

# THE JOYFUL ASHES

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*Kevin Jared Hosein*

Wood already touched by fire  
is not hard to set alight.

*Ashanti Proverb*

One grain, two grain, three grain, four  
    En't no pain like a heap o' grain  
                    lain front mi door  
Five grain, six grain, seven grain, eight  
    En't no pain like a heap o' grain  
                    Stainin' mi dinner plate.

*Trinidadian Folklore Rhyme*

*The Joyful Ashes*

*For my parents, who have loved a difficult son — though they'd probably disagree with that description if asked.*

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **PATIENT**

All eyes shoot up at me as I barge into the waiting room. The door swings shut behind me and I pause for breath, for a moment of reconsideration.

The clock on the wall already reads a quarter to nine. Dr. Dass always operates on a first-come, first-serve basis on the mornings. It's going to be a long wait, but it'd be much worse in the hospital. The sun would go down and I'd still be waiting for a doctor there. I'm not sure how much it matters at this point. According to every medical textbook, I should already be dead.

My red hoodie cushions my burning skin. I keep it zipped up to my chin, the top pulled over my eyes. Everyone turns away, but I know they're just pretending not to stare. Little Davi Bim, sitting crosslegged on the carpet, fiddles with his plastic soldiers, positioning them for battle, their guns and bayonets pointed up at me.

I pull the hood tighter over my forehead before I go up to Beadie Dass, the good doctor's wife and secretary. I try not to make eye contact as I approach. Even though the hood hides most of my face, she immediately recognizes me. "Surya Sukhu. Y'naw lookin good at all, gal." She squints her eyes and pouts, the fissures lining her lips deepening.

As she rummages through the filing cabinet for my card, a poster catches my eye. On it is a giant mosquito perched over the silhouette of a man, its palps prodding his chest like fencing swords. Beneath the illustration, written in big and bold: ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT YELLOW FEVER.

The symptoms are printed in red: abdominal pain, vomiting blood, liver failure, kidney failure, seizures, bleeding from the nose and eyes, delirium.

I rub my cramped hand, trying to gentle my fingers. I can't even remember the last time I've been here. The doctor's certificates are framed and posted on the wall, one on top of the other, like rungs of a ladder. At the bottom is a plaque with a quote, "A sick body is a prison. Prayer is the key."

The sick don't live in the same world as the healthy, I heard the Doc say once. The sick may occupy the same spaces, but they exist in realms of their own—silent, lonely realms. Dr. Dass sees himself as a kind of spirit medium, ferrying souls from that world to this

one. He even oversees jharays—special exorcisms involving cocoyea brooms, mustard oil and black pepper seeds.

Dr. Dass never charges a fee for any villager of La Baliza who's under the age of eighteen. That might sound like a noble offer, but that category currently includes only three people: yours truly, my cousin Zee, and Davi Bim.

Mostly only the old folk are left in La Baliza. Half the elders spend their days in their hammocks. The other half still perform their trades—the machinist, the oyster salesman, the seamstress, the electrician, the carpenter, the small engine mechanic. The younger folks tend to get out as soon as they can. La Baliza is a dead end.

As I take my seat, Beadie says to me, “Y'en't feelin hot in that thing?”

I shake my head and clear my throat. I take a seat at the edge of the room, away from the others. I hunch forward, arms folded over my stomach, trying to make sense of everything that happened this morning.

I wonder—can a person die from a broken heart?

My grandparents both died young, both before I was born, and both from diseases of the heart. A heart attack took my grandfather at forty-eight and my grandmother died a few months after. The villagers said that my grandmother died of a broken heart—

though the record stated that she succumbed to a condition called *atrial fibrillation*. Her heart couldn't maintain its rhythm, well before my grandfather passed. She managed it with blood thinners, but after my grandfather died, she stopped taking them.

Last night, my heart was broken in the worst of ways, and last night was the first time I'd cried in years.

*BOOM! BSSSSHHH! RAT-TAT-TAT!*

I duck quickly, almost falling off my seat. I lift the hood over my eyes. It's just Davi Bim. He rams the soldiers into each other, making gunshot and explosion noises with his mouth. For a moment, I can actually hear every bang and blast, every detonation, every whistle of shrapnel.

"Y'arright, dear?" says Beadie from across the room.

I don't want to speak, so I just give her a nod as I settle back into my seat. I note the other patients in the room. There's Nal and his diabetic wife, Dollsy, who might have to get her left leg amputated soon. Mr. Walim, who received a slice of his brother's liver just a year ago but still waits for the bar to open every morning. Madam Lahti, whose arthritis has just begun to threaten her sewing skills.

And then there's me, Surya Sukhu, dying of a broken heart.

Last night can be summed up in one sentence: *You are blocked from following @MarySu83 and viewing @MarySu83's tweets.*

If it were anybody else, I wouldn't care.

But @MarySu83 is my mother.

My mother didn't plan to have me and, to make things worse, my father died before I was born. I've never seen him. Nobody seems keen on remembering him. My mother owned nothing of his—no photographs, no letters, no mementos of any kind. Apparently his family hadn't taken well to the pregnancy. Even today, nobody will let me know his name.

When I was four, my mother left the house her father built and shipped up to Toronto. Her brother, my uncle Rafael, agreed to take care of me while she found her bearings up in the Great White North. His wife, Judi, always left her opinion unsaid about the matter.

My mother sauntered out the door with an old suitcase, a duffle bag and a pledge to send for me when she found a proper job. I can't remember much of her. I can remember little details—shapes, sensations, voices half-heard. Her fingers clutching my hair, the way she folded her arms, the way her eyes looked in the morning.

When she finally got the job, she wrote, explaining that she needed to locate a bigger apartment—one where the tenants didn't cuss all the time, one that had a proper heating system.

One that could accommodate us both.

When she moved into the bigger apartment, she wrote again. Her workplace was now far away and she had to spend the better parts of the day on a Greyhound. When she could save enough to get a car, then that'd be the time to send for me, she concluded.

There'd always be a package attached to these apologies. Clothes, toys, the latest gadgets. I had a Nintendo DS, an iPod Touch and a RoboSapien before Trinidad even had them on the shelves.

And it went on like that.

My cousin, Zee, was always jealous of the gifts. Any gift his parents gave to him was inferior—and he always let them know. I let it go to my head, believing that I would leave this dingy little island. I was running out of patience. No brand or company logo could console me. I began to hate this house, hate Trinidad, and hate Aunt Judi and Uncle Rafael. I stopped listening to them—they weren't my real parents, after all. I always had it in my head that one day, I wouldn't have to put up with them any longer.

I was especially aggressive with Aunt Judi. I loathed anytime she tried to do *motherly* things with me. I have distinct memories of her standing at my door, mustering the courage to ask me to come to the mall with her, or to watch the latest movie, anything so we could spend time together. I always turned it down.

I preferred being by myself than with her. My response to anything she ever wanted to share with me, “That’s so lame.”

I wrote to my mother like crazy. Uncle Rafael posted each letter, but told me that I needed to be patient. I checked the mailbox everyday, sometimes two or three times a day. Uncle Rafael eventually took note of my desperation, and began spending more time with me. He probably spent more time with me than with Zee, to my aunt’s growing annoyance.

One night, he came up to my room and sat at the edge of the bed. Before he tucked me in, he said, “Lemme tell you a story. You listenin’?”

I nodded, and he began, “Once, there was this hunter who put a dog in charge of guarding his child while he was gone.”

“A dog?” I asked. “Why a dog?”

“Cause nothin’ ain’t more loyal than a dog,” he said. “When the man returned from the hunt, the dog came runnin’ up to him, tongue hanging out, mouth smeared with blood. The hunter, in horror, rushed over to the child’s room to find what?—the room in a mess, shelves toppled, cradle overturned—”

“The dog ate the child?”

“See, you need to stop pushin’ in like this, Sue, so you’ll understand why I tellin’ you this story, y’hear?” he said, trying to sound stern.

“Okay. Go ahead.”

He continued, “When the hunter turned the cradle over, he saw his child, unharmed. And beside the child? A dead, mangled wolf.”

He then looked at me, expecting me to say something, probably identify the moral of the story. I took a guess, “I should know the whole story before I say anything?”

He rubbed my shoulder. He said it slowly, “Things look bad sometimes, but you just have to be patient with the situation.”

I kept his fable in mind for many situations in my life, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t be patient with the situation with my mother. It was that bad. It *is* that bad. Ever since my mother first called and I heard her speak in standard English, my tongue wouldn’t dare to curl in Creole anymore. I always figured that Trinidad was temporary—a big waiting room.

Many things happened in that waiting room. We’ve changed Prime Ministers twice, Presidents thrice. We’ve claimed a Nobel Prize winner, a Gold Medal Olympian, a World Cup qualification and an episode of *Bizarre Foods* on the Travel Channel. We’ve waded through the ruins of the sugar industry, a State of Emergency, and all manners of scandals ending in *gate*.

But most importantly, on a rainy Wednesday evening in 1995, Aunt Judi and Uncle Rafael went to pick up a pizza I ordered. The delivery boy was sick and the replacement was late, yet I clamoured for this god-forsaken pizza. Uncle Rafael lost control of his car after skidding on spilled loose gravel. He hit a light pole and died immediately upon impact. Aunt Judi only suffered a mild concussion.

I would've been almost seven. To everyone's dismay, my mother didn't fly down for her brother's funeral. I remember seeing Zee and Aunt Judi standing over the coffin. I didn't know if I was allowed to stand with them, or even mourn with them. It was the first time I had felt truly alone.

Ever since that day, I felt like I didn't belong. Aunt Judi had no interest in bonding with me again after that. I began paying for everything. I was dead weight.

She rang my mother over and over and over again at night. I used to press my ear against the door and listen. Between the strings of threats and profanities, a ghastly sadness would emerge from her voice as she begged my mother to take me.

I officially became a freeloader, and I had to be put to work to earn my keep. Clean, sweep, scrub, mop, mow, trim, iron, and if not done right, rinse and repeat, and repeat, and repeat. The neighbours always said, "Good to see that li'l girl bein put to good use!"

I've always done it. I used to think, if I do it, I'd eventually earn my way back into a family photo. But that's never happened. After all, the maid isn't considered family.

When I was seven, my mother began appearing beside me. Standard One, Sports Day, she was sitting in the savannah with a poplin floral dress tucked neatly beneath her knees. She cheered me on as I ran, and won, my first hundred-metre dash. She stood behind me and massaged my arms as I found out what secondary school I passed for. On Good Fridays, we ate kingfish together. On Divali, we dipped our sparklers into the burning clay deyas and wrote our names in the air.

I built her phantom from images. She always sent me photos. 4 x 6" Polaroid premium gloss paper, 3 x 2" matte paper, high-res lossless PNGs. I've kept a large chestnut leather-wrap journal with each photo, each letter, each email. Each one glued, paperclipped and dated.

For the past six months, letters and packages have stopped arriving. Skype calls, unanswered. Emails, unreplied. I've always kept track of her, although *cyberstalking* would be a more appropriate term. I scour her Facebook profile multiple times a day. I check for every slightest update, but the profile is now only lit-

tered with invites that go unaccepted and spam that goes undeleted.

The everflow of articles that had once populated her page had come to a sudden stop—diet and nutrition infographics, doodles from the *New Yorker*, pop science blurbs, Change.org petitions, and quotes from the rich and famous. The very last post from her is a quote from John D. Rockefeller, “Don’t be afraid to give up the good to go for the great.”

But what exactly is the good, and what exactly is the great?

Aunt Judi is an expert at finding faults. The scary thing is that she’s rarely wrong, even in the smallest of things. She always took note of key words and phrases in my mother’s letters and emails. Working for *a volatile company*.

Doing *this-and-that*.

With a contract that was *insecure*.

And that variable pay was *temporarily suspended*.

Because the company was on the *verge of bankruptcy*.

And that all of this could quickly and unpredictably lunge her back *in the red*.

“Rafael used to tell me about her,” said Aunt Judi. “Ever since she was a child, she’s been making excuses. And the worst kind of excuses—the ones that make her seem like she has a plan.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“If Rafael was here, he’d tell you. No, no, no, she couldn’t hang up the clothes because she was too busy perfecting the book report. She couldn’t set the table because she had to set her life to become a doctor, lawyer, scientist, whatever. Anything but a mother to her damn child.” She scoffed, wiping the condensation from her glasses. “You really think she’ll come back?”

“Maybe she’s just busy—”

“We’re all busy,” she said, giving a look of weary scorn. “I never planned for two children, you know.”

I’m sixteen now. For twelve years, I’ve believed my mother would send for me. I don’t like to think that it was never part of the plan. I don’t like to think that she had written and charted the whole thing out on a piece of paper, just to crumple and toss it on the tarmac of Toronto Pearson International Airport. Maybe it just got misplaced by the baggage handlers.

Twelve years is a long time, but a small part of me always held out hope until last night.

Things couldn’t get more real than last night. A woman tagged my mother in a picture of a pair of crocheted booties. Upon viewing it, I saw that she was tagged twice. The first time as Maria Sukhu; the second time as Maria Walsh.

So, I clicked it.

I almost had a heart attack when the profile loaded.

The cover photograph showed her splayed out on a red sofa, her T-shirt rolled up over her belly—her pregnant belly. The inset picture was her standing before an icy bay and banks lined with feathery combs of grass. In the distance was a sailboat and an island with a church, crowned with a bright white spire and its gables painted barbecue-red. A thick brown cotton coat hid her belly in the picture. Standing behind her, arms protectively wrapped around her chest, was a man—tall, curly blonde, strong as a Viking.

Current City: Corner Brook, Newfoundland.

Relationship status: Married.

I fixed my eyes on the doppelganger profile, my jaw clamped shut, unable to breathe as if my windpipe had collapsed on itself. I scrolled through the posts and spotted links correlating to accounts on other social media platforms. It was then I realized that my mother not only had two Facebook profiles, but two Twitter accounts, two Instagram galleries and two email addresses.

One for me.

And one for everybody else.

My mouse hovered over the button—*Add Friend*.

My finger trembled. A trickle of sweat clung to my brow.

I counted—One. Two. Three.

And I clicked.

For a few minutes, I stared at the monitor, in the dark, no light but the screen's ghostly glow.

I refreshed the page. Nothing.

I refreshed again.

And the profile was gone—*poof!*

The same thing happened on the other platforms. It was like lights shutting off in a building—each window going dark. A complete emergency shutdown. Page Not Found. No Posts to Show. Twitter was the only one that was polite enough to give it to me straight:

*You are blocked from following @MarySu83 and viewing @MarySu83's tweets.*

I went to sleep feeling sick—physically sick. I woke up this morning with a sharp pain in my head, as if a sliver of bone had come loose in my skull. My teeth were sensitive, like holes were drilled—seared—right through the pulp. My mouth was dry, bitter like vinegar.

