beach was gone. And all it had was bush and a dirt track. But we was driving along it, anyway. Then we stopped in the middle of it. Father Anton light a cigarette and was blowing smoke out the window. I was seeing his eyes watchin me in the rearview again. He shut off the ignition. He was saying with a kinda chuckle, "You want to know where we are?"

"*Where?*" Rico asked, sounding concerned. I don't remember feelin concerned at all.

"You might think we're lost. But I know where we are. I call this place a geographical oddity," Father Anton said, blowing out a puff of smoke, "It's hard to come across this place. And it doesn't sit still. It doesn't have a home. It's like an animal that goes to sleep and wakes up and walks around before going back to sleep again. I call this place that

because, no matter which direction we go from here, it would be the right direction, fellas."

"What you talkin bout?" Rico asked. He look like he wanted to kick the driver's seat.

He turn around to look at we. "I'm bringing you to this place so you can be familiar with it. Because plenty of you going to come across this place and you're going to think you're lost. And you might want to back-track and see if you see old things you noticed. Little landmarks. A dinner table. A double decker bed. A primary school. That would be the only wrong way to go. Nobody lives backwards." He take another drag.

Me and Rico say nothing. Father Anton was facing front again with his eyes on the rearview. "See, if I try to reverse from here — from this spot — my van will get stuck. I would demonstrate but then both of you will have to go push. But if we go in any other direction, we will end back up on the road." He then turned the ignition and we drive forward, even past where the road stop, and we eventually end up back on the road. Facing the beach once again.

He pull up next to a old demolished brick house. One of the beach temple shrines, maybe, reduced to lookin like a rotting uprooted incisor. Wet, jagged granite and rusty nails and coarse sand grains scattered across the floor. Roof completely gone, stairs leading up to nowhere. Father Anton get out of the car and flick his cigarette on the sand and crush it with his heel. He then stand akimbo, looking at the old house. The bottom of his frock was ripplin in the composed evening seabreeze. And I get out of the car and join him. Rico soon follow, but only because he didn't want to be alone. "I'm very sorry this happened to you, boys," Father Anton was

saying to us, still lookin at the house. "We're at the beach. Let's bathe."

Father Anton sit on a log and motion for us to go in the water. But me and Rico wasn't feelin to bathe. We both look at him. He smile and say, "We come all this way. Both of you like the beach, right? Bathe for as long as you want. We will buy something nice to eat on the way back."

Rico look at me and then back at Father Anton. Then at the ocean. He stare at it for a few seconds and then take off he shirt and pants. I did the same. We hand our clothes to Father Anton and he keep them on his lap. In we jockey shorts, we marched to the water. And under the sunset, we was wading around in liquefied corroded gold. Golden blood that pumped through the heart chambers of the ancients. Father Anton sat quietly with a cigarette in he hand and watched. Me and Rico didn't say a word to each other. We didn't even bathe next to each other. He was movin slow and clumsy like an overgrown lobster, lettin each wave clobber him right in the face. He eyes was red and it kinda look like he was crying.

But it coulda just be the salt.

The followin couple days at camp was weird. Sister Kitty was gone. Guitar and songbook and all. Mrs. Julia and Father Anton didn't say anything about what she do but that didn't change a damn thing. Everybody did know what she do. Or rather, what I did say she do. I never find out for sure what did become of her. But no charges was ever filed. And, like Father Anton did say, no headlines was ever made. Nobody really talk bout her again. And if they did, she was referred to as the real name, Sister Catherine, and it was in

reference to *that thing that happen to Joshua in camp that one time*.

I was drawn all kinda weird stares from the other children. Not weird like I had something on my face. Not weird like staring down. Weird like they would watch me when I not watching. And turn away quick when I watching. Christopher would look at the floor anytime I came close. Rey would start playing with he phone. Daniella would start playin with she hair. Crystal had a peculiar *avoidance strategy*. She would look me in the eyes for a couple seconds and then pretend like a mosquito bite her arm or that she suddenly get a itch.

My presence in a room could make it go from ceaseless chatter to heartbeat silence. The very sound of my name would rotate necks and turn eyes upward, downward. And Rico was behavin strange too. He wasn't talking to Quenton and spend most of the time in his room.

Fish didn't smile at me no more. She seem to lose she voice when she was around me. The shoulders would slump, the lips would shrivel and the throat would go dry. She use to press she forehead against my chest and tilt backwards and forwards and cry. She use to cry in sharp breaths. Just shrill inhalations and exhalations. "I feel so bad. I love you," I hear she say through one of the exhalations once. But I could be mistaken. She wrap her arms around me and it feel like an octopus' tentacles and suckers. When she was done, the front of my jersey was soaked.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*"They does tell me not to talk to strangers."*

- The boy

I sit, almost half asleep, at the topmost rung of the pavilion overlooking the Carnival Tuesday procession. A parade of sectioned-off clans of flabby bareback men and scantily-clad women marchin slowly to raucous soca music. A mosaic of colour and costume. Everyone with a Carib beer in one hand, a cellphone camera in the other. Rough hairy legs scraping against shaved delicate skin as backs brushed against chests. The wood beneath me seeming to vibrate as the music blaring. The music so loud that I couldn't understand the lyrics. Just a beat and a muffled bassline from the crawling music trucks.

And this is the procession. A section of red people, then a music truck, then a section of purple people. Then a woman wearing a giant float of shiny cloth, grass and beads on her back, about ten times her size. And it shimmerin under

the blazing afternoon sun, spread symmetrical like the wings of some deformed bird of paradise. Or, I should say, some gigantic extraterrestrial butterfly. All moving at the pace of dying earthworms.

But they keep marching.

Though a staple of Trinidad culture, Sister Mother never let we come to town on Carnival Monday and Tuesday. While she did agree that the original concept and behind Carnival was a admirable thing, which was a rebellion act of slaves to mock their masters. Back when it was now gettin popular, Carnival shows was as small as it fit a backyard. It was an expression of power, she did say, and an expression of culture and folklore. Then, from the backyards, it pour into the streets. Now it nation-wide, region-wide. And the ancestors of the same slave-masters would purchase airline tickets to join in the parades.

"It's an excuse to be reckless now. The original meaning has been lost. It's rebellion without a cause. It's very obscene," Sister Mother use to say, "And God does not like it. God help us all."

She used to send we to the church camp instead to have water balloon fights and to learn bout the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But back then, Sister Kitty use to load up about four or five of we in she car to see the celebrations anyway. I did never bother to go. And now that I am here, seeing it for the first time in person, I have no regrets. I don't like it. Too loud. Too crowded. It wasn't so loud when it was on TV. And it smelled like sweat.

I watching a man laughing and peeing on the sidewalk. Then I watch the cotton candy man making he way up and down the pavilion. He carrying the cotton candy on a

makeshift steel handle. Plastic-wrapped puffs of sugar dangling like bright pink and turquoise fruits along a metal tree branch. Children running around with facepaint on. A vagrant sleepin on the other corner of the pavilion.

Something bout the light lookin funny. Like I cannot tell if it is day or night. It had to be day because the outdoor parades does only go on til the sun go down. The night is more for the bump-and-grind after-parties and pub raids and police stops and traffic jams. But it suddenly looking too dark to be day. And the children was scampering like blind mice and tripping over the steps. Two mangy-lookin dogs run past and growl at me. They piss on the vagrant and hurry away.

Then a torchlight clicks in my face. But I don't blink. For some reason, I can see clearly. A little dark-skinned Indian boy is holding the torchlight. He looking about eight years old or so. He takes the torchlight and then shines it against he own face and tells me, "I can't find my parents. I fraid they gone home without me." I can hear him perfectly clear through all the music.

"If that is a real fear," I tell him, "Then we should just find new parents for you."

"They tell me if I get lost to ask a policeman for help."

"Well, find a policeman then," I say.

"Where the policeman? I can't find he either."

"You want me to help you find one?"

"I not supposed to be talkin to you," he tell me. The light in he eyes so long now that they start to get them red cracks along the sides. They begin to water.

"Why?" I ask.

"My parents say so."

"What your parents tell you?"

"They does tell me not to talk to strangers," the boy say.

I say, "Well, that is a stupid rule. Because when we find the policeman and talk to him, he go be a stranger to both of we."

"But he is a police."

"You want to know a secret?"

"What?"

"I am a police too."

"Where your uniform?" he ask, he eyes watering even more now.

"I wearing it," I say.

"That is not a police uniform."

"I am what you call a undercover police, boy. It have plenty of we here."

He pointing the torchlight in my face now and asking, "Where your gun?"

"In my pocket."

"Lemme see it."

"I can't take it out."

"Why?"

"Because if I take it out here, the bandits will know I am a undercover police. We go have to go somewhere where nobody watching if you really want to see it." I pause and smile. "You still want to see my gun?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"Yeah."

"Your parents tell you what we does do when a child lost?"

"No."

I point to the foghorn speakers distributed all along the pavilion. I say, "We would go to the music man and then you have to tell him your name and then he would make a announcement for the parents to come collect you at the DJ booth. That is how it will go, step by step. Any questions?"

"What happen if nobody come to pick me up?"

"We does give them fifteen minutes to pick you up. If they cross that time, they owe you money."

"Money?"

"Yes. A dollar for every minute that they have you waitin. We does call it *late fees*. See, the more time we spend talkin here, the more late fees you missin out."

"How I could get to the music man booth?"

I stand up. The torchlight shines right through my belly like a bright yellowy white hole through my stomach. "Follow me," I tell the boy. We make we way down the pavilion. I grasp his hand so he don't get lost again. His hand is so fragile that I fear that it might snap in two. Or that his small body might get lodged between the legs of a dancing drunken fat woman. I keep him in front of me instead, wrapping my arms around his chest like a penguin's wings. And we waddle like penguins through a dank shitty pig pen.

The boy tosses away his torchlight and it rolls down to the pavement.

and just like that, it become daylight again

i walk the boy down the sidewalk and around the side of another pavilion. it have graffiti on the wall reading NO ENTRY. and some more that i dont bother to read. i walk him to the back of the pavilion. then i stop.

he ask me, where the booth

i tell him, not far from here. it have the door around here somewhere

i look right then left then right like i going to cross a street.

then behind me in case a car come speeding behind me. then i slap one of my palms against the left of the boys chin and the other on his right temple.

and with one strong jerk

i break his neck

i hold on to him for a

couple seconds and let him

twitch it out

before letting him

fall

to the ground.

An arc of blackbirds fly above me and then disperse like a fighter squadron breaking formation. I watch them disappear in the distance.

And it seems that everything else has disappeared with them. The music has stopped. I walk around the back of the pavilion and turn to my right and I see the streets laying empty except for confetti quivering in the vanishing wind. The sun sits in static. The boy's legs shudder one last time. His eye and mouth hang open like a dead fish's. I cough. A reeking stench creeps into my lungs. I cough again. It feels as if someone stuff dung through my nose halfway down my throat. Even if I breathe through my mouth, I feel the air cutting my throat.