I was burning up.

However, the whole time, before I even opened my eyes, I was convinced of the opposite—that I was drowning. I was lying face-down on the drenched pillow. It was only when I rolled over, I saw that it wasn't just the pillow, but that half the bed was soaked. I had

either cried in my sleep the whole night through, or straight-up peed the bed.

Or both.

“Yo, Sue! You ready?” It was Zee, calling out from behind the door, “Look at the time—we late!”

“Leave me alone.” The rasping words barely escaped my parched throat.

The doorknob twisted.

I pulled the sheets over my head, leaving a small furl to peek through. Zee poked his head into the room before fully opening the door. He was already in his uniform—cream shirt, black pants, coffee-brown tie adorn with an Atlantic knot. He glanced at my uniform, my white blouse still on the rack, my camel brown skirt and tie still folded and lain out on the chairs next to the shelf.

“You still sleepin’?” he said. “You for real?”

Zee and I attend the same school and are in the same Form Five class, doing the same subjects. We’re both sixteen and, despite being cousins, could pass for fraternal twins. Aunt Judi is a teacher at another school. I’m forever thankful that I’ll never have to cross her in that capacity. *Aunt Judi* is brutal enough, I don’t need to meet *Mrs. Ali-Sukhu*.

“So you en’t goin’ to school? You sick? Sick-sick?”

I pulled the cover over my eyes and observed his fuzzy shadow from behind the fabric. "Let me sleep," I said.

He recoiled upon hearing my voice. My voice was so deep and scratchy that it was hard to believe that such a sound could come out of a human mouth. "That is a demon I hearin' under there?" he said.

"Zee, stop it." My voice again in a sombre croak.

He put his two forefingers in a cross and said, mockingly, "*The power of Christ compels you!*"

I gave him a nudge through the blanket. I curled fetally and my jersey pasted onto my clammy skin. Only then I realized that all the salty wet patches on the sheets was me sweating my insides out.

"What's going on up there?" Aunt Judi's voice sounded from downstairs. "That girl is keeping us back!"

He got up and went to the door, and then yelled downstairs, "Sue gone and get sick!"

"Sick?" Aunt Judi shouted from downstairs.

"Sick-sick, she say!"

Before Aunt Judi came barrelling up the stairs, I tucked the edges of the blanket under me, wrapping myself with it like a mummy. I listened out for the click-clacking of heels as Aunt Judi entered the room. My stomach knotted itself into a bulky tangle.

Zee said, "I feel I catch it too, Ma." And he faked a cough.

Aunt Judi softly slapped him on the shoulder. "Azeez, go downstairs and wait for me."

As he trotted to the door, he turned and said, "I tellin' you, Ma, it contagious."

"Look, you didn't catch anything. Stop pretending you're weak like her."

As Zee stamped down the stairs, his muffled footsteps fading, Aunt Judi stepped up to the bed, her heels sounding in a slow clack... clack... clack. "Leftovers are in the fridge," she said.

I didn't say anything. I didn't want her to hear my voice. She ripped a page out of one of my notebooks. "Since you're here for the whole day," she muttered as she scribbled, "you could make yourself useful." She leaves the page on my desk. I don't even need to look at it. I know what it is—donkey work. My continued penance.

"And before I come home, sick or not," said Aunt Judi before she left, "scrape together some time and clean this pig sty up. Yours is the only room in this house I could barely stand to breathe in."

I lied still until she was gone. I waited for a few minutes after the car pulled off before getting out of the bed. I left a tangled swirl of long black strands pasted

on the pillow. It looked like the first few whorls of a bird's nest.

I blinked and an image struck me. It almost knocked me down.

A large tree, tapering up into depthless black.

It came and went, in a flicker—a camera flash.

I rubbed my eyes and it flickered again—the large tree once more, but with smoke hissing up from the ground around it. A crackle sounded, even after the image was gone. A crackle and a chilly whisper cutting through me like a razory night wind, "*Just sweat it out. . .*"

I paused, letting the words bounce around in my head. I sat up on the edge of the bed, breathing hard, inching my toes towards the ground—suddenly filled with a fear that I would fall through the floor.

"Mi bottles! Somebody t'ief all mi bottles!" The shouting came from outside. I tiptoed to the window and pulled the curtain. It was Coo-Coo, a vagrant who frequented the village. There's an old wheelbarrow on my street where he usually stores bottles he collects from the pub and the roadside. "That is mi salary they messin' with!" he bellowed.

As he stormed off, everyone went back to their routines. At seven in the morning, I could always count on several things. The keskidees always come out in full force. The roosters from Sat Ram's chicken-shed call

out to the sun. Old Brother Bally across the road paces the length of the street, brushing his teeth with baking soda on a neem twig, chewed to a bristle. Tantie Petra sips darjeeling on her rocking chair, listening to cassettes of old-time chutney and bhaitak-gana. Mr. Sammy hangs up his chicki-chong bullfinch on a hook hammered into his caimite tree.

The roads in La Baliza are fractured and pebbled with beer crowns over a decade old. Blotchy keloids of tar are slapped all over the potholes. The streets are without sidewalks. Instead, the asphalt is bordered with small, shallow gullies. Patchworks of weeds line these drains. The wire fences are colonized by passion-fruit vines. The houses are old—built by the fathers and grandfathers of their occupants.

I sat at the windowsill, the crook of my knee pressed against the jamb. I put my palm out and felt the light, cool morning breeze. I let it wash my skin while I composed my mind.

I turned and caught my reflection in the mirror, and my mind went haywire again. I slowly approached the mirror, my expression frozen in disbelief. My skin was redder than flushed—almost the hue of hibiscus petals. My lips, sorrel-red. My eyes, bloodshot. I had never experienced anything like that before—I looked stuck in mid-mutation. An abomination.

I put the back of my palm to my neck and let the fever burn against my fingers for a moment.

In a panic, I raced downstairs and emptied a half gallon of cold water down my throat. I sprung to the medicine cabinet and sifted through rolls of bandages and gauze and tiny bottles of iodine and hydrogen peroxide.

Then I found it, way at the back of the cabinet—the old thermometer.

My hands fumbled and I nearly dropped it. I rinsed it in the sink and stuck it in my mouth. Impatient, I strained my eyes to focus on the line of mercury in the bore. Normal human body temperature is 37°C. The thin streak of red was quickly creeping past that.

I looked at the final reading in horror—45.

I recalled Biology class at that moment—Mrs. Grace’s classification of a fever. A typical fever is just one or two degrees above normal, and that anything above 40 is considered an emergency. I remembered Mrs. Grace’s words—the body begins to *shut down* at 42.

I shut my eyes tight, the graphs flipping through my head. Curves plummeting right, right down.

Down to seizures.

Down to organ failure.

Down to coma.

Down to death.

All of this information Mrs. Grace had me cram into my head, except for how to reverse the process!

I dropped the thermometer and it shattered, the red beads of mercury bleeding out through the bulb. I didn't even bother to clean it up. I couldn't deny it anymore. Whatever is happening, this is *not* normal. I should already be dead.

My heart was pounding-pounding-pounding. I dragged a stool to the fridge and opened the freezer compartment. I hopped on the stool and stuck my head in, breathing in the chill. I grabbed a fistful of crushed ice and smeared my face with it. I wanted to tear out the fridge shelves and lodge my body inside.

I soaked a sponge and stuck it in the freezer. I rummaged through the medicine cabinet again and snatched up a small bottle of bay rum. I almost expected it to sizzle as I patted my skin with it.

I was losing my mind at this point. I ran to the computer and turned it on. While it booted up, I skated back to the fridge, took the cold sponge from the freezer and pressed it against my burning forehead. I sat in the swivel chair, biting my nails as the computer finished its start-up.

Mosquitoes have always been a problem at night at La Baliza. The nearby rice fields are to blame. No matter how many coils the villagers burn, or how determined they are to convert their bedrooms into gas

chambers, the mosquitoes refuse to relent. A regular mosquito couldn't cause something like this, though. Ultra-dengue? Mega-malaria? Chik-V 2.0? I needed to know.

I opened three tabs on the browser and went straight to *Mayo Clinic*, *MedHelp* and *WebMD*.

I typed into the search box: Red skin. Fever. Excessive sweating. It proceeded to vomit out a catalog of medical jargon. My eyes scanned the screen—left to right, left to right, left to right—as I scrolled past the risk factors, preventions, treatments, epidemiology, pathophysiology.

So many terms, so many big words, I didn't even know what I was looking for anymore. My vocabulary expanded along the way, that's for sure. Words reserved for nightmares: *hyperpyrexia* (having a body temperature of over 41.5), *febrile convulsion* (a seizure that follows hyperpyrexia), *Encephalitis lethargica* (brain-swelling and coma following a febrile convulsion).

I continued scrolling through the list of diseases.

Next up: NMS. Neuroleptic malignant syndrome. God have mercy, I said to myself. Who comes up with these names? Memory impairment. Life-threatening. Coma. About 38% mortality if not treated early.

After that: Kawasaki Syndrome. Cause unknown. Inflamed skin. Red, swollen eyes. Lips and tongue the colour of bloody bruises—they even had a picture of it.

I kept scrolling until I hit measles—ah, plain, old, simple, world-renowned, doctor-familiar measles, I thought. Red blotches, high fever, red eyes. Seemed to fit the bill. I then scrolled down and came across another nightmare term: *subacute panencephalitis*, a condition brought on by a possible mutation of measles. It is as terrifying as it sounds. Swollen brain. Seizures. Coma.

At that point, another vision hit me—the tree again.

I barred my eyes with my fingers but it was still there, clear before me. The thick trunk with folds of bark in tapering swirls sitting atop charred-brown foliage and ash-grey soil. Smoke rising from the roots. The voice whispered again, “*Be patient. You’re becoming what you were always meant to be. . .*”

Then it cut back to reality—me staring at my computer screen, my hands clasped as if in violent prayer. Was I going mad? Seeing things, hearing voices in my head? I wondered if mad people ever really speculate if they are mad. I wondered if they could pinpoint the day, the hour, the minute they go mad. Do they just laugh off that moment? Madness in Trinidad, after all, is always viewed as comedy rather than tragedy. Laughter, rather than cries, screams and shouts.

*The Joyful Ashes*

The tragic side of Trinidadian madness is silenced and locked away within the white corridors of St. Ann's Hospital. And I'm determined not to be locked in there with it.

## CHAPTER 2 WAKE

A small TV sits in a cage propped up at the upper corner of the room. A talk show is on at low volume. I look up at the screen. A woman enters the stage in a fitted green cocktail dress, tailored to accentuate the bump on her stomach. She sits on the couch and the audience bursts into applause for her.

I squint to see her face but the screen is too small. Even though the TV's volume is low, I can hear the conversation clearly. The host proclaims, "So, you tied the knot!" And another wave of applause rises from the audience.

"Life must be pretty good now!" says the host.

"Well, you know. It didn't just fall into my lap. People at the top do not just fall there." The guest cocks her head to the side, "Sometimes you have to give up the good for the great."

My eyes widen and I nearly leap out of the couch. It's *her*. It's my mother on the TV. Am I the only one

seeing this? A few other patients' eyes are on the TV, but their expressions of glum boredom don't change.

"Wise words from a wise woman, Mrs. Walsh. Is Newfoundland nice this time of year?"

"Oh heavens yes. I'm living my dream!"

"But you don't regret it at all? Leaving behind everything where you grew up?"

"Sometimes." The word stumbles out after a somber pause.

"What about your daughter?"

She nods. "Sue, yes, yes."

"If Sue were watching now, what would you say to her?"

The camera pulls close to her face, focused on her pursed lips. She turns her gaze upwards, searching hard for the right words to say. I stay fastened to the screen, unblinking, my toes pressing stiff against the floor.

"I'd say—"

And the image dissolves into static.

I lunge out of my seat and towards the TV. With a leap, I cuff the side of the cage.

"Child, what you think y'doin'!" Beadie exclaims.

"The TV!" I shoot back, jumping and hitting it another time. "It cut off!"

*Bang!* Like a gunshot. I plant my feet firmly against the floor to keep from falling.

A sharp hiss zooms past my ear, a metallic ricochet. It flings me against the wall.

I turn to Davi Bim, who is standing now, his palms hovering over his hips, poised like a gunslinger. His plastic platoon all facing me, bayonets, blunderbusses and bazookas all in place.

I tremble, turning to the other patients in the room, to the row of furrowed brows, crooked mouths and widened eyes. Dr. Dass emerges from his office. All eyes dart to him. He eyes Beadie, but she just covers in her chair, mouth half-open. She has no answers for him.

"She was there... on the TV," I whisper to the room. The words come out before I realize how crazy I sound. I turn to Davi again. But he's gone. In his place is a giant frog, squatting in a spreading puddle of its own slime. Its brown skin is striped with gold and speckled with black gunk.

It opens its mouth, exposing its featureless interior—a black hole. "*Don't look at it . . .*" I hear the whisper again, conjuring a flash of the big smoky tree again.

"W... What is it?" I can't help but speak out loud to the voice in my head.

*"It's here to feed . . ."*

"F... Feed?"

*"No time to talk, leave here . . ."*

“What’s h... happening?”

“*He’s here, the man who killed me . . .*”

“I... I don’t understand.”

“*Leave now, go to Ranahumo, find the tree . . .*”

“The tree?”

“*Find the tree of smoke and ash . . .*”

“Smoke and ash?”

Nobody else can see the frog. Their eyes are glued to me, their faces tensed with bewildered shock.

Suddenly, the frog hops towards me.

I grab my chair and shove it towards the creature. It creates a sharp screech. I use the distraction to bolt out of the building. I hop on my bicycle and speed back to my house.

I slam the door behind me and rush into the shower, all of my clothes still on.

Slumping against the wall, I let the cold water hit me as I pull my wet clothes off my burning skin. *Relax, relax, Sue, relax.* I pretend that it’s raining. The rumpling sound of the water beating against leaves and soil. Maybe near some daub and wattle house, far away from Trinidad, far away from civilization.

The thought relaxes me, and I can breathe again.

I open my eyes. I’d forgotten to close the bathroom door. Through it, I can see the top end of the staircase. After my grandparents died, the house was split. My mother got upstairs and Uncle Rafael took downstairs.

I've been occupying upstairs ever since my mother left. Sometimes I feel as if I'm just a guest in this house. A tenant, who must pass the snarky landlady on her way out.

I run my palm through my hair and a spider of limp strands come loose. As I let the water wash it down the drainpipe, my thoughts whirl back to the frog in the waiting room. It couldn't be real. It had to be a hallucination, just had to be. Nobody else saw anything—anything except me acting like a madwoman.

Am I imagining everything that's happening to me? Not like that would make things any better. That would just mean that I've indeed gone mad.

A light clang and a slow creak come from outside. The sound of the gate.

Then I hear the door open downstairs.

I turn the shower off and quickly wrap a towel around me. I hurry out of the bathroom and slowly make my way downstairs.

The door's closed. I must be hearing things.

I head back up to my room. I shut the door and lock it. I quickly dry myself and throw on some clothes. A thick pair of black jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt that is one size too big. I sling my red hoodie over it. I put my slippers on and sprint downstairs.

I keep quiet, tiptoeing around every corner.

There's nothing here. False alarm.

My stomach grumbles. It's only eleven, but I skipped breakfast. I decide to have lunch. Can hunger do this to a person?

I go to the fridge. Only leftovers from yesterday, just as Aunt Judi said. I lift the lid off each pot—pigeon peas, cured pig tail, boiled cassava, jasmine rice. I scoop the food into a plate and heat it in the microwave. I set the food on the kitchen table and pull up a chair. My muscles tense as I lower the spoon into the rice. My hand begins to tremble and the spoon flicks out of my hand and lands on the floor—clink, clink, *clink!*

But I can't turn to watch it. My eyes remain fixed on my plate, on the rice grains. I try to flick my eyes sideways, but they immediately jolt back to the rice. My lips quiver. My teeth chatter.

I reach my trembling hand into the plate and pick out a single grain, and set it on the table mat.

It teases me—that grain, that small cooked seed. It resembles a tiny white pill. And it is with that thought, I wonder—have I been drugged? I imagine that this is what it would feel like. I rest my chin on the table, my unblinking stare still glued to the lone grain.

I reach my fingers in my plate and pick out another. I set it beside the first.

I pick out another. And then another.

And another.

I can't control myself. Even as a fly circles over the plate, I can't bat it away. The fly eventually lands on my eyelid. I wink and flutter my eyes, but the fly doesn't budge.

I grit my teeth, muster up all my strength and slap my hand away from the plate, whacking myself right in the forehead. At the same time, my other hand wallops the plate, sending a clump of rice on the floor.

However, in the midst of the commotion, I can finally relax my arms—as if a spell has been broken. I sit upright for a minute, looking at my shaky palms. I dare not look at the spilled rice.

I take slow, deep breaths, balling my hands into fists, wiggling my fingers, relieved to have them to myself again. I start wondering if obeah is real, if duppies really exist, if voodoo dolls really work, if all the local superstitions hold true. Do people who bathe in the sea on Good Friday turn into fishes? When dogs howl in the night, are they seeing jumbies?

As silly as all of it sounds, I have no choice but to regard them all as possibilities now.

My muscles tense again as my gaze creeps back to the rice on the floor. I drop to my knees and resume my counting. I set the grains into a neat pile against one of the table legs.

Then there's a knock on the door. I try, try, try to get up from the floor, but I can't. I call out, "Who is it?" My voice isn't as scratchy as before.

"You okay in there?" It's Dr. Dass.

"Y-Yeah. What do you want?"

Without a reply, the door opens. I force myself to look up. I get a sudden feeling of dread as he closes the door behind him. He's still wearing his white coat. I'm unable to stay still under his gaze.

"What you doin' down there?" he asks.

I pause, and then say, "I'm not feeling well."

He walks in but he stops in his tracks as he sees the rice strewn on the floor. "Y'gon' and make a big mess here, girlie."

While he speaks, I can't help but keep counting and picking out the grains from the floor, one by one. I can feel the doctor's stare on me. He tells me, "Lemme help clean this up. Go sit down."

But I can't. I can't pull my body away from the rice grains, but I dare not tell him that. I instead say to him, "Help me up." So he does. He pulls me up and sets me down on the kitchen chair as he grabs a cocoyea broom from the corner.

"What are you doing here?" I ask. "What about your patients?"

"Y'nearly scare them to death." He kneels and scoops up the rice grains. He looks up at me. "I have

m'boy seein' after them. I needed to come and see if y'arright here after that outburst."

I shake my head. "I just have to rest. It's nothing."

"En't seem like nothin, girlie." He squints at me and scratches his balding crown. "What happen there to y'skin?"

"It's just an allergy." I swallow hard, pulling my sleeves over my hands.

"It en't look normal. You look like y'burnin up!"

"Well, I told you, I feel sick."

He finishes sweeping the mess up and takes a seat facing me. I move my hands from the table and rest them on my lap, clasping my jeans. He passes his palm over his wrinkled forehead and gives me a small smile, baring the gaps between his teeth. "You say somethin' that catch my interest back there," he asks.

"I can't remember what I—"

"*Tree of smoke and ash.* That is what you say."

"I dunno. It was just something I heard and it spilled out at the time—"

"—Who y'hear it from?" He leans in closer.

"I dunno. I can't say."

He nods and leans back in the chair. He gazes at the ceiling. He asks, "You ever hear any stories 'bout my big brother?"

I shake my head.

He cocks his head. "Y'sure? My brother was a carpenter, name of Bhai Paray. I want to tell you about him."

"Dr. Dass, your other patients—"

But he ignores me and continues, "Bhai Paray always liked to have a good time. When he was still alive and kickin', he used to load up on cane rum every Christmas mornin'. The man used to parang from house to house to house. He was a man who everybody liked. He was the kinda man who had a story for everybody. But he got sick. It mess with his mind."

"How?"

"He start revvin' his car at odd hours of the night, threatenin' to poison neighbours' dogs, and sweet-talkin' every woman he see. Wives, daughters, widows. If it was anybody else, the village woulda have him in exile long time. He still had a story for everybody but the stories get strange. And when he was real old, and he load up with enough cane rum, he used to tell this one story that used to make rooms go quiet."

He gets up and interrupts himself, "Y'still have appetite, right?"

"I'm not hungry anymore."

"Girlie, don't be foolish. Y'have to full your belly. How else y'gon' get energy to fight the bug?" He takes my plate.

He continues the story, “The story Bhai Paray used to tell—well, it make people believe he wasn’t too right in the head. He used to talk ‘bout when he was a young man, before he ever settle down with wife and child. A huntin’ story. He used to go prowlin’ for agouti in the forest. The one right cross the river, y’know which one I talkin’ ‘bout, right?”

“Ranahumo Forest?”

“Mmm— that one.”

“We’re told never to go near there.”

“Well, one day he come ‘cross another man in the forest. And this man had a kinda look in the eye. Glazed. Like glass, y’know? But it wasn’t no normal kinda look. Was mal-jeaux the man was givin’ him.”

“Mal-jeaux?”

“The bad-eye. Evil eye. And without sayin’ a word, the man grabba holda him. Squeezin’ the side of he face, eyes open up big-big.”

“What happened after?”

“Well, way how he tell it, the soul was being drag right outta him. Like the eyes was magnets, he say. He feel like the flesh was pullin’ straight outta his skin, and it was like he had to fight a tug o’ war before it was rip right outta his bones.”

“So, what did he do?”

Dr. Dass sets the plate before me. On it is a mountain of rice. I grasp fistfuls of my jeans, trying hard to

keep my hands from idling. I focus on the doctor's eyes.

He takes his seat and continues, "Bhai Paray draw his huntin' knife and slash him right 'cross the face! And what he see—well, what he see was the skin peel off. Demon! Had a layer of white underneath. Smoke risin' from the wound. No blood, just smoke. A dirty kinda white, y'know, the colour of cigarette ash, the colour of them white things y'does see on trees."

"Lichen?"

"Yeah, that. Lichen. The colour of lichen. The man's face en't budge. The eyes was as blank as ever. The man mouth never twist, never curl, though he was making sounds like he was gaspin' for air. The man never say a word, though. My brother say he left the man for dead after that. Leave him right there, on his hands and knees, body still leakin' smoke."

"Why are you telling me this?"

He lingers in a moment of silence before continuing the story, "Bhai Paray claim that two days later, he went back to see if the body was still there. But it disappeared. Instead, he saw a plant. A sapling. Over the years, he'd go back to the spot. And the tree'd grow and grow and grow. It even had that *lichen* in it. It grow into a big silk cotton tree. Sure y'hear of it?"

"In passing."

"He never see a tree grow so fast, he say."

“So, what is the point of all this?”

“In the huntin’ story, and nowhere else, Bhai Paray always used to call it the *tree of smoke and ash*.”

“You’re trying to tell me that big silk cotton tree in Ranahumo Forest has something to do with that man your brother saw?”

“I en’t tryin’ to tell you a damn thing, girlie. If y’was older, my brother woulda be ‘round tell you that and that woulda be the only time you woulda hear someone say them words. I en’t hear nobody repeat that story ever since the man dead and cremate donkey years ago—so I was just wonderin’, who runnin’ their mouth here in La Baliza, child?”

“I probably just overheard it on the street—”

Dr. Dass shakes his head. “Naw. That en’t make a licka sense. Y’see, I tell you, my brother was a good man. He was well-liked, and when the man finally pass, people say they would forget ‘bout them final days. They would never repeat that story. We all agreed. See, the man wasn’t *all there*. It en’t the way people want to remember him, the way *I* would have him remembered.”

His suddenly sour tone ranks of menace. His eyes are sharp like drill bits. I realize I have to be very careful with my words, but I end up saying nothing.

“As y’could see, this affects me greatly,” he says. “I’d appreciate if you tell me who here in this village

been talkin' 'bout things they shouldn't be talkin' 'bout."

"Dr. Dass, I can't tell you anything," I say. "It was just the words that came to mind. If I'd heard it from somewhere, I can't tell you where."

He leans back, nodding and clicking his tongue. Then his entire facial expression changes, his lips parting as if an idea has just blindsided him. He points his chin at the small heap of rice at the side of my plate. "You always play with y'food like that?" he says. Only now I realize I've been picking at my plate, grain by grain, without even knowing.

I try to stop, but I can't. I don't have control over it.

He gets up from his chair and takes the plate from me. "If you en't hungry, y'should put that in the fridge."

I am immediately drawn to the plate—the rice. I fix myself firm on my seat. *Don't get up*, I keep telling myself. *Stay here, don't do it*.

Dr. Dass runs his fingers along the metal pot of rice. He doesn't say anything. He reaches his hand in and scoops up a handful from it. He extends his arm to me, beckoning me like a dog. I know it's a trap, but I can't help it. He trickles the rice on the ground and even from afar, I can't help but count the falling grains—*one, two, three, four, five...*

I rise from my chair, as if in a trance and stumble towards his outstretched palm. As I near him, he slides the metal pot until it falls to the ground—*clang!*—the shower of rice pouring with it.

My blood surges and I begin to sweat. I bite down hard on my tongue. Fists clenched against my cheeks, I hold back a loud groan. I scurry towards the pot, dragging my belly on the floor. With my arms wrapped around the pot, I chant in my head, *Stop it, stop it, stop it.*

*Six, seven, eight, nine, ten.*

All the while in my mind, I keep hissing to myself, *Get up, get up, get up!*

The veins on my wrists turn as black as ash, creeping like ink through my arms.

Dr. Dass backs away. His face goes pale. He stutters, but he cannot find the words. He goes back to the table and sits, hunched forward, staring in deep observation, as if I'm an animal in a laboratory.

In my mind, I'm climbing—climbing on my feet, but I'm still here on the floor. It's like I'm tittering on the edge of a dream, scraping and scrambling with phantom limbs. In reality, I'm still just lying here. I claw against the ground, trying to get back up, trying to pull away from the grains. I fiddle with the hundredth grain of rice between my fingers before shutting my eyes, trying to push the tallies out of my head.

I hear a knocking coming from upstairs, coming from a window. Did a bird get in—or a bat? As the sound gets closer, I realize it isn't knocking I'm hearing. It's clinking, like glass bottles.

Suddenly, the tree flashes again, its voice cutting in, "*Leave now, run, run, this is the man who killed me . . .*"

Killed? What is going on?

I look up and see a figure descending the stairs. It's my mother in a long baby blue nightie, draping her body from neck to toe. She stops at the bottom of the stairs and smiles at me. She runs her palm along her pregnant belly, and raises her finger to her lips.

My eyes flick to Dr. Dass and then back to the bottom of the stairs—she's gone. What did I just see?

Dr. Dass finally gets up from his chair and approaches me. He kneels before me. At first, it looks like he's extending his arm to help me up, but he instead puts his finger under my chin. He licks his cracked lips and fixes his bright blue eyes on me as if he's about to give me a diagnosis. He recites a rhyme:

*"One grain, two grain, three grain, four  
En't no pain like a heap o' grain  
lain front mi door  
Five grain, six grain, seven grain, eight  
En't no pain like a heap o' grain*

*Stainin' mi dinner plate."*

"Ever hear that rhyme before?" he asks.

I shake my head.

"That rhyme is 'bout a demon that could take off its skin—slip it right off like a jacket and light up bright like the sun. Light up and take off into the night, like a firework. But it have a weakness. It like to count rice, so the villagers would heap rice 'round its door. It couldn't leave until it count every grain. The story regard as folklore, yes, but I can tell you it's real."

I try to hide my face in my palm. He brushes some hair off my face. He continues, "Most people—the younger people—just say it was madness and he was making up things." He shakes his head. "It's still madness. But it en't made-up."

The tree's whisper echoes, "*Please, run . . .*"

He continues, "Whatever take that man, take you now. I dunno if it's through reincarnation or possession, but it take you now."

*"He watched me die . . ."*

"Y... You were there too," I stammer. "You were in Ranahumo Forest that day. You saw it too—what your brother saw."

He raises his eyebrows. "It was a long time ago. We en't like to talk 'bout it. We thought it was done with."

"You were there when your brother killed that man."

"*Killed* is a bad word for a demon, girlie."

"What do you mean?"

"We *slayed* the demon." I feel a sudden pang in my heart as he says this.

"*Murderers, both of them, all of them. . .*" The whisper and the tree again.

"Nobody here en't gon'" speak a word of it. But take my word for it, all these old folks here know the story. Had a lady who used to live here, born and raise right in La Baliza—her name was Muneerah Jankie. You wouldn't hear nobody say that name no more. Muneerah had a child, a boy. Strange boy. He used to get sick often—fever. Bad-bad fever. Always had to go to the hospital. Had a girl in the village that liked him. Pretty girl, face like porcelain, coulda get anybody she wanted, yet she choose this weak, scraggly boy."

"*She loved me. . .*" the whisper cuts in.

My heart beat fast as he continued the story. "But it wasn't workin. All the hospital visits. The outbursts he had. How he used to howl at the furniture at night. And now, the boy was claimin' to hear voices. No sane person coulda handle that. We know she was scared of him."

"*Scared, because she was told to be scared. . .*"

“Was only a matter of time ‘til she could break it off, but she let the misery drag on ‘til she couldn’t sleep. She become a zombie. All the colour in her face was gone. He sap the life right outta the poor girl.”

*“Wasn’t my fault. . .”*

“The girl couldn’t take another day of it, so she call him over to her house—she figured that was the safest place to end it.”