My eyes start to water. I look down at the boy again and see a dark purple liquid leaking out from the side of his mouth. A broken faucet. Though dead, his eyes follow me



observe the lengthening shape along the asphalt. Like giant wings flapping. Moving in and out, in and out, in and out, with a menacing symmetry.

I wipe my mouth with my sleeve and turn around to see a rainbow-coloured giant bulldozing every structure in its way. Whipping tendrils against buildings, slicing pavilions in half. Spidery fissures race along the avenue. But the ground does not shake. A Carnival float gone mad. A rainbow nightmare. A demonic hybrid between a butterfly and octopus with the breath of a rising storm and enormous eyes glowering with insane hilarity. Bigger than anything I ever see and tumbling like a colossal *jumbie* train. And I here like a deer on the tracks. It whips another tendril against a building, knocking half of it away. It lets out a scream:

*EE!*

I scramble to my feet and start running like mad. A surge of wind knocks me down again. I wince in pain as I fall and hear a snap. I look behind me. The rainbow nightmare begins flapping its wings and leaps into the air. It flies up to the sun. And the world grows silent again. I look at my leg and see blood leaking down my knee. And a broken bone protruding through my thigh. I run my fingers along the splintered edge of it and wiggle it a little with my thumb. I try to push it back in place and a sharp semi-circle of pain sweeps along my groin.

Then it becomes night. I look at the sky. The sun is gone. And the humming sounds again. *Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee*. The blossoming sore in my leg begins to vibrate and hurt. So do the veins and tendons in my neck, til they begin to strangle me. I can barely swallow. The sound grows louder. A small white dot appears in the sky and begins to scatter slow like a

slithering ink blot. A whistle sounds. I begin to sweat. The cracked buildings, the fractured roads, my skin begin to shine. The litter and confetti rise slowly from the ground. The trees in the distance burst into flames and the burning leaves glide upwards. Lines of flames run across the savannah until the entire field catches fire.

I clamp my palms against my eyes.  
my eyes water until they begin to shrivel  
and then leak down my cheeks  
i go blind  
i  
i  
i  
i collapse  
then i feel my body begin to rise  
floating upward  
face down  
a reverse parachuter  
my arms and legs swinging like clock pendulums  
tick tock tick tock tick tock  
my clothes bursts into flames and  
my skin burnst  
he saliva in my mouth  
sizzling  
like oil in a pan  
my tongue falls off  
and I feel like my brain has  
begun to m

# chapter fifteen

*we will both be dead and full and alright*

i wake up in the dark

at first i think i pee myself but it dont seem so once i grope around a little. wet hard slimy concrete beneath my body. my palm slips as i try to prop myself up and i hit my shoulder.

then i decide that maybe it would be better to crawl. no sign of light anywhere. the stench of rotten eggs wafts under my nose. the air also smells very old. and stale. no sound except the occasional slushing of water. muck gathering under my fingernails and on my kneecaps as i crawl. a cockroach creeps up my nostril. i try to hack it up. i begin exhaling sharply. but i already feel it ticklin my throat. ticklin my stomach. i try to vomit it out but no vomit comes out.

and i dont want to stick my mucky fingers down my throat

not worth it nah

it go just die in there anyway

alone like it deserve to  
as i crawl i hear a funny sound. like a coin beating  
against a rusty barrel lid. or a pebble stuck between the  
spokes of a spinning bicycle wheel  
can someone help me please  
can somebody turn on the light

And then a light beam shines in the distance. Thank  
you. Specks of dust billow around the light. My eyes follow  
the light and I see that it is coming from a torchlight. The  
figure holding it walks towards me. Then I hear the song. *I  
feel so bad I got a worried mind / I'm so lonesome all the time  
/ Since I left my baby behind / On Blue Bayou.*

My heart beats fast. A church bell sounds from above.  
The figure stops before me and shines the light in my face  
until my eyes begin to water. I do not blink. They then shine  
the light in their face. Mouse's face. It looking funny with the  
light shining up from below her chin. Like pieces of she face  
missing. Like she only have a chin, nostrils, cheekbones and  
eyes. She telling me, "Joshua, we found each other!"

"We find each other in the darkness," I say.

"I was looking for a way out," she say, "And I find one.  
But it have nothing up there."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing! Only you and I are left, Joshua."

"In the whole world?"

"Yes." And in the same breath, "But do we need  
anybody else, Joshua?"

"No."

"Good."

"What we going to do, Mouse?"

"We could just live down here."

"What we go drink?" I ask.

She shining the light in my face. "Open your mouth," she tell me. So I do. She then brings her face to mine. So close that we lips nearly touching. Then she spit in my mouth. I swallow it. Then she open her mouth. And I spit in it. "Yes, drink yourself silly," she say as she swallow.

"What we go eat?" I ask.

"I have a knife," she say, "I will cut off piece of myself and you will eat it, okay? Then you will cut off piece of yourself and I will eat it, okay? And we will never go hungry ever again."

"But then we go both be dead."

"But not of hunger, at least. Our bellies will be full. We will both be dead and full and alright."

"But I want to live, Mouse. You don't want to live?"

She shake her head. "Can't live forever. I'm leaving St. Asteria tonight. In fact, I already leave."

"Why? Why you didn't tell me sooner? I coulda come with you."

"Woulda, coulda, shoulda. The past is gone, Joshua. Can't live life in reverse. Can't live life in *park*. Can't stay here forever. We will drink, then we will eat, then we will die. And it will be all right. Okay?"

"People need you."

"People need to learn to take care of themselves," she tell me, "You want to eat first? Do you want my arm or my leg?"

"It does itch when you not here. Like deep below my skin. It feel like roaches in my veins. Maggots creeping around in my bone marrow. It unbearable."

"Does it itch now?"

"Yes."

"Why? I am right here."

"No," I say, "You'se not Mouse. I know Mouse too good to recognise she from a *jumbie*. Who is you? I know Mouse eyes too good. You is just a dream. A nightmare. A dream is not good enough for me. I refuse to die with just some imaginary shade of Mouse."

She laughing. She say, "You would be looking for me all these years after I leave?"

"Yes."

"You are sweet, Joshua," she say, "You was always the sweetest boy. You is the type of boy who would never stop searchin for somebody even if you find out they dead."

"Yes."

"What if you find out I dead?"

"I would search for a way to bring you back to life."

"Would you kill yourself for me?"

"Yes."

"Betray your country for me?"

"Yes."

"Go to hell for me?"

"Yes."

"Then kill yourself for me *now*."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because you'se not Mouse. I dunno who you is. You is just some faker. Some *schemer-woman*."

"Then kill me."

I don't say nothing.

She say, "Why you not stabbing me to death right now? Why you don't slit my throat? Why keep me alive?"

"For the same reason why I ain't go set fire to a photograph of you. I like seeing your face. You should sing to me. Sing *Blue Bayou* for me, please."

"No." She say with a smile. And I see the dark green grime forming between she teeth. Her gums slowly recede until I could almost see the roots. She licking her teeth. "I want sex."

"You could get it from me," I say, "I could try for you."

She laughing. "No. It not in you, Joshua. And I don't intend on ending up like Kitty. You don't see, boy? I am young. I need to be *touched*." She runs her fingers along her thighs.

"I could *touch* you. If you stay, I could do it. And we could be good, just me and you."

"You'se such a silly, sweet boy," she say, giggling. She hand me the torchlight. "Shine it on me," she tell me. She unhook her skirt and, bare-bottomed, sit on the mossy floor. Her vagina brushing against caked gunk. I wave the torchlight around the room. To our right was the edge of a long waterway with rats drowning silently. To our left was a solid brick wall with dead plants hanging from the crannies. I shine the torchlight back at Mouse. She was rubbin her fingers against the outside of her vagina.

"I don't want to watch this," I tell her.

"Oh God," she say, arching her neck and back. Then she lie down flat on the floor, scraping she heels against the moss.

"Please stop. I can't watch."

"Every night, Joshua. Oh God. You know that, boy? Every night in my room. With the crucifix watching and all."

"Please stop."

She lowers her other hand and she spreads open her vagina. She begin to flop around like a fish. Going leftward, leftward. Until she fall into the canal. Her eyes roll back into her head and she was whispering nonsense. Gargling, guttural gibberish. I keep the light on her. She was floating on the filthy water, spread like Christ on the cross. The rats all rush to her and use her as a raft. And she floating, unmoving.

Shit. She dead.

One of the rats scurry down she stomach and hop back into the water. Then it swim right up her vagina. Squealing loudly as he kicking he feet to get his whole stout ass inside. Then his tail disappeared inside her. "Oh God!" she say loud, eyes flying open, "Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Yes! Yes! Yes!"

The room start to flash. Like a stroboscope. Each cry flashing a image in my head. Even when I shut my eyes, I still seeing them.

A broken clock, a dog about to howl, a bee sinking he barb into black skin, a duck wading in shit, a pen writing a letter, an entire classroom laughing, a crumpled up bein slotted into a church box, snow on TV, bumper cars, a pair of shoes on a electric wire, a distant airplane, a plastic Christmas tree, a dead hummingbird, Christmas carollers, a baby soaked in mommy fluid, the past, the present, the future tense.

I drop the torchlight and jump in the water. And it all goes quiet. I submerge myself. Bubbles come out of my mouth. Rats swarm around me, biting my clothes, my legs, my chest. I swim back up to the surface, lashing at the rats with each breaststroke. I scuffle to get back up to the concrete.

I rip my shirt off and pick up the torchlight and shine it on my chest. Tags of bloody flesh hang from my sides due to

the rat bites. And I seeing leeches clutch onto my skin. They leaving soft bloody kisses all across my body. I slap at them and they fall to the ground, curled and immobile. As soon as they fall off, I stamp on them until my foot drenched with leech juice. I peel the leech skin off my heels and shine the light on the canal. And Mouse nowhere to be found. The fake Mouse, anyway.

I shine the light on the ceiling and look at all the ants and beetles scuttling upside-down. I shine the light on the canal and notice that it is gone. Replaced by more mucky slabs of concrete. Then I shine it on the wall and notice some graffiti on it. One word. EXIT. I walk towards it. I mash dead leeches with each step. I caress the word. I let my fingernails drag down the "I". Maybe a secret opening. A trap door out of this place. I hearing a dog barking this whole time. Not from above, as I did first think, but from below. Sounding like Chopper.

My stomach churns and I feel my abdomen swelling and getting heavy like a bullfrog's chin. I get on my knees and shine the light on my torso. Jesus Christ, I grunting. The pain radiating to my chest and rectum. A blunt pain, worse than the worst gas I ever experience. I feel like my intestines rotting, like my organs being shifted and switching positions like musical chairs. I feel like my heart shift to the other side of my chest. My ribs expand. I could only draw short breaths. My belly distending until the skin get stretched out like thin latex.

"Go away!" I yelling, "Get away!"

a long brown sickle come burstin through my chest  
and i feelin like five others stabbing me  
from inside

i cough up blood  
UNGH  
i shine the light on the sickle  
and notice the hairs on it  
and the segmented shape  
oh my lord  
it is a livin thing a leg a giant cockroach leg  
and it slicing upwards to my collar  
oh my lord  
i grab the leg  
it cut right through half of the fingers  
on my right hand  
oh my lord  
the digits fall to the ground  
still squirming  
like dying leeches  
the hinge of the leg  
curls  
and the  
edge begins  
oh my lord  
gashin  
away  
at my  
face  
stabbing my cheeks  
cutting my skin  
like crepe paper.  
my body gone into f f f f f f f f f  
fits  
i feel another leg bursting through my back

i start runnin around like a  
cluck cluck cluck cluck  
headless chicken  
with the torchlight  
still in my good hand  
i see a flash of the word again

EXIT

i ram my head  
straight  
into  
the  
fucking  
w

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*"See, you either born a stray  
or you earn the title honestly."*

- Quenton

I remember the day Elroy Morris leave St. Asteria. I woulda be about thirteen around then. He sneak out in the middle of the night, had to be. It wouldn't be til early New Year's morning of 2000 we would notice he seat was empty for breakfast. We was all shaken awake with interrogations by Sister Bulldog and Sister Mother, asking if we know his whereabouts. Nobody did know. Even he roomie, Christopher Lall, didn't know nothing. Sister Mother gather us in the dining room and she start to recall facts to sheself:

The front door was lock-up and none of the windows was left open.

Everyone was present for the New Year's countdown on radio. I, myself, remember wishin Elroy a Happy New Year. Of course, he didn't take the energy to wish me back, or even budge he mouth.

Everyone was in their rooms by one o' clock for lights out, Sister Mother recalled, after Father Anton put on a small fireworks display. Quenton and Rico also was helpin out. Everyone was clappin and shriekin at the bottle rockets and bamboo bangers except Elroy. Stoic and alone as always, face like a puffer fish.

Christopher did say he wake up about three in the morning to go pee and Elroy was still in bed. This was valuable information for the authorities. They give him what they call a *four hour window*. This country so small too. Four hours was nothing here. They was fairly certain they coulda recover the boy. But something tell me they wasn't going to try too hard. Just by the look on their faces. Jokers, all of them police. Pranksters. I think Sister Mouse did realise it too, and probably why she and Father Anton form their own private search party for the boy. They drive for about three or four hours daily hoping a peep of the boy would turn up. Elroy's bulk make it not hard to miss either.

While they was concerned bout finding Elroy, I was more curious bout how he even get out. Locked front door. Closed windows. He was too fat to scale the wall and the gate outside. Couldn't tunnel underneath. How he do it? Flush heself down the toilet? If he manage to pry the window open, how it remain closed after he get out? Chris say he didn't help him and I did always believe him. It had to be somebody else who get him out. But I dunno who. Nobody business-up with Elroy. Nobody bother Elroy and Elroy bother nobody.

I always had the feeling that he didn't escape in the first place, that somebody kill him and stick him beneath the floorboards somewhere. Or in some hidden wall or cupboard, and that if I go back there right *now* and look hard enough, I

could find a wide-ribbed skeleton with rat-bit greying flesh slippin from the bones still somewhere in the cubbyholes of St. Asteria. What if he had try squeezing in some drainpipe and he fat ass get wedged too tight? Or maybe he was in St. Asteria around breakfast time that mornin, and he use their panic to he advantage and sneak out when they was driving around lookin for him. But one of we woulda see him for sure if that was the case. As I say, he so fat, he not hard to miss.

Where is Elroy? Where he coulda go? Where a boy like Elroy coulda turn up?

Some of we was in the library one time. I should note that Rey and me wasn't talking anymore. We did just drift apart. And he stop going to the library. In fact, he stop reading altogether. All he used to be interested in was *business*, he did say. School only used to sell them cheap home-made snacks like salt prunes and preserved mango and rainbow-dyed sugar plums. Rey aim to give them competition. He use to buy snacks from the kiosks here that the stalls in school didn't sell. M&M's, Skittles, them Willy Wonka candies. He use to carry them around in a separate red bookbag. I never buy any.

Anyway, we was in the library and we was all sittin cross-legged on the carpet and playing All Fours. Well, them was playing – Crystal, Fish, Quenton and Daniella – I was just watchin and thumbing through a copy of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, my latest from the Mouse collection. This one was different from the rest of the books she had give me to read. I remember them in order too: The Little Prince, The Pearl, Matilda, The Wind in the Willows, Miguel Street, Oliver Twist in the first year alone. This one wasn't about talkin animals and telepathic girls, though. This was bout two

men who kill a entire family with shotguns. Mouse say I was gettin old enough to read more *challenging* books like that.

As we all sit down there, we get to talkin bout Elroy.

"I don't understand why he go want to run away," Crystal did say.

Fish say, "He was a weird boy, y' know. We does get plenty here." I should also note that Fish's attraction to me dissolve real quick after the Sister Kitty thing. I never suspect that she did think I was lyin. She just couldn't deal with that kinda thing. She become one of them who use to suddenly had to inspect ant and mosquito bites when I did come around. But years later now, people did stop with that silliness. I don't think it ever leave their minds, though. Up til I could last see her room, my drawing was still stick-up on her wall.

"Girl," Daniella say, "You know what sad? I never really get to talk to he. He was just a stranger."

"He make heself out to be so," Crystal say.

Fish add, "He never use to talk to anybody, girl, so don't beat yourself up. Some people just like to live like that."

"You have to watch out for the quiet ones," Quenton did say, laughin, finally droppin a card and makin a play.

"For true, eh," Crystal say.

Daniella was busy scannin she cards. Fish turn to me and ask, "Joshua, you ever talk to him?"

I say, "Once. But it wasn't nothing, really."

Daniella say, puttin down a card, "You lucky, boy. I once had he for the Christmas gift exchange and I didn't even know who it was from. The boy didn't even write he name on the tag, much less *Merry Christmas Daniella*."

"What you buy for him, anyway?" Quenton ask.

Daniella say, "Socks, probably."

Quenton laugh and say, "I wouldn't tell you *Merry Christmas* either if you was givin me nasty fuckin socks, bitch."

"Oh gosh, Quenton, that *word*," Crystal say, covering she ears.

"Bitch bitch bitch bitch bitch," Quenton keep repeatin, chucklin, each progressive *bitch* gettin softer.

Fish play her hand. She say, "You all think he would come back?"

Crystal, finally uncoverin her eyes, say, "Why he ain't go come back? What he going to eat? Where he going to sleep? Where he going to go do he *business*? Reality going to catch up just now and he go come back."

Daniella say, "He go be real stupid not to come back."

"I know *stupid*," Quenton say, "And when I use to look at that boy, I never see no *stupid* in he. He do something reckless, yeah, but he ain't do it without workin it out over and over in he head first. Quiet people is like that. I wouldn't do the boy so to call 'im stupid."

Crystal say, "What you go call 'im then?"

Quenton think bout it for a couple seconds, fannin he chin with he cards. Then he say, "*Clairvoyant*. That is the word, right? I learn that word in English class. That is how you does say it, right? Joshua? Aye, Mr. Dictionary."

"Yes. Clairvoyant," I say, raisin my head from the book, "The keen ability to perceive events in the future."

Quenton continue, "*Clairvoyant*, yeah. The boy know he future already. You bitches ever think bout what you going to be after you done with St. Asteria? Eh? None of we going to be living in palaces."

"Unless I marry somebody rich," Daniella say, laughin. I should note that Daniella wasn't talkin to Rey anymore either. Never bother to find out what happen between them.

Quenton say, "Yeah, easy for a girl to say. Gold diggin is a female profession. Elroy know he wasn't goin to be no gold miner or anything once he gone from here. That is why he dust it. He wanted to give heself a head start in life."

"And what bout you, Mr. Smartypants?" Fish say, "Why you don't give yourself a nice big *head start in life*? I ain't see you becomin no *gold miner* either."

"Bitch, I not fuckin ready to be eatin outta no fuckin rubbish bin."

Crystal say, "Your *mouth* is the rubbish bin! Stop sayin that word!"

Daniella say, "You can't be serious when you sayin somebody thinkin straight go run away from their home to be a stray dog, Quenton."

Quenton shrug. "It is what it is."

Fish say, "I suppose people go do anything when the desperation get to them."

Quenton say, "I still sayin what I sayin, eh. All yuh does call this place *home*. This not your *home*. Sister Mother not your mother. Father Anton not your father. Your mother and father dead and gone. When you gone, another one go come in."

"Shut up, Quenton," Crystal say, "They take the time to raise we. They is good people."

"I *never* say they is bad people," Quenton say, "Listen for once in your life, nah, and stop accusing. But it only have so much they could do for we. It only have so much they could be able to care."

Daniella say, "Even if that is the case, I still don't see how somebody go want to cut short the little time they have here. Nobody does just wake up and *decide* to be a stray."

"You right," Quenton say, "Nobody does decide to be a stray."

"Then explain yourself," Crystal say.

"You know what they does say bout elephants?"

"Good memory?" Crystal say.

"No. Bout when it is their time to die," Quenton say.

I say, "They does march to their graves."

Quenton nod and say, "They does know when they going to die. They don't waste no time waitin it out. Why wait when you already know what goin to happen? They wait til a lil before and then they start the march. The march of death. But they don't stray from the herd til a lil before."

"What your point?" Daniella say.

"Elroy the elephant," Quenton say, lookin at each of we, "Marched to he grave." And then he laugh.

"God, Quenton," Fish say, "Why you have to be so?"

"I just half-joking, bitches," he say, "Daniella, you remember your first day of secondary school?"

"Yeah," she say.

He say, "Different, eh?"

"But not too different," Daniella say, "Is all the same. Teachers. Books. Only the place and people different."

"You had to throw all your other friends away, ain't that so? Imagine when all start turnin eighteen, one by one, and we have to dust it from St. Asteria. Imagine how much different that going to be than secondary school. How much you think you three bitches goin to be seein each other after that time come?"

They look at each other. I look at them. I recognise the sudden sadness in their faces. Quenton was smilin, though. It seem he had long accept this fact of life. He say, "Elroy know he was goin to have to say goodbye sooner or later. I think that is why he never bother to talk to any of we. And he know he was goin to have to get out there when the time come. And he didn't want to wait for that. Why wait?"

The three girls was silent. Quenton continue, "The boy raised in a kennel only to get toss out later. Eighteen is too late to start trainin to be a stray dog. It have nothing like a new stray. It only have a dog with old tricks that useless in a new environment. A dog don't become a stray until he learn to survive. See, you either born a stray or you earn the title honestly."

Then Fish speak up, "I just glad you go be leaving before any of we," and storm off.