He pauses in contemplation before resuming, “We spend the whole night trying to put out that fire. This’s the house on Hare Trace. The fire killed everybody inside.”

“What about the boy?” I say weakly.

Dr. Dass nods. “He walk straight outta the blaze—not a scratch on him. I see it with my own eyes. The fire couldn’t burn him. He run, run, run all the way into Ranahumo Forest. Bhai Paray say he see Muneerah, petrified, eyes focus on the burnin’ house. And she whisper to him, *Do whatever you have to do with that boy.*”

*“Her own child . . .”*

I get a vision of the tree on fire, the whisper emerging from the smoke, “*What kind of mother abandons her own child . . .*”

“Wasn’t no boy,” says Dr. Dass. “Don’t know what it was—but wasn’t no boy. We thought we coulda work the demon outta him. We didn’t aim for it to go

down the way it did. But he come straight at us, lunge on us first, and Bhai Paray end up slicing his face with the knife. It was just as he describe—I was there. White flesh underneath, smoke tricklin' out from the wound. I panic, boy. I stick the blade in him and we run back here. When Muneerah see us, she knew. She didn't even bother have no wake for the culprit."

I'm too shocked to speak.

"We had to get the stories straight for the police," he says. "Lucky for us, they didn't have no case."

"No case?" I ask.

"En't no case if it en't have no body. Where we left the body, the tree started to grow—the *tree of ash and smoke*. Muneerah just tell the police that the boy run away. She say it enough that she herself believe it. Wasn't even a month later when she pack up and leave the village. It was like the two of them never exist."

*"Until now. . ."*

None of this can be true. My mind calls back to the view from my window. Old Brother Bally brushing his teeth; Tantie Petra in her rocking chair; Mr. Sammy hanging up the birdcage.

Did they help cover up the murder?

Did Muneerah Jankie really choose to leave, or was she chased out of La Baliza?

I look Dr. Dass in the eye. "Why are you telling me this?"

He stares right back. "So history don't repeat itself. We can make this easy."

He then grabs my wrist and yanks me up. He holds me and shoves me on the couch. I kick at him and I go to scream, but his hand stamps my mouth at the same time. "A jumbie take hold of that boy!" he says, pinning me to the couch, his mouth in a scowl, his eyes piercing through me. "And now it take hold of you!"

It doesn't make sense putting up a resistance. He's stronger than I expected. Or perhaps I'm just too weak. "Hopefully, we en't too late." His hand remains clamped down on my chest.

At the same time, I hear the clinking again, muffled echoes coming from upstairs. It's louder this time. I picture my mother in her nightie, trapped between the walls, flailing her arms against the concrete.

Dr. Dass doesn't react to it—he can't hear it. The sound gets sharper and sharper.

I look at the stairs and there she is.

Her skin is pale and scaly, shiny like a fish's. She's still in her nightie, but she's soaking wet, as if the rain has caught her. She leaves a trail of white strands as she walks. Hair? Fur?

Her belly swells against the fabric, the shallow indentation of her navel printed and dark. Black ringlets of hair stick to her cheeks. Her ragged bangs hides her

eyes. She smiles at me, raising her finger to her lips as she tiptoes down the stairs.

Dr. Dass doesn't know she's there. The veins along her wrists blacken as she gets closer, stretching her curling fingers out to his neck.

The skin over her features bloats and loosens. She slowly loses my mother's likeness. Her face warps, sagging on one side. The pink of her eye glides down her cheekbone. Her hair swims upward, like a throng of tadpoles to a pond's surface.

She's smiling at me, shushing me again.

I bite down on the doctor's hand. As I push him off of me, I cry out, and my mother's image dissipates into black mist.

Dr. Dass jolts backwards, nearly falling over. His hand is bleeding. I let it sink in: I've bitten an old man, a charitable man, a scholarly man, and now, he's going to rally the village against me. They'll bury me.

I don't give him a chance to speak, or retaliate. I bolt out of the house and grab my bicycle. I peddle, peddle, peddle, until I get to the main road.

I almost hit a car—it blares its horn and swerves out of the way. My heart is ready to burst through my ribcage.

When I get to the old bridge, I hide my bicycle in some bushes. I need to gather my thoughts. I skid down the bank and rest beneath the bridge's shadow.

The soil is damp and muddy, but I don't care—I sit, positioning myself like a yogi during meditation. I squeeze myself closer to a nook, where a drape of moss hangs from both sides of the bridge, like stringy curtains.

It's only now I realize I've forgotten my phone, but there's no way I'm going all the way back to get it.

I trace my slipper along a small spiral of weeds. A centipede dangles from one of them. It withdraws into a whorl as I touch it. Guabines and guppies skitter down the slow purr of the muddy river.

I put my hand against my heart, still beating fast. My mind reels back to the story of Muneerah Jankie—her and her son. Has he possessed me? Are we the victims of the same demon? Was he really cursed and turned into a tree? Whatever is happening, I feel a strange closeness. I feel sorry for him.

I hate French, but there's something I'll never forget from class. In a routine phrase lesson, our teacher listed and described some popular sayings. The one that caught our attention the most was *folie à deux*, which she translated as: *a madness shared by two*. When asked to explain it, she told us a story about Swedish twins. The two sisters, suspected of carrying illegal items, were stopped and interrogated by police. Then all of a sudden, one of them ran into the road and got knocked down by a 40-tonne lorry. Immediately after, her twin

sister leapt in front of an oncoming Volkswagen. Both sisters survived.

When the second sister was asked why she did what she did, she simply claimed that one accident usually follows another.

The story got more bizarre, and suddenly, all other chatter had ceased. French was suddenly the best class. The second twin, the Volkswagen one, ended up running off by herself. She stayed the night at a man's house and ended up running a kitchen knife into him five times.

Clearly one was madder than the other.

I recount the story over and over in my head. *Folie à deux*—I will never forget the term. A madness somehow shared across minds. Muneerah Jankie's son and I—we share this curse, this madness, whatever it is.

The difference between the Swedes and this was that the twins had known each other their whole lives. Muneerah Jankie's son was murdered before I was even born. Could madness pull and stretch across time and enter someone's mind from another? Could it extend beyond death—beyond the grave and the pyre?

For some reason, I don't believe he set that house on fire—not on purpose. I know he would tell me that. I know I'll never see the people of La Baliza the same after this. He never had a chance. Disowned by his own

mother, and people didn't even have the decency to hold a wake for his murder.

If he never had a chance, do I?

I feel a hand on my shoulder, but it doesn't startle me. It fills me with a sudden warmth.

I scoot to the side. It's my mother—the vision of my mother. It's strange. I can actually *feel* her. It's strange and frightening, but my body does not cringe or shudder in response. It's like a caress after a bad day. It's almost like static electricity. It heightens my senses. The river rumbles louder. The wind feels cooler. The sunlight is almost blinding.

She's not soaked, scaly and pregnant, as she appeared before. She's smooth, glowing and glossy—just as she looked just after she gave birth to me, before she left Trinidad, perhaps before she ever thought of becoming a Walsh. The light behind her is so bright that I can barely recognize any of her features except her brilliant smile.

"There's a fire within you," she says as she leans towards me. "It burns and burns like no other." Her voice is as I've always imagined. Only now I realize I've only heard her voice through conversions of electrical signals, transistors and amplifiers. The sound is so powerful that it makes me tear up.

I clutch the front of her dress and press my forehead against her collarbone. “What is happening to me?” I ask her, straining to speak.

“You’re finally waking up.”

She then vanishes. The dress in my hand whisks away like a dissolved fog. I find myself leaning on nothing—I nearly keel forward. In her place is a small brown frog, staring up at me, puffing its throat. There’s an almost magnetic force between me and the frog.

It hops away and leaps into the river. I wipe my eyes and sit upright. I swallow the lump in my throat, feeling foolish for being deceived so easily.

In addition to this, I’m stuck. I can’t go back home. I can’t call anyone. I wonder whose side Aunt Judi would fall on—it pains me to even have to question it.

My only hope is Zee. If I can find Zee and somehow explain all of this to him, maybe we can figure out a plan. Zee is the only person in the world right now who would take my side, even if he didn’t believe me.

It’s noon right now. It’s Friday, and I know Zee congregates with the other Muslim students for Jumu’ah in an annex behind the school. I get up and dust myself up. I have to find a way to break him out of school.

## CHAPTER 3 HAUNT

It takes me fifteen minutes to ride all the way to school. I lean my bicycle against a light pole, about a stone's throw away from the back gate. Luckily, the annex is accessible through there. However, there are children swarming the entire compound. Thank goodness I'm unpopular—I won't have much trouble going unnoticed.

The security guard lounges on an old iron chair facing the gate. We don't know his real name, but he's always wearing these shades that look like the ones the men in the Secret Service have. So we just call him Shades.

Shades is a chatty man who not only knows the names of the students, but the names of their friends *and* their enemies. The man is a sponge for the rivers of gossip that flow through this compound. I suppose there's not much else to do from his vantage point.

Shades is the worst type of security guard, the type that probably wants to be a policeman, but cannot make the cut. So now, he's stuck ruling over the kingdom of the back gate. That chair he lazes on is his iron throne.

We joke about him having some sort of radar embedded in those tinted lenses sometimes. How Zee manages to slink past him and ditch school so often is a miracle. I always tell him that he must be some sort of escape artist. I never dare to ditch, though, and I'm always the first one to lecture Zee about ditching.

As I approach the gate, I'm saved by the pie vendor. He swivels around the corner and parks his cart near the gate, as he does every lunch period. A gaggle of students immediately surround him, starved for overfried saheenas and pholouri. Shades gets up from his chair and fights through the pack to get his fix of salt and oil as well.

This is my chance. I keep my head down as I sneak past the cart and slink into the compound. I head straight for the annex, where Jumu'ah is still in session. I sit in the corner of the room and watch the students pray—maybe ten of them altogether, with Zee at the back in his long black thobe, his taqiyah fitting snugly over his head. Nobody in the room takes notice of me.

The annex used to be a chemistry lab. It's not used for much now, except for Jumu'ah and as a Religious

Instruction room. It's now a room reserved for sanctity. I've been in here a few times. I prefer the quietness in here to the ruckus and gossip outside. It's calming to watch them pray, even now.

Behind them is a large fire safety poster, no doubt a leftover from the lab. I wonder why they didn't bother to take it down—are they expecting the Devil? I roll my sleeves up and look at my arms. Still red. I know I'm still burning up inside, even though I don't feel it as much now. Whatever's happening to me—terms such as *febrile convulsion* and *subacute panencephalitis* don't frighten me anymore.

I rethink my plan. I can't tell Zee anything here. I don't even know what the poor boy could do to help me, but I just don't want to be by myself.

When the prayer session is over, the students get up, roll up their mats and change into their uniforms. I pretend to wipe my face with my collar as they walk past me. Zee is the last to leave, as always. I grab his arm and pull him towards me.

He raises his eyebrows and notices me straight away. "Sue?" he says. "I thought you was home sick?"

I shake my head. "You have to come with me."

"Come with you? Where?"

"We'll decide that after."

"You askin' me to break school?" says Zee with a chuckle. "What happened?"

"I'll tell you when we're outta here."

"This's a joke, right?"

"If it's anything you have a talent in, Zee, it's ditching school."

"Yeah, but—"

"You're like an escape artist."

"But—"

"You have a problem doing it today?"

He folds his arms. "You f'real?"

"Please, Zee."

"So, tell me where we—"

"I have my bike."

"But where—"

"I don't know! Let's just—"

"Sue! You en't expectin' me to just waltz outta here in my uniform, right?"

"You have clothes."

"What clothes—" He pauses. I point my chin at the plastic bag in his hand.

I tell him, "Just throw your thobes over your uniform."

"These? These are for prayer, Sue."

"Good. I need all the prayers I could get."

Zee laughs. "You gone mad?"

"I'll get mad if we don't go now."

He shakes his head before giving me another look, his brows furrowed. He knows I'm serious. He quickly

puts his thobe and taqiyah back on and slings his bookbag around his back. "You promise to tell me what goin' on?"

We exit the annex together. Zee points to an almond tree at the end of the compound. "Have a gap in the fence over there. I could sneak out on that side."

"But my bike—"

"You want to get outta here or not?" he says with an impatient sigh.

"I need my bike. You go through the fence and wait for me," I tell him. "I'll get my bike and I'll meet you there."

"Well, hurry!" He gives me a small push.

Shades quickly finishes his aloo pie as I walk past him. He tips his cap at me. I try not to make eye contact.

"You look familiar, Miss," he says.

I don't turn to watch him. I can see Zee up ahead, through the fence, already on the other side, the mid-day breeze ruffling his thobe. He stoops and hides behind a light pole when he notices Shades tagging me. I reply, "My brother forgot his lunch at home. I just came to drop it for him."

"And who your brother be, Miss?"

He's still right behind me, breathing down my neck. I keep my gaze dixed on my bicycle. "You wouldn't know him," I say, my back still turned.

"You a student here, right?"

"No. Just passing through."

"You have a sister goin' here?"

"No."

"Cousin?"

"No."

Zee pops his head out to scope the scene, and quickly pulls it away. But it's too late.

"That boy there," Shades says, pointing at him.

"That your brother?"

"No." I grab my bicycle.

"Turn 'round. Lemme see your face."

"Stop following me."

"I have a right to know." He puts his arm on my shoulder and pulls me towards him. His hand is dripping wet.

I spin around and see the face: it's my mother. She's in a white wedding dress, sopping wet—her smile is gone—ice blue lips—frozen white eyes. She stands beside the unknowing security guard.

I scream, "Watch—!"

But before I could finish, she punches him in the temple.

I blink and she's gone. Shades is knocked to the side, his palm clenched over the side of his head. One of his lenses has been knocked right out. He looks at me, his one visible bloodshot eye focused on me. Be-

hind him, a small group of girls cling to the fence and start hollering.

They're calling more people over.

I have to get out of here *now*.

I hop on my bicycle and take off. I swing around the corner. When I spot Zee, I shift onto the center bar and motion for him to hop on the seat behind me. His jaw's hanging open, still in shock. He has probably realized that he's about to become an accessory to a crime. Hitting a security guard—this could get me expelled, but I couldn't care less right now.

I motion again. Shades is catching up on me. The group of children sidle en masse along the fence, hollering at us like spectators in an arena. Zee finally jostles himself onto the seat, and I take off again.

"Sue, *what the hell!*" Zee exclaims.

The road is clear. I make a sharp turn left, avoiding the parked cars. Zee grabs onto my collar. "Go! Go! Go!" his voice keeps building. I turn around. Zee's thobe billows like a large black blanket on his back.

I pedal faster. Shades isn't giving up. This is no longer his job—this is personal.