"Bitch, why you mad?" Quenton say.

The other girls follow.

"Mad bitches," Quenton mutter, smilin and shakin he head. And I get back to my book. Needless to say, up til I leave St. Asteria, Elroy was never heard from again.

But we had two runaways in the year 2000. On the sunny afternoon of the eleventh of February, after five years of service, Sister Michelle "Mouse" Pierre exited the front doors of St. Asteria, never to show she face inside again. It was a Friday. And she was going to leave while we was all still at school but change she mind and decide to stay til we all get home. I couldn't make it, though. Because I had to go to a fucking after-school Mathematics lessons class and didn't get back til half past five.

She was already long gone.

While everybody else get hugs and kisses on the cheek, all I get was a phone call. And I was the one who had to make the phone call. I remember bein upset. I didn't say nothing but it did show. When I went to my room, Rey was fastenin rubber bands over small stacks of five-dollar bills. He didn't even glance at me. The Rey from years ago woulda notice immediately. He woulda treat it like a bleeding artery. Tie a tourniquet around it. But the Rey from years ago was long gone.

Crystal was more intuitive. She see it. And she know I was hurtin. She tell me how Mouse's last scene was very brief. No speech or nothing. No real monologue. No dialogue. Just a "God bless you" and "good luck with your lives" and "It was a pleasure being with all of you." Like I did care if it was brief or not. Daniella give me a hug. And Fish make a cup of tea for me. She end up drinkin it out.

Two nights after, I ask for Quenton help to break into the room Mouse was stayin in. Usually, that woulda be Rico business but Rico was mostly keepin to heself around that time. I use to hear rumours that Rico didn't take good to secondary school. He meet a new breed of badjohn there and make the unwise decision to mix with them and would come home with black eyes and swellings. Maybe he was too shame to show he face around we because of that. He wouldn't allow we to see bleeding.

He also get catch more than once with marijuana in he jacket pockets. And get suspended once for carryin an icepick to school. He didn't do nothing with it, though.

Quenton did finally get the door open and I did never feel so dismal. The walls resemble some kinda skin disease,

half of the paint already flaked off. The cobwebs and dust was back. I remember the day Sister Mother make we clean all of that up and break we backs scrubbin and moppin the floor. Mouse use to clean the room. I know that. But for that year and the one before, she slack off on that. I only realise it then because I was too busy lookin at the ceramic swans and the the personal book library. She always keep the shelves free of dust and grime. I think I was hoping she woulda leave at least one of the seashell crafts behind. Whether it was by mistake or intentional, like a treasure for me to discover.

But the room was just empty. Like she had never live in it at all. Not one stray hair I coulda find. Nothing. I sniff the mattress but her scent was gone. Quenton tell me, "What you doing, bitch? Hurry up before somebody come!" It had nothing there for me. I come out the room and Quenton close the door. I never went in there again.

I ask Sister Mother if I could call Mouse again but Sister Mother just give me a kinda gloomy look and tell me, "She's not a part of the St. Asteria family anymore, Joshua. I am here for you if you want to talk." But I didn't want to talk to Sister Mother.

I did feel like somebody died and I didn't get enough time with them. It had so much things I still had to talk bout. I didn't even get to talk to she bout *In Cold Blood*. I couldn't figure out why she would leave. And then I did remember Quenton talkin bout Elroy.

Maybe she was just a elephant marchin towards the graveyard.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*"Me loving him is none of he damn business."*

- Pinky

With Elroy's exit and unlikely return, sometime in June 2000, Marissa Kelly had get ship over to St. Asteria. But everyone use to just call she Pinky, because of how pink she skin was. She had French Creole blood, deep creases under she eyes and and dark brown curly hair. She wasn't hesitant at all to tell we how she end up here. Apparently she father abandon she at a very early age and hitch a banana boat back to Guadeloupe and she had to be raised by a semi-conscious string-out mother. Big in the cocaine game. Well, one day she lose the game. Pinky was even there when it happen. "She mouth was frothing with blood and she was floppin bout like a damn fish," she describe it to we.

She say how she mother make she sniff it a couple times too. And how it use to smell like it had laundry detergent in it sometimes. But I guess she did never develop a real addiction.

Pinky was bout fourteen when she come in St. Asteria. Pinky already had a life before. Not like how me and Rey and Tiana was here since we could remember. When she did first come, we didn't really consider she family. We wasn't even sure if she was going to be there permanent, or if she was just passin through. No godparents was ever established and authorities was trying to get in contact with the father but nothing ever come of that. Neither had attempts to reach out to the grandparents. So St. Asteria just decide to keep she. But yeah, even still, we didn't consider she one of we.

She talk too damn much. She was like a damn foreigner spewing culture-clashin garbage. During breakfast, she was always talkin bout she dreams, no matter if they was just nonsense or not. And then she use to try to analyse them. In the library, she was talkin bout all the suitors she mother had. Hard-back gangster men from Laventille and John John and Morvant who use to come around with tattoos on their chests and necks. And then she would talk bout how one of them sleep with she already. That was when everybody start paying attention.

She tell we bout when she lose her virginity. It was with one of her mother boyfriends. A man call Glass. She never find out he real name. She mother did never find out. She just say how late one night he climb into bed with she and start doing it. Pinky say how he penis was like a cutlass inside of she. She didn't like it. And she bleed after. It was as long and thick as she hand, she did say.

"Sheeit," Quenton had say, "Mine bigger than that."

She say she was twelve when it happen. And Glass was somewhere in the early thirties. Glass and she mother had a big row the next night and he cuff her in the eye so hard that

it swell up for two weeks. "It was like a nasty leakin scab. With the stinky water pouring out," was how Pinky describe she mother crying during them two weeks.

Then she start talkin bout her mother next boyfriend, a red man she call Darron. Younger than the last one, bout mid-twenties or so. She say even though Glass take she virginity, she first kiss was with Darron. She say how she was in she room, lying on the carpet with the radio on. And he come in and she look up. "He look so tall from where I was," she say. He say how he tell her to sit on the bed. Then he kneel in front of her and he cup her chin gently, stroking the corners of her lips tenderly with he thumb and index. She talk bout how fast she heart was beatin, much faster than when Glass first penetrate her. "Then he move in slow and kiss me," she say, "And my body tremble. I feel like my body was burstin with some kinda white light."

She say how she feel special round him, how he couldn't get enough of she. How he used to *make love* to she and treat she like a woman. Before they make love, he would put on slow music and hold she tight against he naked body as they shuffle sensuous and idle along the carpet. And while they was dancing, she was still fully clothed, and she would be tuggin at he cock the whole time. "Was a whole different kinda sex," she describe it.

"How your mother ain't find out?" Rico ask.

She say, "I think she did know. She use to fall asleep fast after a hit and that was when me and he use to do we business. A couple times she wake up in the middle of it, mutterin some nonsense. She probably convince sheself that she was hallucinating. Darron didn't come over to see she. He

come to see me. That is why he use to bring a bag of coke every time. To get the bitch high and outta the picture."

"You didn't feel bad?" Chris ask.

"Use to feel good to be wanted."

"You use to love the lovin, eh, bitch?" Quenton say.

"The only man I ever love."

"He did know that?" Chris say.

Pinky suck she teeth. "Me loving him is none of he damn business."

Rico raise he eyebrows. Daniella say, "I don't agree with this at all," and get up and leave. Rey scoff as she exit the room.

Pinky talk bout the one time her mother come home and collapse. "Like a bag of bricks," she say. A tattered dress, slippin halfway down her shoulder and hikin halfway up her thigh with blood smeared on their insides. She wasn't wearin no panties neither, but the blood didn't look like it come from the vagina. It was from a stab wound somewhere on the inner thighs. A trickle of dried blood was pasted over her temple and her jaw look funny, Pinky describe, like someone shift it out of place. Pinky say how she give a look that she couldn't describe except for, "She eyes just kinda roll to the back of she head. But she was tryin to look at me at the same time," before she went tumblin to the floor. Like a bag of bricks.

In the emergency room, the doctors had determine that she had a fractured jaw, two broken ribs, a cigarette burn on her arm, slight hemorrhaging and that she was rape by at least three men. She was also drunk and high on cocaine, Pinky hear. In the police statement, she just state that she get into a taxi and he drive she into the middle of a field where they beat her senseless. She say she musta pass out during the

rape. But Pinky didn't believe this. I could imagine the jokey police didn't really believe it either, but them didn't care. "Them didn't even bother to ask how she reach home after that," Pinky say.

Pinky was put in temporary foster care for a couple months before she mother recover and reclaim her. Pinky was mad during that period because she couldn't see Darron no more. She was also almost certain that Darron was one of the men who rape she. She say how she bull two of the boys in foster care, one in a broom closet and the other in he room after lights out, but that it wasn't the same. Pinky and she mother get placed in a new housing project in Maloney after and she mother didn't take long to fall back into she old bad habits.

But instead of passin out when she take a hit, she use to get to apologising profusely. "She use to just be tellin me how she sorry," Pinky say, "Bout a hundred times a day. Saying how she sorry, how she so sorry. She didn't know she coulda do she baby like that. It was real sickenin, havin somebody tell you so much that they sorry. I don't want nobody feelin sorry for me."

Then Pinky tell we bout the time she had to go in the hospital. "Had this rasta I had my eyes on," she say, "He live up the road by me. He was young, bout twenty, and livin by heself. He face always under a car hood. He didn't have no education or anything but people use to say the boy was a wizard with cars. They use to call him Fix. We start talkin one day And then we get to talkin bout my mother and the time she was in the hospital. But I change the topic quick. I tell him he have a nice body. And the whole time I givin him

the eye and the swag and t'ing but you coulda swear the fella was a skettel, he wasn't havin none of it."

Rico was strokin he chin. Pinky continue, "So one day, I make Fix take me inside and I jump 'im. And he fall backwards on the couch. And I grab he face and start kissin it. And he was mumblin something but I wasn't listenin. Rasta was real nervous. Then he start kickin around. He went mad. He throw me off. And start kickin me in the ribs. And he keep bawlin, *You gone put me in jail, you gone put me in jail!* Stark ravin mad, I tell you. Then he pick me up and pelt me across the room. And he was still yellin but I couldn't understand nothing. Only boulders flyin. He was dribblin all over. I was breathin real hard, watchin this crazy ass lashin he arms around, knockin over everything in the house. Mashin up the whole damn house! Then he take he pack of cigarettes and bolt out the door."

"Fuckin madman," Quenton say.

"Fucker was mentally *unsound*," Pinky say, "They lock him up. I dunno where he is now. But he lock up somewhere, I hope. I was in the hospital for bout two weeks. He crack one of my ribs, yes. That shit did hurt like hell."

Pinky's mother went from profusely apologising to beatin her. "She would just come home and start sharing out licks," she say, "I think she finally realise that she wasn't experiencing no coke hallucinations. And that I wasn't no innocent victim. As soon as she reach home, she take off the belt and start whippin away at everything. Sometimes two belt. Like some kinda crazy squid woman. She did get a new boyfriend. This one use to call heself Powers. He was a big one, look like he coulda cuff holes in the wall."

"I stronger than he," Quenton say, flexing he arm.

Everybody laugh. Pinky say, "And my mother pull me aside one day in the kitchen and beat me and tell me not to go round this one. How this is *she* own."

"Did you?" Chris ask.

"Course I did," Pinky say and everybody laugh. "But it wasn't my idea, eh. I not so devious one time. He was playing Darron game but with different rules. He use to bring coke anytime he come over. But not as a distraction. But payment. She could get a couple hits by pimpin me out. I never wanted to do nothin with him, though. He did frighten me. She never let him fuck me, though. Just other things. I remember the first time she ask me to do it, high as a fuckin kite. She say, *Mary, do this for mommy, okay? It not takin much outta you. He just going to put he thing in your mouth for a couple minutes.*"

"I feelin disgusted listenin to this," Chris say.

"Shut up," Rico quick to retort.

Pinky say, "It went like that for bout a month. Until she start to cause trouble and start goin to the police. That is when Powers give she the hot shot."

"Hot shot?" Quenton ask.

"He put something in the batch," she say, "I not sure if it was cocaine or if she did graduate to heroin. I hear people talkin bout it already. They lace the batch with something. Easy way to kill somebody who already killin theyselves. So she take the hot shot. Shoot up straight she arm with the glass gun. Racing through she blood. I remember how she went bazodee for a minute or two before gravity hit she. And before she did, she give me the same kinda look the night she had to go to the hospital. Eyes rollin back but lookin like she straining to look at me at the same time."

"And what happen?" Chris ask.

"She mouth was frothing with blood and she was floppin bout like a damn fish," she say, "Then after bout twenty seconds, she stop floppin. And that was it, boys."

As for me, I was just trying to study Social Studies the whole time. I wasn't no genius in school, but I wasn't no failure. Sister Mother did know this. So imagine the shock she did get when I did fail almost all of my subjects in the April exams. Especially abysmal marks in Science and Social Studies. She confine me to the library for a hour and a half every evening with my textbooks. But I couldn't pay attention. Not no more. I just spend my time re-reading *In Cold Blood* and recallin the stories of the other books I had read. I couldn't find *The Little Prince* in any bookstore here so I try writin the story over in my own words. A copybook I leave behind in St. Asteria was just that – my scarce rewriting of Antoine de Saint Exupéry's beloved book with amateur pencil sketches.

And on the night of July 9<sup>th</sup>, I run away from St. Asteria. Pinky was the catalyst. See, she disrupt the natural order of things around there. She use to sneak out of the girls' section and come in the boys' section. Didn't have no set of sneakin to do but nobody else ever do it – not even Rico and Quenton – because out of some mutual self-respect, I think. Pinky did come and go as she please.

I remember the first time I see her. Rico was on the floor with he pants down to he knees and she was kneelin on top of he crotch with only a white bra on. The lights was off. She was gigglin quietly as she was bouncin up and down. Rico was bare-back and woolly-chested and bitin he bottom

lip and runnin he palms along her chest. Pinchin the nipples. Chris, Quenton and Rey was sittin, three in a line, on the bottom bunk and watchin. I remember bein surprised at how little noise they was making. Like I was watchin the TV on mute.

Pinky spin around and look at me. Even with her jaw hanging open like a Venus Flytrap, the smirk was apparent. Cheeks rising and flushing with clammy pinkness. Then she pressed a hand down on Rico's chest, grabbin a fair amount of chest hair as if it would help her balance, and she pursed her lips at me and blew me a kiss. "What you all doing?" I ask.

"What you think they doing, bitch?" Quenton say.

"Unhook my bra, boy," Pinky tell me, smilin.

"No," I say.

"Do it, faggot," Rey say, not even watchin me. His first words to me in a long time.

"No," I repeat.

Chris, without sayin a word get up and do it himself. He pushed the right cup against his nose, makin him look like a demented surgeon, and inhale deep. He remove the bra from his face with a big grin on he face. This same time, Pinky was doing a 180 on Rico to face me. She grab her breasts and push them together, still bobbin up and down. Then she let him go. I stare down their shadowy division and she pucker her lips again.

"Gimme a kiss, boy," she say.

"No," I say.

"Why?" She make a pretend-sad face.

"Don't want to."

"Faggot," Rey say.

"Don't worry, baby," Quenton say, getting up from the bed, "I go give you a kiss." And he kneel at her side and with nudge her face to the side with one finger. The lips didn't even touch at first. He just plunge he tongue into she mouth.

"Ooh," Pinky say in a fake delirium after, "Everybody so friendly here, boy. This my new favourite place."

And I went back to bed.

As the nights went on, Chris, Quenton and Rico each take turns with Pinky. I never use to go in the room after that time but I use to peep from the doorway. Nobody ever notice me but Pinky use to know. Because the next day, she use to whisper in my ears, "Joshie, how the peeping was?"

"All you boys nasty," Fish say.

"I go tell on you one of these days," Daniella say, especially dejected due to her lingerin attachment to Rey. "Joshua, why you don't say nothing?"

"I don't bother nobody. And nobody don't bother me," I say, "That is them business. My business right here," and I tap my pencil against my Social Studies textbook.

"You boys just fuckin filthy, dread," Fish say.

"The people didn't come give you all the AIDS talk yet or what?" Daniella say, "I ain't go be surprise to find out that ho bring disease in this place. Shit, man."

"I don't business-up in that shit," I say, "Talk to them, not me, if all of you feelin so bothered by it. I don't like she either, you know. But is really not my business."

And sometime during the next couple days, I notice something weird. Pinky was comin out of the bathroom and had a white towel wrap round she. But I notice a red line runnin down the side and blotting around the hip. When I went to use the bathroom after, I see a razorblade with a

speckle of blood on it. She was cuttin sheself, but where? During the next romp, I went to see if I coulda pinpoint the wound.

The first thing I see was Rico, Quenton and Chris sittin on the bed. And Pinky bobbin up and down. She was fucking Rey. And for some surprise, that did come as a big shock to me. And I not really one to succumb to any kind of alarm. But this one make me feel sick. I did just leave. And I didn't say nothing. Whenever I did see Rey from then on, I felt a weird bulge in my throat. Like a worm squirmin behind my Adam's Apple.

And when exam time did come around and I see the paper, I just didn't know nothing. So I didn't write nothing. And when lunchbreak did come, I leave the school compound. I toss my school shirt aside and I just keep marching in my cotton white vest and khaki pants. I suspect they all talk bout me for a while. But then forget bout me. Probably not sooner than Elroy, but I don't think I did leave a big lastin impression on anybody. Maybe Fish. Nobody else.

Sometimes I wonder if I miss anybody or not. I could never figure it out. But I know, on that day, it didn't have nothing there for me no more.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*"Is a thin line between sinning and losing."*

- Sanskrit

The years in between then and now come as a blur. Had a small shanty town near the small white Port of Spain lighthouse where the highway slimmed and intersected. I live there for a while. I just stumble in and this rasta man who use to call heself Sanskrit let me spend the night in he shack. He was bareback and had a beard the colour of bad coffee, with random white splotches throughout. His eyes was yellow and jaundiced. And he was skinny but streamlined with lean muscle. He had a tattered cloth tied around his waist, over a pair of ragged short pants and had a cutlass strap to his back like he was some kinda vagrant warrior.

"Sanskrit love to help out the people," he tell me, giving me a glass of dirty water, "Especially the children." I look at the fragments of dirt and decomposed seaweed in the water with disgust. But I still drink it. My throat was too parched to turn it down. He light a candle and a mosquito coil

and we eat a couple mangoes for dinner. They was soft and didn't taste too good. Candle-flies clicked on and off as they flitted bout the room. The dull sweet incense from the burning mosquito coil let out a twisting trail of smoke looking like a thin transparent grey snake.

He give me a old gasoline-stained bedsheet to cover with in the night. "Sanskrit going to take you out on a outing tomorrow, boy," he say before he fall asleep. I could barely sleep, though. Constantly driftin in and out of dreams set in St. Asteria. Dreams of me still being there. That night I had a nocturnal emission also. It was still dark when I wake up and notice it.

I take off my shorts and I take my sheet and I walk to the small bay outside the shack. It was footsteps away. During the day, when the tide recede, all you coulda see was muck on the shoreline. Sometimes dead fish. I dip my shorts and the semen-covered parts of the sheet in the murky water and scrubbed them with my knuckles. The semen looked like molten pearls dissolving slowly.

I remember when goin back to the house, my toes brushin against the overgrown prickly weeds, I see a rope tied round a metal beam bridging two galvanise roofs. It look totally out of place. Both the metal and the rope. The first thought that did come to mind was that it was some kinda makeshift gallows. Maybe it had a story behind it. And maybe everybody make a pact to keep quiet bout it. A hanging. I coulda imagine a body hanging from the rope, neck broken and toes pointed straight downwards, rotating slow like flayed meat on a rotisserie.

And then I remember Elroy. Elroy the elephant.

In the morning, Sanskrit ask me if I wanted to go to the dump with him. "Monday is Dump Day," he say. He had a shifty look. But I coulda read shifty too good and this wasn't a treacherous kinda shifty. I didn't turn down the offer. He give me a pair of oversized slippers and he grab a shopping cart from behind he shack. It was chained, like a dog, to a steel pipe, and covered with a blue tarpaulin. We roll it down down the traffic-jammed highway as the sun was coming up. I remember the corbeau, looking like large winged jaguars, scaling the piles of junk. "Dem corbeau not going to do you nothing," Sanskrit say, "Them birds is friend to Sanskrit." And he run towards some of them and they fly off. "They shy, boy, they real *cunumunu*," he say.

"We lookin for non-ferrous metals, boy," he say, runnin around and rummaging through some of the heaps, "You know what that mean? We lookin for brass, aluminum, nickel, copper. Copper pay sweet too bad. What you lookin so for, boy? You ain't know the fuckin difference between zinc and nickel? Sheeit, you still new to the business. Tell me if you dig up any buried treasure. Blackbeard treasure." And he start to guffaw.

We get the cart full of metal. I couldn't tell what was what. And I hope Sanskrit wasn't playin the metal specialist as no joke. Because we was there for a good two hours and the sun did come out blazin hot. "Look up there," he tell me, pointin to a flock of corbeaux circling the dump, "It have a dead dog round here. What you say we get it before them swoop down?" and he start to laugh. I just look at him. He say, "Is a fuckin joke, boy! We go eat good today and tomorrow with the money we earn here. Tomorrow is Tuesday. Tuesday is Meal Day."