I veer onto an old dirt road. We're now straying from civilization. Nothing flanking us now except bush and power lines. We manage to finally lose Shades. I'm sure he's cussing up a storm on his walkie-talkie. This

is going to be the talk of the school. Zee and I are going to become legends—expelled legends.

Zee hasn't said a word outside of instructions and directions. I've kept my mouth shut as well. He's angry—and it isn't often that this boy spends energy on things like anger. He directs me down a dirt path until we come to a river. Bamboo stalks curve and bow into archways and porticos. A squirrel pauses its ascent to look at us.

We get off the bike. I follow Zee's path, rolling the bike alongside me. He picks up a stick and beats a way through a tangle of ferns and bushes near the riverbank. We keep walking until we come to an abandoned wooden cabin. The windows have all been boarded up. The wood is old and rotted, but the roof is fully intact. I don't know who could've lived here.

I expect Zee to go inside, but instead he tosses his bookbag on the ground and brushes off some moss from a big flat stone. He sits on it and pulls his knees up against his chest. I lean the bike against a rock. As I sit beside him, he glances at me. He strums his fingers against his kneecaps, waiting for me to say something.

But I have nothing to say—nothing that would make a lick of sense. "We're in deep trouble, aren't we?" I say, faking a smile.

“They gon’ bring out the hangman on Monday.” His gaze drifts and lingers on the river. He picks up a stone and tosses it in. “Any last words?”

My eyes stay on the ripples. I feel weak all of a sudden, like my muscles have turned to gelatin. As he goes to throw another rock, I finally say, “Zee, Dr. Dass attacked me.”

Zee’s arm freezes, and he drops the rock. His lips part as he turns to me. “Dr. Dass? Our Dr. Dass?”

I nod. “He came in the house—”

His eyes widen. “You serious? He break in?”

“I let him in. I didn’t know what he was planning to—”

“And he attack you?”

“Zee—”

He stands up. “Sue, we hafta tell the police!”

“No!” I exclaim, remembering the doctor’s bleeding hand. I shouldn’t have bitten him. He has proof that I attacked him. I have none. Who were the people of La Baliza going to believe—an alleged cannibal, or a respected doctor? “No police,” I say again.

“Sue, you can’t be serious.”

“No police!”

Zee pauses, looking skyward and squinting at the sun. “We gon’ have to tell my mother, at least.”

“Not yet.”

“I know you two have issues but—”

I restrain from yelling this time. “Zee, please. Not yet.”

“What did Dr. Dass... do?” His words are slow and cautious.

“He held me down and choked me. That was it. I broke free and ran away.” I’m cautious as well. It takes a great lot of work to get Zee going, but it takes a lot more to stop him.

He takes a deep breath and fiddles with another rock. “What cause him to do that? You need to gimme the full story, Sue.”

I skip a stone into the water. I can’t tell him about the visions and the voices, the rice, the rhyme, the village secret. The full story—no way!

“I just need a moment,” I tell him, putting my arm over my forehead. “I feel faint. It’s really hot out here.”

He points his chin at the house and motions for us to go inside. He goes in first and I follow him. Inside is dark and much cooler than I’d expected it to be. Slices of light shoot through the gashes between the wooden slats of the walls and ceiling. The floor creaks as we walk, as if the cabin itself is alive—alive and disturbed from its slumber. Because the windows have all been barred, the cabin’s only entrance is its exit.

The cabin has no ceiling and is partitioned into two rooms by just a large slab of wood with a doorway sawed into it. A room to the front, and one at the back.

The front room has a table with two chairs, and a small counter with a chopping board still resting on it. But no chopper. For some reason, the room has the perfumed smell of frangipanis. The counter is being slowly eaten away by moisture and termites. Other than that, there's no other sign of life here.

No electricity. No plumbing.

The back room has a small bed, though the frame has toppled on its left side, leaving its mattress slanted. The mattress is old, frayed and chewed. In the corner of the room is a closet with a broken mirror stuck to its door.

I catch my reflection in the mirror—my red skin, my ruffled hair, the thin bright strokes of sunlight tattooing my clothes. I turn to Zee, whose thobe is similarly speckled with light. I ask him, "Who lives here?"

"I do." He takes his taqiyah off and runs his hand through his hair. "For 'bout an hour or two during the weekend."

"You're joking?"

"Maybe after school too." He laughs. "Is like on TV how them children always have a hideout. Sometimes they's call it a haunt. I just thought I should have a haunt too. So, yeah, welcome to my haunt."

I trace my palm along the mirror and pinch the dust off my fingertips. "How did you even find this place?"

"Some people like to go to the mall. Some like the cinema. Some like street corners." He sits on the upright half of the bed. "I like to explore, and on my voyages, I find places."

"So you have other places like this?"

"Not like this."

"Nobody else knows about this cabin?"

He shrugs. "I can't answer that. Whoever else know 'bout here, we en't cross paths yet."

I open the closet. The dust particles dance in the light. There are clothes still inside—two pairs of black jeans, two olive-green shirts and a blue silk negligee. They're all old, damp and dirty, slung on a half-broken rack that's sandwiched with cobweb. Two pairs of boots sit below them.

"It's so lonely here. You don't get scared when you come here?"

"Scared? Scared of what?"

"I don't know. This place gives me bad vibes."

"It should. There's ghosts here."

"Ghosts?" Usually, I'd roll my eyes, but after all that's happened, I want to hear more.

"What is a haunt without ghosts?"

"You really believe in ghosts, Zee?"

"Believin' have anything to do with it?"

"I guess not." It comes out in a murmur.

"Sometimes the breeze's just enough to make the cabin rumble. It give me a feeling like somethin' else is here."

"And that doesn't scare you?"

He shakes his head. "I imagine it's whoever use to live here. And I talk to them."

"Talk to them?"

"Just 'bout what's on my mind."

"To ghosts? You come all the way here to do that?"

Zee shakes his head. "Look, this's why I never tell nobody—"

"I think it's interesting. Maybe even nice. But it reminds me of how little I know about you. I mean, we've lived under the same roof all our lives. We barely ever talk. Why don't you talk to me?"

"It's complicated."

"It's your mother, right?" I purse my lips. "She tells you not to talk to me."

He frowns. "You know how she is."

"She really hates me, doesn't she?" I try to say it like it doesn't bother me.

He looks at me for a while, as if examining my face. "She is a confused woman. I don't understand her sometimes."

I shut the closet door and sit next to him. I change the topic. "You really think ghosts would listen to us?"

"You don't think so?"

“Why would a ghost care about what a human has to say? Ghosts have nothing to gain from humans.”

“Not if they miss being alive. If there’s such a thing as ghosts, I en’t think all of them would be bad. Some would listen. The ones awake in the daytime would listen.”

I let out a chuckle.

“What so funny, eh?” he says, nudging my shoulder with his.

“Not even *one hour* ago, you were praying to Allah, and now you’re talking about seeking ghosts for attention.”

“Well, not even one hour ago, I wasn’t worried ‘bout the rest of my life goin’ down the drain. You remember they gon’ hang both of we come Monday, right? They gon’ build a gallows just for Azeez and Surya.”

“It would be worth it, though, right?”

“Seeing Shades getting lick-down like that? Hell yeah!” He pretend-punches me.

“So, your ghosts—looks like they would’ve been hunters.”

“Could be a hunter’s cabin. Someone not from round here.”

“What’s the story behind the negligee, though?”

“Negligee?”

“Perhaps it was more than a hunter’s cabin?”

“Sue, what negligee?”

“The one in the closet. It’s right there.” I go to the closet and open it. The negligee is gone. It was never there. The closet door slowly swings shut, and I feel all the blood drain from my face. I could see it from my reflection in the broken mirror.

“You okay?” Zee asks.

At the same time, the wind blows and the cabin rumbles—growling. The cabin door shuts for itself. My eyes drift to the threads of light on the floor. A shadow crawls over them. Water drips from the darkness above. Something’s in the room. I peer at the ceiling, but it’s too dark to see anything.

Something’s up there. I know it, *oh God*, it’s there, hanging in the darkness, hovering over us.

It’s like how a nightmare works—all fears always come true. The more you wish for them to not be there, the more you wish for the bad things not to happen, is the greater chance that they’ll just leap out from the shadows and eat you alive. Just thinking about the things that terrify you gives them the power to exist.

The shadow hangs over us, drops of water still falling from it. I hear it scuttling as it clings to the underside of the roof. It makes a *crunch-crunch-crunch* noise as she shifts down the wall.

Its face emerges from the darkness above me. A woman's face, but not my mother's this time. Its face is lined with urchin spines.

It's suspended upside-down. The blue silk negligee comes into view, billowing between the wiry columns of light. Its eyes are jet black. As it descends, I see the single silvery thread that it's dangling from. And the rest of its body comes into sight—the bloated grey abdomen of a spider bursting out of the bottom frills of the negligee.

"Zee." My voice shudders, trying to remain as calm as I can, reminding myself that it's not real. It's just a vision. It can't be real. This doesn't stop me from nearly peeing myself. I turn to him. "Zee... Zee... we have to go."

Suddenly, a shining bright blade drops from the darkness.

It lodges into the floor.

It's the missing chopper.

"Sue!" Zee yells, stumbling backwards. He hits the back of his leg against the bed.

I gaze up and notice the spider-creature is gone.

I then turn to Zee.

The creature is behind him now—it's right behind him, perched over his body. He screams out. It looks at me, grinning, black gums exposed. Its lips part and a

hairy pair of palps slither out, each ending in two sharp, glistening fangs.

I grab the chopper and leap across the mattress and pin Zee down, right as it moves to sink the fangs into him.

I swing the blade at the creature.

And it bursts into a cloud of black mist. I fall right on Zee, and the chopper flies out of my hand and rattles the wall. Zee scrambles to get out from under me. We don't even get to say a word to each other when the walls begin to growl again. The bars on the windows clatter. However, this time, it's not the wind.

Zee grabs onto my shirt. Whatever it is, it's trying to break through the window. A surprise attack. It moves away from the window and towards the door—the only entrance, the only exit.

The door knocks, knocks, knocks. Rattles, and then bangs. It must've jammed when it was shut. Bang! Bang! As if whatever behind the door is flinging its body against it.

"Zee, get under the bed," I whisper to him.

"Sue, what's goin on?" I'd never heard Zee's voice tremble like this before. This isn't a hallucination. This is real. It's going to get us—my fear right now. Just like the nightmares—all fears come true.

I repeat, "Under the bed."

"Sue—"

*“Now.”*

He creeps under the bed. There’s nowhere else for me to go but the closet. I shut myself in. Beside the mirror, the other half of the closet door is slatted. I can just barely see the room through the horizontal slits.

*Bang!* And then the sound of wood cracking. The vibration along the wood hums against my back. I try to calm myself. I can’t panic now. I have to be brave.

*Bang! Crack!*

I have to be fearless.

*Craack! Snaaap!*

I have to be strong.

*Slam!*

The door flies open. All sound is suddenly sucked out of the room, leaving just a faint ringing in my ears. I strain to peek through the slats, but I can’t see anything yet. I hear the tables and the chairs dragging in the other room. It’s looking for us.

The creature pokes its head through the doorway before staggering into the room. It’s no bigger than a child. The first thing I see is its feet, twisted backwards. It brings with it a high foul stench like burnt rubber, creeping into my nostrils. I try not to cough.

Its charcoal-black skin is pulled taut against its flesh to expose a filigree of veins. Its body is like crocus bag stretched tight. Draping its body is a large jersey, threadbare and moth-eaten. Covering most of its face is

a wide-brimmed straw hat, unravelling along the rim. Its spindly, stiff hair resemble the shadows of brambles.

What sticks out the most is its eyes—two large glowing yellow orbs resembling a car's headlights. It scans the room with them and makes a clicking *tut-tut-tut* sound as it breathes, like a small motor starting up.

I can get behind it. With some patience and resolve, I can overcome it. I can throw one of these shirts over it and clobber it with a boot.

I squat, careful to not let my knees press against the door. I pick up the boot. I keep my eyes on the creature. The snips of sun rays pasted over it resemble bright yellow incisions, as if its body is being scratched by the light.

The creature drags itself towards the closet—closer and closer. I bite my tongue and hold my breath. I don't make a sound—I cannot afford to. It lifts a long swollen finger and flicks it down the slats of the door.

*Tut-tut-tut-tut.*

The bright round eyes shine through the slats like two headlights.

Does it see me?

It suddenly turns around and lurches towards the bed. It lifts the mattress up and peeks underneath.

Now's my chance! I grab the shirt from the rack and charge out of the closet. At the same time, the crea-

ture reaches its arm under the bed and drags Zee out by his collar. It presses its forehead against his, its eyes smoldering into a hot white.

I remain frozen in place—the shirt in one hand, the boot firmly in the other. Zee opens his mouth to scream. And then—*flash!*—the creature vanishes from the room.

Zee falls to the floor, still paralyzed. I drop the shirt and the boot, and rush to him.

I pull his legs out from under the bed.

I pat his face, shake his shoulders, but he doesn't move.

Oh God, *oh God.*

He's not breathing. I put my ear against his chest. I listen out for a beat, a pulse, anything. I press my thumbs against his wrist. His arm is limp. He's going cold. Then:

*Look how the sun now raisin' up / and the crowd now wakin' up / the atmosphere have vibes / and nuttin cyah break it up*

His ringtone. His eyes suddenly flutter open. He rubs his forehead and sits upright. He reaches into his back pocket and produces his phone. He squints at it and sucks his teeth. "Is ma. I en't in the mood."

I'm too shocked to say anything.

He continues, "She en't callin' cause she missin' my voice, I can tell you that."

I just stare at him, still in shock. What the hell just happened? He furrows his brow at me and says, "How you lookin' so?"

"L... Looking how?"

He gets up and dusts his thobe off. "Strange. What's the matter with you?"

Me, strange? I can't believe that just two minutes ago, he was screaming, legs wobbling. Brave Zee, reduced to a tremble. What was that creature? Did it possess him? Is it trying to trick me?

"Strange, how?" I ask.

"Like you see a damn ghost."

Maybe I'm seeing a ghost right now. He *saw* it, I swear. He saw the blade hit the ground. He heard the knocking on the door. He looked the demon in the eye. It's like the entire ordeal never happened. Did the creature erase his memory? Did it turn his mind backwards like the hands of a clock?

"Well, I told you this place gives me bad vibes," I say.

The cabin rumbles again, and the closet door flies open. I turn around. On the rack, hanging there, much to my disbelief, is the blue negligee. I take a deep breath. "You want to get something to eat?" I ask.

"Look, you have to gimme the full story 'bout what went down this mornin'."

*The Joyful Ashes*

I grab his hand, impatient to get out of the house.  
“Let’s get something to eat first.”

## CHAPTER 4 SALT

Old Richie Leong likes to pretend he's Chinese when he's just half. While most Chinese-Trinis may find it annoying to be called *Chinee*, he wholeheartedly welcomes it. He also claims that he was born in China. Guangdong Province, Zheijang, Sichuan—he's so old now that he mixes up his own stories. Some might see his dishonesty as endearing.