We then roll the cart back to the shanty town. Sanskrit untie the cloth round he waist and dab he face and chest with it. And then ask me if I wanted to use it. I decline. He tie it round his waist again. He tell me to wait at the shack while he drop off the materials. "You ain't gone to school, boy?" a big black woman ask me. She had a big spotted yellow bandana round she forehead and an empty basin propped up against she hip. "Where your parents? Them should give you some good licks!"

"Today not a school day," I did say.

"You feel this is the weekend?" she say, "Today is Monday, boy. Big school day."

"Monday is Dump Day," I tell she.

She shake her head and suck her teeth and walk away. It didn't really have nothing to do but wait for Sanskrit to come back. The bay water wasn't even clean to bathe in. Casually bathe, anyway. Had a few women washin their clothes near the banks. And I see some men on a rowboat crossing the bay and the docks. It had a short row of small trees along the banks by the road. And across the road was the little lighthouse. I went to it and peek inside to see bout four vagrants sleepin, arranged in a circle. A stale marijuana smell was slowly spillin outside and being swept away by the afternoon seabreeze.

When Sanskrit did return, he bring two styrofoam containers with him – barbecue chicken and fries from some town joint – and he had two sweatin Heineken beer bottles with him too. "Lunch is served," he say, and he hand me my share of food.

While takin a sip of the beer, I tell him, "Don't buy no beer for me next time. Beer cost too much. I could just drink water and you could gimme the money for the beer."

"You savin up for something, young'n?"

"Yeah. You could say so. You ain't need to buy food for me either. I could buy my own."

"Barbecue and fries not good enough for you, bredda?"

"No. It too fancy. I could do with less and save the rest of the money."

"This petty cash you go look to save up?" he say, chucklin and finishin he beer, "Well, fix your mix, boy. You goin to be a rich fella. Don't plan too much ahead, though, eh. Not here. Not in this place. The wheel spins, the ball does bounce random."

"The ball does bounce random?"

He look at me. "You still young, boy. You know how a smart man like me end up here?"

I just look at him.

He face the horizon and scratch he hair. I watch and see his face start to droop a lil. He say, "Risk, boy. Risk it all and lose. It don't pay to be a gamblin man. You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because the house does always win," he say, "No matter how the ball go or what hand you have or what horse you put down for, boy, the house does always win. Is a thin line between sinning and losing." He turn to me. "You understand what I sayin, boy?"

"I understand what you sayin."

"Good. Because everybody round these parts does think I does be talkin in Sanskrit."

Monday was *Dump Day*. Collecting the so-called non-ferrous metals from the Beetham Dump in Old Annie. Annie was what he call the shopping cart. I dunno if it was ever name after anybody or not.

Tuesday was *Meal Day*. For Sanskrit, at least. It was Belly Growl Day for me. I was busy saving my money while Sanskrit was drinkin heself silly.

Wednesday was *Gambling Night*. But I never along with him to find out what that was bout. I was too busy saving my money. He never use to win anything, anyway.

Thursday and Friday was the *Charity Days*. We use to make the most money on Hustle Days, I think, but Sanskrit say he didn't have it in he to do it everyday. We use to just sit on the pavement near the bus stops and shake a old bean can at passersby. He say people was more likely to give money coming down to the end of the week. He tell me not to try it on a Monday if I don't want some good tongue lashin and cussin. He tell me how I is a real money maker. And how people was more likely to give to a beggar who either had a disability, a talent or a child with them. He didn't want to put on no shades and and knock a broomstick all over the sidewalk, fakin some blind man act. And he say he couldn't draw or sing for shit. So I was the advantage there. He say before he use to take this stray dog from the shanty town. He call it Didi. "A dog is like half a child," he say. He didn't have no use for Didi after Joshua Sant show up.

Friday night was *Bathing Night*. He tell me never to bathe in the bay by the town. Instead, we use to walk along the highway for a couple miles across Port of Spain to this stretch of water by the remains of a jetty and later, a lonely helipad. We use to wash weselves there. I use to carry my

clothes there too in a big black plastic bag and a bar of blue soap in my pocket.

Friday night was Bathing Night because Saturday was *Restocking Day*. Couldn't walk in the supermarket lookin like a pair of smelly vagrants. Sanskrit say he was too proud for that. Mostly we use to buy a tin of Crix crackers, a loaf of bread or two, probably some butter. We coulda make that last for days. The first Saturday night of every month was *Ladies Night*. "A man have needs, boy," Sanskrit use to tell me. I never was interested to go with he for these. He never really extend any invitations either, til I was sixteen. But even then, I never bother.

And then Sunday was *Easy Day*. The day to just take it easy.

As the years gone by, I watch Port of Spain grow. Buildings going up, buildings breakin down, buildings waitin for years to be torn down. The cinema multiplex went up. The traffic jams get worse and worse. The tunes from the music carts change from month to month. The Hyatt and the waterfront went up. They paint colourful pictures of dancers and steelpan players on the walls. Electronic billboards went up. Doubles vendors and their white-and-blue umbrellas came and went. Snowcone men came and went. Men dress like blue and red devils use to have stick fights come J'ouvert morning. And the streets used to be fleeced with yellow and orange paint come Carnival Tuesday. They put up big posters of endangered birds and frogs on the technical institute walls. The rain fell harder. The dump smelled worse. The skirts get shorter. The pants get baggier, then tighter. They put up walls around the ghetto. Barack Obama and Queen Elizabeth II rode past us in limousines.

Even as all this went on, the days went by the same. Monday was always Dump Day and Sunday was always Easy Day. The schedule was simple enough to adapt to. And Sanskrit, despite the gamblin and alcohol addictions, never manage to run outta money. We use to have close calls and bad Hustle Days, but we never run out. Even with prices going up year after year. And I had plenty money saved up over the years.

Until one night, we get robbed.

Apparently Sanskrit get some hood boys angry over some gambling bullshit. I didn't want to know no details. They burst in the shack while we was sleeping and fire one single bullet into he kneecap. It was three of them, as I recall. Du-rags and corn rows and big gold chains. And guns cocked back, of course. Sanskrit was blubberin and making no sense at all. They put me and him to kneel on the floor. Then I look up and the word just escape my mouth, "Rey?"

He look at me. It was Rey, yes. But with a red bandana and a thin line of hair swathed round he jaw from ear to ear. He was bareback, lined with muscle and he finally grow the afro he always wanted. And he head was still big. The glasses was gone, though. Maybe he was wearin contacts. Or maybe he was just managing with half-blindness to appear more intimidating. He appear to be the leader of the crew. "Shit," he say, lettin off a laugh, "That you, boy? Sant, that you?"

"Yeah."

"We just here for the old in-and-out."

"That's my life savings."

"Yeah?" he say, "I suppose to give it back?"

I didn't say nothing.

He then say, "This motherfucker scam we, dawg. He didn't know he not supposed to do that shit. Can't let shit like that slide, dread."

I say, "Then take he money. Not mine."

Sanskrit start blubberin again. Rey smack him in he head with the pistol and yell for him to shut up. Rey then say, "Hear what, Sant. You want your money back? Take it. But we bustin him right here point-black in the head as soon as you take it. Or you could let we have the money and you could save he life."

I hesitate. Sanskrit look at me. I look at him. He mumble my name. I say, "I want to save he life."

Rey smile, raising only one corner of he mouth. He click he tongue and withdraw he gun and he gesture for the other two to do the same. "You never change, eh, dawg," he say, "You'se what I call a time-defying act. Always remain like a lil puppy dog. You want some advice, hoss?"

"What?"

"Carry a weapon around. A butcher knife or something would be good."

"Okay, I will."

He laugh. "Hear what. Keep the money. And we leavin the sucker alive. For now. But we sendin him to hell if he pull that shit again. And then we goin to kill he ass in hell too." Rey then look down to Sanskrit and say, "You hear that, you fuckin cunny? Thank your fuckin lucky stars!"

Sanskrit bow to them and start kissin their shoes. Rey kick him in the cheek and suck he teeth. Before he leave, he ask me, "Sant, why you did skip out just so, boy?"

"To get a head start."

"You get far in life, son. Look like we meet right down the middle." Then he was gone.

I see Rey one more time after that.

Me and Judah was set to start workin on a body bout three months ago. He did already finish the sense-dulling phase of the procedure. The ossicle removals. The eyeball sewing. The deadening of the olfactory nerves. And it was only as I was making the first incision that I recognise the voice. "Who is this?" I ask Judah.

"Concentrate on your work," Judah tell me.

After making a couple slow cuts, the voice was already begging for mercy. Scared stupid. Speaking nonsense. But I was sure I did know the voice. "Rey?" the word had slip out.

"*Concentrate*," Judah stress.

"Turn on the light," I tell Judah.

"They must not see the light yet. The time is not right," Judah say.

"Judah," I say, settin the scalpels down, "I cannot complete this procedure."

"Do not forget who your boss is, Joshua."

"I am unable to finish the procedure."

"You will be going against God by refusing to finish the procedure, Joshua. We like you, Joshua, and we do not like you messing around with the program."

"Sorry to mess round with the program. I cannot complete the procedure. I apologise, Judah. You will have to finish it yourself."

"Why are you doing this, Joshua?"

"Because it's Rey. I know the voice."

"You baffle me, Joshua. This is an evil man. He was responsible for the deaths of many in his neighbourhood. He led a notorious group of hardened criminals."

"He wasn't born that way. He has a good soul. He doesn't have a bad soul like the others. Just tell God to send him to Heaven when his time comes."

"Do you know how a soul rots, Joshua?"

"No."

"A soul is independent from the body. God has no control over where the soul goes. A soul can remain pure or a soul can rot. A soul can shed its rotting layers and become pure once more. Rotting souls sink to Hell, like a metal ball to the ocean bed. Pure souls float to Heaven. It is like a simple litmus test. A soul floats or sinks. Do you know what the word *attrition* means, Joshua? It is a marvelous word."

"No."

"*Attrition* has two central meanings. The first meaning concerns the topic of geology – more specifically – the wearing down of rocks by action of water movement. For example, a stone travelling down a mountain stream. As it travels, the outer layers physically grind away. It is a slow process. The layers erode. The stone gets smaller."

"Attrition. Erosion."

"Attrition can also be defined as the sorrow felt for sins due to the promise of damnation. It is a slow process. The layers erode. They physically grind away. The rot is scrubbed off by unbelievable bouts of remorse and mental anguish. The soul becomes pure once more."

"I see."

"What we do here is not senseless violence, Joshua. This is God's work. Violence breeds bitterness and hatred and

humiliation in the opponent. We do not prompt such acrimony. We seek for understanding instead. We seek to persuade. We scour the bitterness away. We polish. We temper. We do not tarnish. We varnish. From the pain sprouts the harmony. It is always darkest before the dawn."

"The souls will just rot again in Heaven."

"They will," Judah say, "But it would not matter. They would already be in God's hands. It is only in this plane that the rot is of any significance. We only need to scrape it off here and now. Think of it as taking a long shower before being allowed to walk into a fancy restaurant."