Leong's Gong, his restaurant, is located along the main road, not too far from La Baliza. It's the only Chinese restaurant for miles—it might actually be the only restaurant for miles. Zee and I take a seat. Mr. Leong nods at us from behind the counter and flashes a broad smile. His thick silver mustache glistens as he does. His bloodflecked eyes reflect an uncharacteristic excitement. We're the only ones in here, so perhaps he's just glad for some customers.

At the same time, Coo-Coo, the vagrant from earlier, barges in. Mr. Leong hisses at him, "I en't have no money f'you!"

"Bottles, boss? No bottles?" Coo-Coo asks, scratching his stubbly face.

"Bottles at the end of the week, get outta here!"

"Somebody t'ief my bottles, boss!"

"That en't have nothing to do with me, oho! Gon' from here!" Mr. Leong stamps his foot.

Coo-Coo sucks his teeth and leaves. As he does, Mr. Leong looks at us again, his smile reappearing as fast as it vanished. Zee hands me his wallet and pinches the bridge of his nose, as if he has a headache. "Just get a medium," he says. "We can share."

"Medium what?"

"Medium anything. I just need to eat."

I go up to the counter. Before I even order, Mr. Leong asks, "Eat here or take-away?"

"Here," I tell him. "Just a medium chicken with chow mein."

"Want rice or noodle with that?"

The image of the rice pot falling to the floor flashes in my mind. "Noodles," I tell him, paying him.

As he leaves, I observe the red paper lanterns hanging and twirling from the ceiling. Scrolls line the walls with Chinese calligraphy. I wonder if Mr. Leong knows what they say. One of the scrolls depicts a long, twirl-

ing serpentine dragon. Above the scroll is a long blade propped up on a small metal rack, unsheathed and most likely decorative.

Mr. Leong returns with the food. I bring it over to Zee and as he opens it, I feel a pang in my stomach. I'm immediately weighed down. Mr. Leong had mixed up the order. He's given us rice.

*One grain, two grain, three grain, four...*

Mr. Leong shuffles out from behind the counter with a broom and shambles towards the door. He reaches his hand into his pocket and takes out a handful of dry rice and pours it at the doorstep. He begins sweeping the grains into a straight line.

*En't no pain like a heap o' grain lain front mi door.*

This is a trap.

Mr. Leong heads back to the counter and dials on his cell phone. He's texting. Who is he texting? It could be anybody, but it could be trouble too.

Zee takes a bite out of the chicken. He squints and scrunches his lips as he chews it. My eyes glide down to the rice. *Look away, look away*, I keep telling myself, but I can't.

*Five grain, six grain, seven grain, eight...*

Zee calls out, "Chinee! The salt shaker fall in the food?"

Mr. Leong turns to him. "Salt?"

“This food cuttin’ straight through my tongue, man!”

“You mad? Let the girl taste the food!”

Zee slides the box to me. “Taste it,” he tells me. “Tell me I don’t deserve a damn refund.”

*En’t no pain like a heap o’ grain stainin’ mi dinner plate.*

I close the box and toss it in the bin. Zee looks at me, surprised.

Mr. Leong drops the broom. “What you gon’ and do that for?”

“I ordered noodles,” I reply, trying to catch my breath.

“So you throw ‘way the food? You don’t like the food? Then leave!”

Zee gets up. “Chinee, lay off. What get into you?”

My eyes linger on the trail of rice along the doorway.

Mr. Leong folds his arms. “She come in my place and disrespect it! What you want me do, eh?” He looks at me and smirks. He’s putting on an act, I can tell. He nudges his head towards the door. “Two of you, leave before it have trouble! She first!”

Zee throws his arms up. “Okay, okay, man. Just next time, don’t dump the whole blasted salt mines in the food.” He walks to the door, but I stay where I am.

I hold my breath. I hear the clinking sounds again. Bottles clinking against each other—growing louder

and louder, sharper and sharper. I can hear it from behind the door. Getting closer and closer and closer.

I close my eyes. Oh God, this is too much.

The door flies open and a wind scatters the rice grains. It's Aunt Judi. She points at me, "You!" She marches up to me and puts her finger against my chest. "Worthless scamp!"

I back away from her. I've never seen her so angry in my life. Zee looks at us, alarmed. She grabs my arm, but I pull away. I have no words for her.

Zee begins, "Ma—"

Aunt Judi glances at him. Her eyes are red. "I don't even want to start with you."

"But—"

"You were there this morning. She was in bed, like she was dying! And now, I'm hearing that both of you ditched school?"

Mr. Leong looks genuinely taken aback. He scrambles for the right words to calm Aunt Judi down. She wasn't the one he texted. Who is it then? I wonder how Aunt Judi even managed to find us. She must've seen my bicycle parked outside.

"Ma, there is an explanation—"

"I know I should've never believed her. The fruit doesn't fall far from the tree."

"Ma—"

"Blasted worthless scamp."

“Ma!—”

“Why can’t this girl just be *normal!*”

“She was attacked!” Zee spits out. He takes a moment to breathe before continuing, “She come to me for help, okay? I dunno the full story but—”

“*She* was attacked?” Aunt Judi raises her eyebrows. “She was the one who hit that guard and bit the doctor’s hand!”

“That was self-defense,” I mutter.

Aunt Judi shakes her head. “The fruit doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

“Why do you keep saying that?” I ball my fists and grit my teeth.

“You’re a liar just like your mo—” I shove her before she can even finish. She falls to the floor and knocks the garbage bin right over. I feel a giddy wave of power wash over me. This has been years in the making, but I regret it immediately.

Zee rushes to her side. Then she starts talking again, “Zee, let me tell you about your auntie Maria. She’s always been a liar, you know.”

“*It’s trying to mock you. Don’t listen. . .*” the tree’s whisper echoes in my mind.

It?

“One night, when she was seventeen, she didn’t come home. But it wasn’t anything new—she was an

immature little girl. And she never stopped being one—”

*“It tells stories. . .”*

“She came home the next day, the life sucked right outta here, as if she’d come back from the dead. At the hospital, the doctors said that they couldn’t find any bruises except for a lash on the head—”

*“True stories. . .”*

“She couldn’t remember a thing. Around midday, she suddenly started claiming that she blacked out and ended up in Ranahumo Forest.”

*“But hides details. . .”*

“Two months passed, and she began vomiting. Morning sickness. She refused to eat. When they told her that she was pregnant, she kept claiming that she wasn’t with anybody in months. We all knew the truth about Maria, though—”

*“To make the truth cut the skin. . .”*

“She had many boyfriends, because she couldn’t make up her mind about anything in her life. She couldn’t even tell which one attacked her that night.”

*“And rubs salt in the wounds. . .”*

“And then she gave birth this *raakhas* there.” She pointed at me. “It was your father’s idea to lie. We all told her that her father died before she was born. He thought it would save her some pain, but—”

*“It does it this way so it could feed . . .”*

"I think nobody deserves to have the truth hidden from them, don't you?"

*"So it could eat the emotions raw. . ."*

"After all, the truth always sets you free." Aunt Judi smirks.

Zee turns to me, his look of confusion now replaced with one of sadness. I try my best to show no emotion. I'm taking it as it comes. She's trying to hurt me. I refuse to let her see me blubber. I refuse to let her see me shed a tear.

My lack of reaction annoys her, and she scowls at me. She gets up, and as she does, her skirt lifts over her ankle—one of her feet is covered with white hairs, like fur.

She has a hoof.

This is not Aunt Judi. I don't know what it is. Nobody else seems to have noticed it, but I'm not scared of the hoof-woman.

The door opens and Dr. Dass scuffs his feet as he hobbles inside. His hand is wrapped with a thick bandage. His eyes fall upon me. "You do good, Chinee," he says, nodding. Mr. Leong is still frozen in shock.

Dr. Dass declares, "I en't pressin charges or nothin. I just want to have a talk."

The hoof-woman smiles. "Do whatever you have to do with that girl."

Zee exclaims, "Ma, you can't be serious!"

The hoof-woman's grin quickly disappears. I can hear her hoof clacking as she approaches Zee—I think I'm the only who can hear it. She puts her hand on the back of his neck and whispers, "The good doctor will know what to do with her."

Dr. Dass grabs my wrist. His palm burns right through my skin.

I pull my hand away, letting out a yelp.

I caress the sizzling patch of skin. Little particles of salt are eating their way through my flesh. I quickly brush them off. "Salt bad for jumbies like you," hisses the doctor, lunging forward to grab me again.

I vault to the side and grab the blade from the wall. It's a real sword, not a decoration, and it's heavier than I'd imagined. I point the blade at Dr. Dass and shout, "Zee, that is not Aunt Judi! Zee! Look at her foot!"

Dr. Dass furrows his brow.

The hoof-woman glares at me. "Put that thing down before you hurt yourself," she mutters.

I keep my eyes on them. "Lift her skirt! Look at her foot! She has a hoof!"

"Grab her!" the hoof-woman shouts at Dr. Dass.

"I don't know what it did with Aunt Judi," I tell Zee. "I don't know where it came from, but it's not human!"

"Shut your trap, girl!" the hoof-woman retorts.

"*Sue, watch out!*" Zee calls out.

Someone grabs me from behind.

The blade falls—*clang!*

It's Mr. Leong. He's not strong enough to hold me.

I break loose. But at the same time, the hoof-woman knocks me down. She reaches into Dr. Dass' pocket and pulls out a small cloth satchel and dumps its contents on my face—salt.

*Salt!*

My face begins to burn. I can hear her laughing madly. I stumble backwards, clawing at my cheeks. My vision goes blurry. I rush to the door and fall towards it, hitting my forehead. I push it open and stagger into the street. A crowd has gathered in the road. I can't make out their faces. Villagers?

I scream at them until my voice is reduced to a gurgle. Fire bursts out of my hands, but it doesn't burn me.

Everyone backs away. Some cower behind others.

I look up at the houses, the windows. Curtains flapping. Faces poking out. People clinging to their front gate. People rising from their chairs and hammocks. Even the dogs stop to watch. Their howls fill the air.

As the fire spreads over my body, the figures slowly fade into blackness before I go blind.

I feel my entire body catch fire—but it doesn't sting. It doesn't sear. It feels like I'm bathing in light. It feels

like the warmth of an embrace. My body becomes a bright orange nimbus. I remember the tree's whisper:

*"Just sweat it out. . ."*

I can't move.

The smoke consumes me and I can't breathe, yet I've never felt more alive. It doesn't crush me—it clinches me and holds me, like a fluid.

I feel my feet lift from the ground.

I am rising, rising, rising.

A ball of rising fire. I must be dying, but I'm bursting with joy, like a butterfly emerging from its pupa.

Finally, I can breathe again.

My lungs wash clean. The air is cool and smooth.

Is this what the final moments of death feels like? If so, I'm not scared, even though all I could do now is whimper.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **BLOOD**

The first thing I see when I open my eyes is the fog, bright and heavy like golden dust. I recognize it right away, even though I've never been here—I'm in Ranahumo Forest.

The forest is dark, tinted in a twilit orange. The muffled sound of a running water hums behind me—a shallow stream. I lie face-down, my legs half-way in the water, my cheek against the soggy dirt.

I peer up. The breaks in the canopy that would usually dapple the light are tied together by the thick fog. It looks like the fog is trapping the light—a large light-filled net. It wraps around the boughs like a spiderweb. In some places, the fog looks strangely syrupy—as if it wraps itself around the trees like chewing gum.

A tiny brown frog hops out from under a leaf and stares at me, eyes like watermelon seeds, its bloating throat quickly puffing and deflating. Its eyes, like wa-

termelon seeds. It's a miniature version of the one I saw in the waiting room. I brush some hair away from my face and my eyes follow the frog as it hops into a brook. The water snakes its way around the trees and disappears into the haze.

I scrape my fingers against the earth. The skin on them is black, but not charred, black as if dipped in the ashes of Lent. Even my clothes are intact. I pull my red hoodie over my forehead.

I dip my hands in the river and scrub the soot off of them. It diffuses into a twist of fading black in the clear water and washes downstream. My complexion has returned to its usual brown. I take my shoes off and wash my feet.

When I'm done, I sit with my knees pulled against my chest and rock myself. There's no other sound here but the murmur of the water—no sing-song of birds, no rusty *rick-rick-rick* of crickets, no scuttling of critters. Even the leaves rustle in silence, swished by noiseless breezes. There's no smell except for the heaviness of humidity.

I stay like this for a while, pondering about the flames. The salt and the flames. The fire should have cooked my bones, seared my flesh, melted my eyes. Yet here I am, head throbbing horribly, but alive and unharmed. Am I dead? Is this the afterlife—am I in Limbo?

I've read about those drawn-out moments before death. A dying dream. I'm not sure what's happening, but whatever this is, I'm not scared.

I put on my shoes and stretch my legs. I get up and I walk along the side of the stream. As I struggle past the interlaced bushes, they claw and snag at my hoodie. I bat them away and continue along my path. As I encounter another heap of brambles, I decide it's easier to just walk in the middle of the stream.

I continue walking until I come to a path where the stream joins a brook. The brook flows down a rough stairway of stones, forming shallow pools along each step. In one of the pools is a starfish-shaped rock with a chorus of frogs resting atop it, one perched on each edge. Their eyes follow me as I wade past them. One of them slurps at the fog.

These frogs are the only animals I've seen in this forest so far. The absence of insects disturbs me. I've been taking insects for granted my entire life—who could've guessed? I go to a nearby bush and I rummage through it, looking for an ant, a dragonfly, a maggot, anything. But my effort is in vain.

All of a sudden, I feel dreadfully alone. I'm no stranger to being alone. There have been many times when I was a child, where a snap or a howl outside would jolt me awake and I'd have nobody to turn to. Upstairs has always been so lonely. Being here in the

forest evokes my worst memories as a child—being cold and isolated in the my upstairs domain. Going to sleep was terrifying. There had been times where I kept a cricket bat beside my bedhead, because no way Aunt Judi was coming upstairs to beat the demons away whenever they decided to pounce from the shadows.

I stop to look at the path ahead of me. I can't see far, because of the fog. Water leads to life. If I follow this stream far enough, I'm sure to find something. A guppy in the stream, a termite in a log. Give me anything. The frogs keep their gaze fixed on me, turning their bodies in unison as I continue down the stream.

The silence begins to bother me, so I hum *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* just so I could chuckle at how strangely suitable it feels. I grab the edge of a fallen branch and pull it loose. I use it as a walking stick to keep my balance. The water gets deeper the farther I get. The jagged rocks nearly cut my heel. I shift towards the edge of the stream, where it makes an elbow-bend.

I sit on a rock and hug my knees. I close my eyes and calm my breathing to dispel the growing ache in my temples. I get on my knees and splash my face with water. The fog still surrounds me, clouding the path behind me and the way forward.

Suddenly, I hear a shout.

I'm not sure if it's a scream—more like a loud grunt. A girl's.

The grunt echoes again from my left, way into the bushes. The shrubbery itself seems to curve itself into an arch, branches and brambles twisting and curling in semi-circles. A portal of twigs. I hunch my body, creeping through the pathway. It gets hotter and hotter the deeper I go.

The fog gets so thick that I can't see, but I keep inching forward.

I hear a sound beneath my shoe—*crack!*

The dirt beneath me crumbles and I slip.

A sphere of pain radiates from my body as I spin, and spin, and spin.

When it's over, I look up. I've tumbled down a hill. With my wrist, I wipe a bead of blood from my brow.

I groan as I make an attempt to stand. I nearly slip on some foliage and fall again. I stretch my arms and legs. No broken bones—thank God, I can't imagine being stuck down here with a fractured kneecap.

The air down here is hot—it feels like an oven. I look back at the slope to see if there's any way of getting back up, but it's too steep, too craggy. I'd just fall again and break something. I can't risk it.

The soil is hard and fissured, covered in carpets of brown foliage. The fog is stringy at the top branches of the trees. Tiny shards of light slick through here, forming a series of pale yellow javelins thrust into the ground. The trees down here are dying. Black ash is

pasted on the barks. Some of them are greying skeletons. Wooden hands with gnarled fingers.

Some of the fingers seem to point me to a trail. There, the branches again have curled into another progression of arches. It's probably leading me to another tumble, so I head in the opposite direction instead. The more I stray from the arches, the hotter it gets. I start sweating like crazy.

I glance down as I kick something from under the foliage. I stoop to take a closer look. With a trembling hand, I pick it up. It's one of the frogs, dead and wrinkled, all moisture sapped from it, its eyes reduced to pencil dots. I lay it back down. I look ahead—there's more of them. A necropolis of rotting frogs.

Taking slow steps backwards, I take a deep breath to keep myself from gagging. I walk faster and faster as I head back for the arches. When I get there, I peer down the passage. The fog wanes past this point and dissolves into darkness—a black hole.

I take a deep breath and I push my way through the darkness. I let it suck me right in.

The arches get smaller and narrower. They remind me of a long ribcage. Am I crawling through the ribs of a giant serpent? I hunch more and more, making my body smaller and smaller to squeeze through. The bony arches get so small that I must lie on my belly and crawl through. What if there's no end? Or worse, what

if it leads to nothing—a mouse hole that I can't fit through?

But then I see the end ahead. There's a figure lying in a glade, among the foliage and mud. I can only see its silhouette but I can tell it's a woman. She is on her side, curled into a fetal position. Her long hair, speckled with chips of dead leaves, hides her face.

I hurry through the arches and to the glade. The fog is thick again here, along with the lancets of light pelting towards the ground. The trees here have leaves. The grass is thick and cool. When I approach the woman, she turns to me with a dizzy gaze. I stoop to get a closer look. She's just a girl—she looks my age.

"Are you okay?" I ask her.

She rests her hand on my wrist. "I was walking—on the street, I was walking." She's hyperventilating. She shakes her head and takes a moment to calm herself down. "I was walking. Then I blacked out."

"You fainted?"

"Someone hit me." At the same time, the trees stir and a twig snaps. My heartbeat ramps up. "He's still here," she adds.

Another twig snaps, and the girl jumps in fear. Her plea comes out in a whisper, "Whoever you are, you have to help me. He's coming to get me."

I grab her arm and pull her up. "You know the way out of here?"

“I-I’m not sure.”

A low growl echoes through the glade again. It’s coming from the bushes. I pick up a stone and clutch it tightly, my arm shuddering until it goes numb.

The girl musters up the strength to get up, and huddles against me. We’re about the same height. She whispers, “I think I know who it is.”

Putting a name to a monster is essential at times, I believe. If a word can be found that a monster answers to, it somehow makes it less scary.

A figure darts out of the bushes and scuttles behind a tree. Then a rock, the size of a cricket ball, comes flying towards us.

I duck and pull the girl down with me.

The rock smashes against a tree behind us.

I drop the stone in my hand and bolt through the bushes on the opposite side.

The girl tags behind me. We come to a descent and I can see the ground below. It’s just a short drop. I tug at a dead branch and break it free before I turn to check on the girl. She holds onto my shoulder.

I leap down first, and I reach my hand up to pull her down. The ground here is soft. We crouch behind a shrub and stay there.

“Why is this man after you?” I ask. “Why would he attack you?”

I hear her swallow. “That’s what men do when you lie to them.”

“A boyfriend?”

She sighs. “One of them.”

I hold back on asking her if she’s sure. Then I turn to her and freeze for a few seconds. I grab her shoulders and look at her face, the light fog wafting around it. I nudge her towards the light.

It’s *her*. I recognize her now.

It’s my mother—it’s Maria Sukhu, seventeen years old. I don’t even need to ask. It’s her. It’s her before she had me, before she even thought she’d have me. I’ve been thrust back to this moment, this turning point in her life.

*Craaaaack!*

Something falls behind us. A branch snaps at the same time. The fog moves over the light and the area goes dark.

Maria pulls me away as a large blade swings before me, cutting a swift arc through the fog.

We both fall—her, and then me.

The figure stands over us. He’s not much bigger than us. I can’t see his face, but I can hear his hissing breaths—hungrily gulping for air. He smells like burnt rubber. He hoists a giant cutlass above his head.

We roll out of the way before he brings it down.

It lets out a loud clang as it scrapes against a stone, emitting a bright spark.

He lifts the cutlass again.

We scramble to our feet and start running. I turn around to make sure Maria is with me. We come to another drop. I grate my heels against the dirt, driving some loose pebbles down the plunge.

I listen out. Water—I hear water. I scan the area and spot a small waterfall, hiding behind a thick sputter of leaves and shade. The waterfall pours into the pool from the opposite side. I look down. Rocks and water below. Pointy rocks—the earth’s teeth. It’s waiting for us, jaws open.

I look around. The ground has tapered into a dead end. There’s nothing left to do but wait. I can already hear it—the echoes of the heavy blade scraping against bark and rock as it approaches us. I still have the dead branch. I keep a firm grip on it.

Maria begins to cry.

I tiptoe through the fog. I keep on sharp lookout for the man. He’s here. I hear him. He’s shuffling through the leaves. I hear him panting. Maria fights to stop her sobbing.

For some reason, Uncle Rafael’s story slides into mind. The one about the hunter and the dog. Once in a while, I picture the dog—wagging its tail cheerfully, eager to greet its master, mouth smeared with blood.

And the hunter finding his child, safe under the overturned cradle. And lying beside the child, the dead wolf. I recall Uncle Rafael's words, "Things look bad sometimes, but you just have to be patient with the situation."

I was satisfied with the story until I'd come across the actual fable. I found out that Uncle Rafael had omitted a crucial detail: the hunter had killed the dog before he discovered his child. The hunter was filled with remorse, hearing the dog's dying yelp as he shovelled the dirt. He heard these yelps for the rest of his life.

I locked myself in the toilet that day and cried—one of the very few times I've cried for a story. Whatever hadn't hit me on the day of his death hit me then. I felt truly alone that day. I regretted my impatience with him, every mean gesture. I sometimes imagine how differently things would have been if he hadn't skidded off the road that day. If it hadn't rained that day, if the gravel hadn't been spilled, if I hadn't ordered the pizza, if the delivery boy wasn't sick, if his replacement wasn't late.

Things would have turned out so differently. The difference between life and death depends on so much. The difference between one minute earlier and one minute later. The difference between a clear road and some loose gravel. The difference between staying in

bed and getting up to take on the day. The difference in a wrong sentence, a wrong tone, a wrong step.

One moment can change a life—it can alter a string of lives.

I've been put here because I am the difference. I determine the fate of my mother's life, and my own. This moment has been tailored for me—by whatever force or fantasy. I realize that if I save my mother from this man, it'll be like I was never born.

I would've saved her from her attacker, and from bearing me.

I glance to my side and glimpse her. She stands still, her ankles pressed together. Fear pulses in her eyes as she peers forward through the fog. I wonder if this day still haunts her. When she left Trinidad, she didn't do it to abandon me—she left to escape this terror in the forest. To get as far away as possible from this moment. If I hadn't showed up, the beast would've lapped her up like raw meat. She ran all the way to Newfoundland and found Mr. Walsh to protect her from the shadows. I wonder if she still has nightmares about this day. I wonder if they wake her up and she screams out at night.

The man steps out from the fog, but he doesn't approach us. He stands still, observing us. He maintains a tight grip on the cutlass. Maria takes a slow step backwards.

*The Joyful Ashes*

“What’s he doing?” Her voice husky with fright.  
I lift the stick in the air and remind myself: If I save  
my mother, I would cease to exist.  
I understand now. We share more than blood.  
*Folie à deux.*

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **BROKEN**

I charge at the man as he draws his cutlass. He keeps focused on Maria. I roll, dodging his swing, and whack him in his ankle with the stick. He stumbles, but he doesn't make a sound.

He positions himself to tackle me. I skid backwards to the cliff.

He thrusts towards me again.

And I dodge.

He loses his footing. I lash the back of his knee with the stick. He turns to me but I still can't see his face. And he falls. The clanking of his cutlass echoes up as it hits the rocks below.

Maria puts her palm to her mouth. She slowly steps towards the cliff and peers down, her back straight and rigid. "Is he dead?" I ask her.

"I can't see."

I approach the cliff and peer down. The fog drifts over the waterfall, bubbling slowly over the water like

steam from a hot broth, or vapours from a witch's cauldron.

If he's dead, how am I still here? This isn't how it works? Am I fated to exist outside of my own birth? Am I to spend the rest of my days wandering this forest?

My gaze shifts to Maria, who is still struggling to catch her breath. A patch of mud smears her jaw and a speckled bloody graze glistens over her cheekbone, made even more visible by her emerging pallor. "I dunno who you are," she says, glancing up at the canopy, "but—"

And she collapses.

"*Help, get it off!*" she screams as she shakes her ankle.

With a quick lunge, my hand shoots towards hers.

I can't see what's grabbing her—I keep looking, I can't see it! I've lost my mother once—I can't stand to lose her twice.

Her feet dangles over the precipice. I try to pull her up. My fingers latch tightly onto her like hawk talons. Her fingers tremble as she loses her grip. "Don't let go," I whisper in strain.

Her scream bounces off the trees.

And she falls.

Her expression warps, numbed by fright and confusion. Her mouth hangs open and her scream never

stops. I cry out to her. Her big misted eyes don't leave mine as she falls and disappears into the fog.

A splash echoes up.

I scurry along the rim of the cliff, searching for a path—any path, a rocky ladder, a chain of boughs I can use as rungs, anything.

I come to a narrow snaking decline, knitted with wet stone. The spray of the waterfall hits my face. I slip on some moss and my stomach instantly goes sour. I grab onto a bramble. Its thorns rip right down my palm, but I save myself from falling.

I glide down the path and leap into the plunge pool.

Maria's body appears as a depthless shadow, floating face-down over a pincer-sharp crag. Her hair bobs like a shadowy tangle of seaweed.

I swim to her and wrap my arms around her torso.

The water beats against my face. Some jets into my lungs and I struggle to breathe.

I pull her towards the edge of the pool, and lay her down against its pebbled lip. Her body is pale and limp. I pump my palms against her chest. I try to give her CPR, but I'm not sure if I'm doing it right.

Frustrated, I hit her chest. "Wake up!" I yell. Her mouth is half-open. I look out for something, anything, a fluttering eyelid, a quivering lip. "Wake up!" I hit her

again. “Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!” I’m beating her between the screams.

But she’s dead. I slump against her body, my cheek against her cold belly. The waterfall now raging in the background, the mist spraying on us. I’ve ensured my mother’s death, and I’m still here when I shouldn’t even exist now.

A frog hops out from the pool. As it puffs its throat, its skin flickers, secreting a faint glucose smell. At the same time, I hear a whisper. The tree’s whisper, but it’s broken up, like interference from a radio.

*“ . . . she . . . not . . . ”*

Between each pause, I hear the clinking bottles.

*“ . . . hear . . . follow . . . ”*

Suddenly, the frog hops through the bushes. The shrubs wiggle as if beckoning me to follow it. I get up, taking Maria’s limp body by the shoulders and dragging it away from the waterfall. As I set the body down near a rock, I turn to see the frog still waiting for me.

My clothes are cold and damp, heavy against my body. They weigh me down with each step. I follow the frog until I come to a coppice with a ring of dead trees. Their antler-shaped branches cast a line of shadows against the floor—each one a horned devil.

They move—the shadows sway.

And a branch cracks and falls.

There's something in the trees. I squint to make it out but the fog is too thick.

*“ . . . behind. . . ”*

I stand still, trying to shake off the sudden dizziness. The shadow leaps from one tree to another.

Another branch cracks.

I hurry back in the direction of the waterfall. My wet clothes paste against my skin. I cut my elbow on a splinter of bark. I can see the waterfall up ahead, along with the rock I'd lain the body against.

But the body isn't there now.

The fall rumbles, mist blowing against my back like sharp gravel. I crouch behind a rock pedestal, keeping my feet firm against the edge of the stony floor below me. I hear the whisper again:

*“ . . . follow . . . wants . . . ”*

The bushes and the fronds enclose me. They are sooty black behind the fog. I can hear footsteps behind them. Slow and intermittent footsteps. Whatever it is, it's looking for me.

The waterfall whips me with water as I poke my head out from behind the pedestal.

The bushes rustle and a figure emerges through them. But I can't make it out. It's not the man from before. It hobbles through the fog, hands empty, fingers splayed.

It's Maria—she's alive.

I leap out from behind the pedestal and run to her. She throws her arms around me.

*“ . . . don't . . . ”*

I close my eyes and bury my face against the crook of her shoulder. “I thought you were dead.” My voice trembles.

She puts her palms on my cheeks, angling my eyes up to hers. She says, “I remember how to get outta here. We have to hurry.”

I nod. She grabs my hand and we head back to the bushes. They rustle and a trilling noise erupts from it.

I don't see him until after he thrusts the cutlass right through Maria's chest. The bloody blade bursts through the centre of her back, inches away from my belly.

Even up close, I can't see the man's features. Just his big glowing eyes. He twists the blade and yanks it back out. A plume of blood sprays from Maria's chest. She's silent during the entire ordeal, and so is the man.

The whisper again:

*“ . . . don't follow . . . ”*

But the clinking bottles block out the rest.

Maria falls to her knees, gasping for breath. She turns to me, her eyes widening with dread.

The bottles get louder.