"This is *not* what the nuns taught us."

"Things have changed, Joshua. Do not doubt me."

"Finish the procedure yourself, Judah."

"Go back to your room and lock the door then. Good night. Sleep tight. Do not let the bedbugs bite."

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

*"Run. Run like hell. Run,  
especially if it have nothing to run to."*

- Elroy

"You soiled yourself last night," Judah saying.

I finish burn the last ligament free of the shoulder joint and rip the arm free. The final arm. The blood rushes out. Four limbs amputated by blowtorch, an eye sliced with a razorblade, about a hundred slow slices along the torso and neck, and five careful stab wounds – careful not to penetrate any important organs – and this body is still alive. And hasn't made a sound except for the escape of shuddering breaths. My raincoat is stained with blood. An abattoir uniform.

I start tying the tourniquet. And I say, "Sorry. I didn't mean to."

"Nobody means to sully where they have to sleep," Judah says with a chuckle.

I decide to tell him. "I keep getting nightmares. Nightmares like I told you before."

"What is bothering you?"

"I don't know."

"Do you feel sick?"

"No." I pause. "I don't know."

"Homesick," Judah says, "Maybe you just want to go home, dear boy."

"I do," I say, "But this person hasn't made a sound."

"They all scream, boy."

"There is nothing left to amputate. This person will die soon enough. Too much lost blood."

"No," Judah says, like he trying to hold in a laugh, "There is still work to be done."

"What more could we do?"

At that same moment, I hear the sound I am so use to hearing. The death rattle. We put these people in so much physical torture but they does always seem to go in their sleep. And peaceful. They never die begging or screaming or twisting and turning. They die silent. "Did you hear that?" Judah ask me.

"He died," I say. "We failed."

"No," Judah says, "The procedure was a success."

"What?"

"The procedure was successful."

"They didn't scream. They always scream."

"Eventually they do. Yes."

"Then what are you talking about?"

A loud ticking noise echoes. Then dead silence.

Judah says, "I wish you would believe in me, dear boy. I wish you would believe that I am indeed a beautiful angel." His voice getting deeper and deeper with each word.

"I don't."

"What do you think me to be?"

"Just a man. A very smart man."

"I am an honest man. I am a river man."

"A what?"

He voice get so deep now that I have to strain to understand. "A river man. I was once a pebble man and now I am a river man. Do you want to be a river man too?"

"I don't know what you are talking about, Judah. I'm sorry I let this one die."

"You did not let this one die. I did."

"How?"

"I excised their larynx. This person was never going to scream. They could not. They could not even budge, because I paralysed them. I left their ossicles contact so they could hear our voices."

"What was the use then? I don't understand. You sabotaged the procedure?"

"No. I did not sabotage it. It was part of the procedure."

"How?"

"It must have been real terror for them. They were locked inside their own bodies, imprisoned in a chamber of ceaseless physical torture. Our other victims could have cut this agony short with a mere scream and some pleading. This person, however, was like a fly whose wings and legs we pulled off slowly. And it would be too small to make a noise for us to hear because we would be too big."

"So what did they do to deserve that?"

"Deserve?" Judah laughs. "Deserve had nothing to do with it. This case was only special because they knew you, Joshua Sant."

"What are you talkin bout?"

He start correctin, "What are you *talking about?*—"

"Fuck, Judah! What the *fuck* you talkin bout!"

He laughs. He says, "I am going to switch the lights on. Okay?" And he walk across the room. The ticking clock sound echoing again, with a loud clank. Each footstep he take sound like the cranking of rusty machinery.

Then the fluorescent lights come on. I am blinded for a second. But my eyes readjust and

And.

And

and

mouse?

my heart want to burst out of my chest

mouse with no legs

mouse with no arms

mouse with eyes sewn shut

mouse with breasts cut off since before the procedure  
even begin

mouse looking like red hamburger meat

i begin to feel faint

i look at my raincoat

mouse blood

judah looks at me with a grand smile on he face

he have mouse blood on he forehead

and i shut my eyes

TIGHT

i scramble to speak but nothing comes out

i try my hardest

but only frail breaths stumble out

shit!

*FUCK!*

tick tick tick tick tick tick  
i suddenly feel like i falling  
even though my two feet upright  
the room is falling  
plummeting fast  
like a airplane with two engines blown  
i cough  
i manage to say one word  
it roll off my tongue so soft that i not even sure if i say  
it out loud  
one syllable riding on one lone exhalation  
why  
*why judah why*  
why, he say laughing,  
*because i am a scorpion you foolish frog*  
i open my eyes  
i grab the scalpel from the table and roar  
i get him in my sights  
i rush towards him  
but he switches the lights off  
i wave my arms like mad  
stabbin the air  
i feel the scalpel connect with something  
i get him  
but i dunno how bad  
i switch the lights back on  
judah gone  
i try not to look at mouse  
silence  
i gather myself  
i take a breath and count

one

two

Three.

I take another deep breath. The lights flicker. The scalpel from my hand is gone. The room expands. The lights get brighter until the entire room looks only white. I hear a loud drilling sound but cannot tell where it comes from. Then the walls start to bleed, black blood seeping out slow like tar. I rummage through the shelves, knocking over chemicals and medical kits. I grab the side of one and send it tumbling to the ground. I avoid looking at the operating table. I take raincoat and gloves off and leave them on the floor. I go upstairs and into my room where I see the window open.

I peek out the window and notice blood on the sill. I smell it before I see it. I look at the long stretch of mountain terrain under the night sky. He feels he could run away from me. He couldn't get far, old man like he is. He better pray he is really an angel with wings that could take 'im far far away. Pray for God Himself to come down to Trinidad and stop me. Strike me with a fucking lightning bolt. Let the moon fall on me and let the tides rise up and wash my ass away. Scorpion man better prepare he stinger.

I making a bet to myself that Judah Weir going to have at least fourteen scalpel stabs and slices before the sun come up, and in the following places in the following order: left testicle, right testicle, left buttock, right calf, right Achilles' tendon, popliteal, subclavian, axillary, jugular, external carotid, left eyeball, right eyeball, septum and finally a scalping.

A scalping with a scalpel.

All those severed arteries like burst water mains. Oh, the blood go spray. Judah Weir go be a blood fountain.

I leap out the window and hit my knee hard as I land. I topple down a small knoll. I get up and hobble along a dirt track, with a palm slap down on my kneecap as I cut through films of mist. I come to a forested expanse. I crouch over and pant loud. I hop around, facing the dirt, lookin for any speck of blood under the moonlight. "JUDAH!" I yell and I stagger into the thickets. I thrash and flail my arms bout, swiping the scalpel in every direction as I reeling across the bush.

"JUDAH!" I yelling.

I see a figure moving in the shadows. A man. I chase after him. "JUDAH!" He running, stumbling over foliage and fallen logs. It don't take me long to catch up with him. I pounce on him. I droolin like a rabid dog and I start biting the man all over he body. He on the ground, chest down, and I raise he shirt and scraping my teeth all down he spine. Only after bout half a minute, I realise the man ain't Judah. But I still bitin anyway, rippin off pieces of back flesh with each snap. I flip the man over. And he look at me.

He not even wincing. Not feeling no pain. And I recognise the face. "Sant," he say, and I recognise the voice, "Wake up, Sant. You sleepwalking, fool. You sleeptalking, fool. Wake the fuck up."

"Elroy?"

"Or you could keep runnin. Run. Run like hell. Run, especially if it have nothing to run to."

I grab he collar tight. "I dreaming again?"

"Wake up," he say.

I cuff him hard in he cheek. "I dreaming again?"

"It real. It all real."

I cuff him and break he nose. "Mouse living? Mouse living? She living? I ain't kill she?"

"She dead, fool."

I slap him. "It was a mistake!"

"She dead as dead, fool."

The ground start to shake. And the world get darker. And hotter. I start to sweat. "I go take all the parts and put she together and make she whole again!" I screaming and punching Elroy in the face continuously.

"She too dead for that, fool!"

"I goin to kill Judah!"

"Killin Judah Weir not goin to bring she back, fool! She deader than dead because of you!"

"I FEEL SICK!" I scream. I punchin him so much now that he face startin to get mash up. The cartilage in he nose break and the blood spurtin in my face. My knuckles gettin grazed with the more teeth I knock out. I blink.

And I realize that it have no Elroy. Blood leaking down my chin. I swallow blood. I pass my tongue along my gums. I put my fingers in my mouth and pull out a incisor only hanging from two threads of gum. I spit flesh from under my tongue. I stretch my arms in front of me, and at the dangling chunks of flesh ripped out by own teeth.

Tears mix with the blood.

The ground shaking again.

I look back and it have nothing there. Just black. I trudge further into the thicket. I lick the blood off my sore bottom lip. I kiss the wounds on my arms. The more I walk, the thinner the path gets. Black trees crowd round me, threatenin to block my way. When I come to a clearing, I see her. Mouse. As big as God. As big as Gulliver. In her pristine

state. Sound asleep. Unclothed. Her body stretching all across the land. Her face looking like the expanding sunrise over the mountain range. Her skin pores as wide as mole burrows. Her hair loose and emerging like massive black drapes hangin from the clouds.

I climb one of the drapes and stand on her forehead. I slide down each eyebrow. I do a dance on her cheeks. And I lie on her lips and look at the half moon. I climb down her neck, grabbin at the pores for balance. And I run circles round the right nipple. Then the left nipple. Then I get to the navel and I sneak down into it. It is dark inside. So I grope around. And I find a small passageway. So I get on all fours and start to crawl. The passage gets narrower and narrower the more I go. No turning back. Moistness on my palms. But the air couldn't smell better. Tiny green lights glitter round me. Hovering like candle-flies. And it have music playing. I dunno what kinda music. I dunno how to describe it. Too lovely to describe.

Then I feel something wrap round me. Not like feelers or limbs or lianas. But like smooth muscle fitting neatly round me. And I realise I not even crawling anymore. It pushin me along. But not too fast. Not too slow. I lie on my chest and let it propel me headforth. Like a horizontal pool-diver. My entire body gets coated with stickiness. And I see a bright white light in the distance.

I close my eyes.

My heart beats faster each second I get closer.

Then I enter the light. I know it even through closed eyes. I see it through my eyelids. And then I open my eyes.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

*"Rise and shine, I said."*

My belly churns and my body aching. Like somehow feeling hunger pains in my neck and face. I try to move but my body is as obedient as a dead cat. My body feel as if it bobbin up and down, not really like it was in the middle of some ocean, but undulating along that stretch of seawater just before the waves pull back along the coast. Halfway touching the salt, halfway touching the water. A dead cat tangled in algae. Refusing to wash to shore properly.

This feeling probably went on for days, maybe months.

I hearing a voice but is like listenin to it underwater. It blurred out. Three words then my name. It repeats. Three words then my name. Clearer this time.

"Rise and shine, Joshua."

It sound again. Fading slow, dispersing, like the seabreeze blowing it away. "Rise and shine, Joshua."

"I wake up already," I manage to say.

"Rise and shine, I said."

"Judah?"

"Yes?"

"I can't move."

"I know."

"I was havin another nightmare."

"I know."

"I feelin funny."

He chuckling. "I know."

"When can I go home?" I ask.

"Soon."

"Why can't I move?"

"Because you are strapped to a table."

I laugh.

He laugh too. He say, "And your arms and legs have all been severed."

I stop laughin. I try to wiggle my fingers and toes only to realise that I have none. I try to bend my arms and knees only to realise that I have none. My shoulder joint still rotates but with nothing attach to it. I try to open my eyes to realise that they sewn shut. I feel like water filling my lungs. I shudder and ask, "Last night was a dream?"

"Yes," he tell me.

"How this happen? How you get me like this?"

"I have my ways."

"You musta use some kinda magic."

"I did, if you want to call it that."

"So last night really was a dream?"

"Joshua." He voice gentle like a nurse's. "The past few months have been a dream. It is all in your head. You never

worked for me. We never met outside of that house and you never burnt that house down. You never lived in that neighbourhood. You never had dinner with that woman and her husband. And I never had her on this table."

"But—"

"It was all part of the procedure. Attrition. You were the rock man. I was the river man. You were dreaming for a long time, Joshua. You dreamt about your childhood, your killings, a shanty town and finally, a fantasy life. It is as simple as that. Everything leading up to that little boy you killed on Carnival Tuesday is real. The girl you killed on the swings—her name was Deidre de Freitas. The old man you killed in his house—his name was David Kingsley. The little boy you killed amongst all those people—his name was Shiva Singh."

"I don't—"

"The procedure is real. The mission is real. You have the flair for destroying healthy life and feeling nothing, Joshua. I stopped you because we need you for our mission. We need somebody who can commit such atrocities and destruction by themselves."

"Police and politicians do much more damage than me."

"They cannot do it by themselves, dear boy. You, Joshua, are a destroyer of worlds. You are a predator and a warrior simply born under the wrong code. You would have killed many more had I not stopped you. God needs you. Are you ready to meet Him?"

"Who going to feed Beegee?"

"There was never any Beegee."

"But Mouse—"

"She is fine. Stop crying."

"I was so frighten that I kill her."

"She is whole. Now is not the time to cry."

And I feel his lips on mine. Images flash across my  
mind.

broken bones

severed limbs

blood gushing

knife wounds

beegee wagging he tail

mouse smoking a cigarette

i feel the vomit rising up i think bout the carnival boy,  
lying behind the pavilion, neck twisted

nobody noticing. and I think bout a woman discovering  
him. and screaming as loud as she could. but nobody could  
hear she through the blaring music.

the vomit lodges in my throat

i try to cough it up

only a matter of time now, i hear judah say

i coughing as hard as i could

judah still kissing me

i cannot breathe

my body thrusting forward

the back of my head

knocking

knocking

against the metal table

then silence

the vomit is gone

like a miracle

i take a deep breath of relief and count

one

two

Three.

And I can open my eyes now. And I can wiggle my toes and my fingers now. A bright fluorescent light flickers in my face. The ceiling is white like paper. Judah smiles Judah finally lifts his lips from mine and smiles at me. He don't say a word. He unbuttons he shirt. I expect he chest to be wrinkled but it smooth like baby skin. And translucent like glossy coloured glass.

Then something blocks out the light and I wince and notice the ceiling is gone. The room is gone. I blink and I see wings glistening beneath the afternoon sun. Wings big and clumsy, shedding feathers with each flap. They flap like a mighty albatoss'. "Let us go," Judah says as lifts me in his arms like I am no lighter than one of his feathers.

And we take off. Floating slowly. "Do not look down," he telling me, so I don't. His neck is arched and he looks constantly to the sky. As we ascend, I wave my palms at the clouds, feelin them dissipate like melting ice crystals between my fingertips. The sky changes colour. From blue to red to purple to green to yellow to white. Strange insects flutter round me but do not land on my skin. They just flit round me, stop and flit again. To my head, stop, to my neck, stop, to my extremities, stop. Inspecting and taking notes.

Then I go blind for a couple minutes until I feel my feet touch concrete. I regain my sight and Judah is gone. I look around. Piles of old metal lying all over the place. But no rest. Just neatly compressed and folded iron, nickel, zinc and bronze. People sit on them, legs folded, elbows on thighs, palms on chins, chattin away the day. The sky is bright white

but there is no sun. No clouds. Just a neverending sheet of white. I expect my eyes to hurt or burn from starin at it but they don't.

I wander bout, barefoot, for a while. People walk past me and smile. And a blonde woman give me a hug and a kiss on my forehead. Old men concentrate on a chess game. Children skip rope and play with dolls. A man stands on a sidewalk with a canvas before him and tries to paint a young black woman, signalling her poses with his brush and easel. Nobody paying any attention to me. I walk til I come across a small neighbourhood. People ride past me in horse-carts, hooves clicking along cobblestone. I notice the lack of cars. Matchbox houses with fractures runnin down the outer walls. Some windows broken or splintered. The sidewalks are cracked. As if hit by some minor earthquake.

I sit on the ground and hang my head between my knees. Then I hear a voice. "Joshua Sant?" he says. I look up and see a man with short dirty blonde hair lookin at me. He sticks out his hand to me. I look at it for a second before thinking to shake it.

"I'm God," he tells me.

"God?" I say, "The real God?"

"The real God, yes."

"So this is Heaven?"

"Yes."

"Where is Judah?"

"He's at work. He's always at work."

"Now that I here, what it have to do now?"

"I have to show you to your house. Come with me." He smiles. He is dressed in a yellow jersey and black slacks and had a small goatee. And if it wasn't for immortality, I woulda

figure him to be bout thirty years old. He kicks off his rubber slippers and tells me to have them. So I put them on.

"You don't look like what I imagine at all."

He laughing. "You didn't imagine me at all, Joshua."

"This place look so peaceful," I say, "What if I end up killin somebody here?"

"You will have to. We have a big war coming up."

"But I now get here."

He puts his arm round my neck. "No. Enjoy yourself for now, buddy. We haven't met our quota yet. We have so many people left to enlist. Your soul is pure right now. Give it time to rot a little. Let the bacteria seep in."

"I don't feel like I in Heaven, God. Ain't this place supposed to be eternal happiness? Ain't this supposed to be the ultimate glory and beauty? I don't feel happy at all to be here."

"You aren't supposed to feel that way here. People just say those things."

I nearly step on a rabbit. It looks at me, twitches he nose and then hops away. We stop at a lake. We cross a wobbly wooden bridge to a small island with a wooden cabin. He points at the cabin and tells me that this is where I'll be living. He gives me the key and I open the door. "We don't have cable here," God tells me as we enter, "Nor do we have TV or radio. Those are the main complaints people have when they first come here. *Whaddya mean no TV and radio, God? No internet, God? What do people do in this bloody place then, God? I bet Hell has all the porno channels that ever existed!*" He laughs. A horse-cart rides past us again. "In truth, we have no electricity here. There are no cars here either. No automobiles of any kind. We have horses."

"I don't care bout any of them things."

He ruffles my hair. "Good, boy!" The cabin is small but suitable. It has a kitchen with empty cupboards, a small stove and a sleek wooden table with an empty vase as its centerpiece. A bedroom with a large dresser, a queen-sized bed with dark blue linen bedsheets and a writing desk. A lone toilet. He opens the faucets to show the running water. A guest room in case I wanted anyone to spend the night with me. "Do you want some tea?" he asks me.

"Okay." He prepares a terracotta kettle on the stove and opens a small ceramic pot with tea leaves in it. I look out the window, my eyes fixating on the tranquil ebb of the lake. I see fish beating against the crest. I see people as specks on the edge of the lake casting fishing lines. "So what people does do here then?" I ask.

"We have many, many libraries filled with all the books ever written and all the books waiting to be written. If you wish to be entertained, we have wonderful plays in large amphitheatres. It's better and grander than Hollywood blockbusters, trust me. We have many talented directors and actors here. We have big music halls with live orchestras. Strings, woodwind, percussion. If you don't like the halls, we have music houses and music booths with music boxes which people wind up to hear songs they like. We have boxing rings. We have football stadiums. We have an entire array of tournaments and play-offs. We have playgrounds. We have bars."

"Judah said you don't like alcohol."

He leans against the counter, scratching the back of his head. "*Milk* bars. *Juice* bars. Cafes. Snackeries. Bakeries. And bordellos."

"Whorehouses?"

"Just waiting rooms to expunge your desires."

"I don't care for that."

The kettle whistles and Judah pours the tea into two small cups. He sits the kettle on the wooden table and we both take a seat opposite each other. "Drink," he tells me, "It's never too hot."

I drink. My body radiates with warmth. He says, "Good, eh? We have the best tea here."

I nod.

"Don't worry, Joshua," he tells me, "You will like it here. What did you have back there that you won't have here?"

"Mouse," I say.

"The woman?" he says, taking another tip, "You can still see her."

"How?" My ears prick up.

He gets up and goes to my bedroom dresser and opens the first drawer. He takes out a small glass prism and sets it down on the table next to my tea cup. "People still want to be with their loved ones when they're here," he says, "If you look into this, you can see her. If you wish, you can let it absorb you and you can spend time with her."

"A ghost?"

"A spectre. But I warn you, she will not see you. She will not hear you. There will be no interaction."

"That's enough for me." I smile big.

He smiling too and finishes his tea. I finish mine. He then tells me, getting up from his chair, "I have more people to see."

"Judah bring another man already?"

He laughs. "Do you think Judah is my only angel?"

I say nothing. He says, "I will be checking up on you, though. Go out and enjoy yourself, Joshua. You're in Heaven, baby." And he leaves, closing the door behind him.

I take the prism and I sit at the writing desk, fumbling with it, my fingertips along the pointy corners, turning it to every angle. I bring it to my eye and I see her. Mouse.

And then I find myself in her Mouse. It look the same way as I had dream it. The flesh-coloured walls. The bullfrog painting. The breastfeeding baby painting. Its lips clinging to the nipple with the same intense determination. The stereo system. The big armchair. The little aquarium with the fake corals and googly-eyed goldfish and guppies. I wiggle my toes on the bristles of the big circular rug.

And I actually *feel* it.

I follow her round for the whole day.

As she smoke her cigarettes in the gallery as she swinging on the hammock.

As she sweep dog fur off the rug. As she climb on a chair and try to change a light bulb.

As she water the plants.

As she hum a old pop song while listening to the kitchen radio.

As she fall asleep on the couch, watching soap operas.

And I sittin here on the rug, watchin she sleep. And even though I know she can't hear me, I lean over and I whisper in her ear, "I love you."

\* \* \*