She staggers to her feet. The man steps back and gets ready to swing the cutlass at her. I reach down and

pick up a rock as big as my fist. I bring it down on his skull in a brutal arc.

He doesn't yell—doesn't groan—doesn't scream in pain. He just drops his blade and collapses. His nails scrape against the dirt as he tries to slip between a shrub.

Maria points to a large rock lain against a tree, almost as big as my head. I lift the rock over my head.

*“ . . . NO! . . . ”*

I breathe heavily. My blood surges. My hot eyes begin to water. And I slam the rock against the man's head.

*“ . . . STOP! . . . ”*

Maria struggles to get up. She wheezes, “We have to go.” She clutches her wound, a cloud of blood blooming behind it. She grabs my wrist with her other hand and leads me back to the antler-shaped trees. I keep asking her if she's all right, but she just ignores me.

We make it past the coppice and emerge into a gloomy tract where the fog is beginning to thin. I struggle to keep up with her. The bottles get louder and louder. A small pond on my right is teeming with frogs. We continue past the pond and come to a dead-end, a tall stretch of rock that extends beyond the trees.

Maria approaches it and shifts some bushes and branches out of the way, revealing an entrance I can't

believe I hadn't noticed. "Through here," she says, and walks in before I could say anything. The darkness engulfs her just three steps in.

I linger for a moment, observing the trail of blood she has left behind her. Blinks of red against the dirt.

As soon as I step inside, my body is overcome with dread. My skin goes cold. I can't see anything. I can't even see my hands. The sound of the bottles echo. Clinking, clinking, clinking. With each step, the clinking is sharper, heavier.

I can see light up ahead. Fire, like a torch. As I get closer, I see there's more than one.

I pick up the pace until they all come into view.

Five torches against a dead-end wall, burning from scraps of cloth. There's nowhere to go. The tunnel ends here, in this chamber.

Glass bottles dangle from knotted strings.

They're all around me. Dozens of beer, soda, wine bottles. Curtains of bottles with the labels torn off.

They sway slowly, jolting and jouncing each other, clinking, clinking, clinking.

I can't see what they're tied to. The strings extend upwards into darkness.

There's a figure sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bottles, slouching forward.

It's Maria. Her hair is dripping wet and hanging over her face. "What are you doing?" I ask her.

A frog totters out of her hair, its webbed foot clinging in desperation to one of her jet black tresses. Her mouth slowly widens into a grin. Her hand shoots up to the frog and she brings it to her mouth, and chomps half its body off. She laughs—a maniacal screech as blood and guts drip from her lips.

The torches flare up as her laughter fills the room.

I step back slowly. As she sits up, I realize that the blood on her chest has disappeared. Her wound is gone. Was it even there?

“You’s nothin’ but a stain,” she says, her voice growing deeper. “No wonder your ma leave you cryin’. You’s a stain. A stain on your ma’s life, a stain on the life of others.”

“Who are you?”

“What’s y’point of existin’, girl, other than to disappoint. To make others want to wash themselves clean of you? You’s nothin’ but a pile of unclaimed flesh!”

“No, I’m not.” My voice trembles.

“Y’might say that, but you already know this. I en’t need to tell you nothin’. Y’puttin’ up with it y’whole life.”

“It’s not my fault!”

“Why don’t she want you?”

“I don’t know!”

"Tell me why she leave she home here. Maybe if y'did cry less when you was small. Or if y'never use to soil y'self so much. Maybe if y'did come out with fairer skin or prettier eyes. Maybe, maybe then y'damn well wouldn't be here. In some ways, you bein' in the position you in now is y'own doing."

"No!"

"Loveliest thing 'bout you is that despite all this, y'gon' keep lovin' that cowardly mother of yours."

"Stop it!"

"Yes, this's so lovely, lovely, lovely. Love she even when she love that new baby of hers. Love she when she put it mouth 'gainst her breast. She never wanted to breastfeed you. Had to do it by force. Had to do it just to please others."

I clamp my palms over my ears.

But I can still hear her. "But y'know all of this already. Why you freakin' out? This en't no secret. People can't love somebody who broken. They could only feel sorry for them and wonder if anybody out there could love such poor things. Truth is, they can't wait to get away from them. Y'could save she from death, she still never gon' want you!"

"You don't know that!"

"Believe me, I been watchin'. Watchin' closer than anybody else. I know everything. I know she used to

leave you rollin' round in y'own filth for hours on end,  
leave you cryin', wishin' you was a bad dream."

Tears stream down my cheeks. I feel an enormous heat within me. "Why are you doing this?" I ask.

"Doing? I en't doing nothin' —."

"*What* are you?"

"I en't have to do nothin' —"

"Tell me *what* you are!"

"Nothin' at all, at all, at all —"

I lunge at her and grab her shoulders. "*Answer me!*"

She stops smiling, and between her trembling lips emerges, "I love you." Then she goes limp. All expression in her face wanes and she falls to her side, hitting her temple against the ground.

The torches blow out, leaving me in darkness.

I can still hear the bottles clinking, feeling them brushing against my shoulders.

The torches light up again. Maria is gone.

The image of my mother emerges from the darkness. She's old this time, just as she was when she appeared before me under the bridge. I recall the tree's whisper:

*"It does it this way so it could feed . . . So it could eat the emotions raw. . ."*

Whatever this thing is, it is nourishing itself with my pain. A demon that feeds on misery and sorrow. It has been able to infiltrate my thoughts and memories

and draw them out as meals. It looks at me and licks its lips. I'm not scared now — this isn't my mother. This is a only warped projection of her. She isn't real.

"Sue." My mother's voice trickles out from her mouth. "Sue, I miss you. Come live with me. I miss you, dumpling."

She creeps towards me, stepping over puddles of water, putting out her arms to hug me. I shove her away, pushing her to the ground.

Before she falls, she lunges on me and curls her fingers around my neck.

I gag, trying to fight her off. The face on her skin begins to sag and wrinkle. The torches in the background flare up, bright like amber floodlights. The demon's face looks like a black hole now. She pins me down, pressing down on my chest with her knee.

I grab her collar and pull her down and headbutt her — my forehead knocking her straight off of me. The blow leaves a small gash over my eyebrow. Her dress folds over her leg, revealing a large white hoof. It's the same demon that posed as Aunt Judi. All so it could eat, and eat, and fill the forest up with dung strained from shattered dreams.

The torches go dim. I race to the edge of the room before it blacks out again. I grope the walls for the exit, but it has vanished. The room has been sealed. I'm

trapped here. The demon calls out to me, “Now I can eat, and eat, and swallow it all up!”

I bang my fists against the wall, still searching for the exit. I hear a sound from behind the rock—a sharp, grating sound.

“Food for years!”

It’s blades scraping against stone. Cutlasses. The whisper echoes in my head again:

“. . . hear . . . voice . . .”

“I gon’ eat til I foul myself up!”

“. . . voice . . . break bottle . . .”

The bottles. They’re blocking the voice from coming through. That’s what the bottles are for.

I grab one of the bottles and yank it from its string, and smash it against the wall. As I do, a woman’s scream escapes. I can barely make out the words: “*Please! Put it down!*”

Then followed by, “*C’mere, woman!*”

“Don’t touch my bottles!” the hoof-woman grunts.

I snatch another bottle and pelt it across the room, releasing reverberations of a child wailing. “*They make me do it!*” followed by three sharp cracks. Leather hitting skin.

The third bottle I smash stops me in tracks. Sobbing spills out—it’s my voice. I remember it. For some reason, it’s clear to me. I was ten. I’d worn a watch my mother had sent me. A girl in class then said to me,

“She obviously don’t love you if she sending you cheap brands like that.” It hurt me badly, and I spent the entire lunch period crying in the girls’ bathroom.

The hoof-woman shouts, “*Nooo! That one wasn’t ready to open! It was still fermentin’!*”

I break another bottle and it sparks and explodes in a crown of smoke. Two figures emerge from the haze, dressed in black, standing over a closed casket. A mother and child, both sobbing soundlessly. The torches, suddenly dimming and quiet, reflect off the coffin’s polished exterior.

I recognize the scene immediately. Uncle Rafael’s funeral. I drift towards the coffin. I have no control over it. I half-expect the two figures to turn to me, but they don’t. They remain unmoving, freeze-frame.

When I get close enough to them, like an optical illusion, they fade into the darkness as the torches extinguish again.

Then I feel a cold sting on my nose. Then another, and another. Droplets from the darkness above. The ceiling has begun to leak. It drips on my forehead, drips on the floor, drips into the bottles. So much that it begins to feel like a drizzle.

Then there’s a loud *crash!*

I am suddenly blinded as the room is illuminated again. It’s not the torches this time, but a pair of headlights blaring from the front of a pile of crumpled met-

al, halfway welded into the ground. A copper-brown Datsun, flipped onto a carpet of shattered glass, expelling smoke from its belly. Uncle Rafael's Datsun.

"Stop it!" I scream out.

*". . . More, more, break more ! . . ."*

I stifled my sobs, but my body was still shaking. I could barely see—my eyes were hot and briny.

I reach out for another bottle.

At the same time, the hoof-woman leaps towards me.

I bring the bottle down—*crack!*—right down on her head, knocking her down.

*"Make it stop! Make it stop! Lord, make it stop!"* The voice bursts out of the broken bottle. The echoes of an old man's pained yells bouncing around the walls of an empty house.

The hoof-woman scrambles to get back up. Before she could, I go to smash another bottle on her head.

I miss and the bottle flies out of my hand and hits the wall. Pouring out from the broken glass are gasps—laboured breathing—impatient tongue clicking.

It's me.

It's me from last night, the living room, computer screen blaring in the dark, staring at the remnants of my mother's online persona. My emotions, freshly squeezed and strained.

Suddenly, the wall behind me bursts open.

Two shadowy figures with glowing eyes glare at me—one tall and hunchback, the other short and meagre. They're both armed with rusty cutlasses. They shove me out of the way. In the midst of the commotion, I hear the whisper:

*“ . . . Here to help . . . ”*

The hoof-woman's squeals jab at my ears. The tall figure slithers behind her, lacing its arms around her chest. The hunchback one then slowly slides its blade into her chest, like a coin into a slot. She arches her neck and bellows out a gargled shriek as the blade sinks deeper and deeper.

The torches go out behind her, but the light from the hole fills the room now.

*“ . . . She can't die. You need to run . . . ”*

I bolt towards the light and race through the forest.

The fog has disappeared and the path is clear, but dark. The golden tint on the trees, the rocks, the foliage has dissolved and melted into the depthless dusk. The blank, starless sky above seems to hover just above the treetops. The trees look like marionettes dangling from the darkness, just like the bottles had been.

I don't look back as I walk. I try not to get tangled between the bushes and the vines. In the stillness, the snaps and crunches of my shoes against the twigs and leaves are like long cracks of thunder. Any movement

from the bushes, any sound from behind the sagging shadows jolts me—jolts my muscles.

I look around and I can see their eyes—their big, glowing eyes. The shadow people with the cutlasses and feet twisting backwards. When they notice me watching them, they make their presence known, making soft clacking sounds in the wind and scraping their blades against the barks. They don't budge from their shaded nooks.

There are dozens of them.

They won't hurt me, the voice said. I have to believe it. I have to believe it so I don't go crazy making my way through these dark woods. They turn their eyes on the trail, lighting a path for me.

I follow the trail until I return to the waterfall.

There, they hang from the branches and light the narrow slope back up to the cliff. Before I continue, I approach one of them that's perched on the rock pedestal. This one is small—a child, a little girl. Even in the light, her entire body is seared black. Her facial features are barely recognizable, frozen in a squinted look of sadness, as if she were in the middle of crying, as if she were wearing a tragic mask.

"What are you?" I ask her.

She doesn't respond. All she does is bow her head and point her cutlass to the top of the cliff.

*The Joyful Ashes*

The whisper beckons me the entire time: “. . .  
*Closer, closer . . .*”

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **ROOTS**

I make it back to the wooden arches, where I had crossed the demon in my mother's form. I stop for a moment, peering down at the spot I had found her, the oval of soil, cleared bare of the dead, crumpling leaves. It was waiting for me. It always waits for me—waiting for the hours I do nothing but feel sorry for myself, waiting for my next moment of failure and defeat. It has been doing this my entire life. It has been doing this to everyone in La Baliza, it seems.

It will live forever because misery is eternal. But my own misery doesn't need to be. I know that now. I have to learn to let go. I cannot fill myself with regret anymore.

I crawl through the arches, careful to avoid the brambles flanking them. When I make it to the other side, the heat sweeps over me immediately. Reefs of steam waft through the air. I continue down the path that leads to the burial ground of frogs. They lay scat-

tered across the curled, shrivelled foliage, like goosebumps on panicking skin. All the trees here are dead and caked with paper-white lichen. They almost look leprous.

Even though I can feel the heat against my skin, against my eyes, against my feet, it doesn't burn me.

Wispy ribbons of smoke leak from the ground, the grey trails reminding me of those from recently extinguished wax candles. The wafting film of steam blurs my vision. Everything behind it is set into a disoriented, distorted wobble. Before me is just a progression of faint shapes—tall, spiny, disfigured, coloured in brown and grey, enshadowed by smoke.

However, in the far distance, I can see spots of orange—embers, like those thrown off by a welding torch. I pick up the pace, slugging along the cracking hardpan of the grassless soil. The embers fade as I approach and trip on a root.

I fall, grazing my chin. I remain there, trying to catch my breath. Then I feel a palm on my shoulder.

I look up. A tall, lanky man stands before me—not one of the shadow people. This is an actual man, or at least he appears to be one. He's dressed in a clean white flannel shirt. He appears to be in his early twenties.

His face is distorted because of the steam. “No time to lie around,” he says, grabbing my arm and hoisting me up.

That voice. It’s the same voice. The whisper. The tree’s whisper.

I stand before him now, seeing his face clearly for the first time. His wide jaw is obscured by a fuzzy beard. His hair is short and prickly. He isn’t handsome, but his smile completely renovates his appearance. His warm expression strikes me as rehearsed.

I pull my arm away. At the same time, a row of the shadow people emerge from behind him. They point their cutlasses at the man and then stick them in the ground, perhaps their way of telling me I have nothing to fear.

The steam subsides, revealing the massive tree in the background. It’s the same tree from the visions, tall, extending beyond the darkness, resting upon a gnarled buttress of roots that lay splayed out in all directions like limbs clawing for an escape.

“Sue,” the man says, smiling.

“Who are you?”

“Will you sit with me?” He releases my arm and takes a seat on one of the roots. One of the shadow people clears the foliage near the root.

I turn to the tree, hesitating. It looks more like a giant furnace, more mechanical than organic, the way its

trunk seems to swell and hum as it leaks smoke from the chinks in its bark. I turn back to the man. His lips curl as if he's amused, but it is difficult to mask the forlorn sheen in his eyes.

He scoots over and I sit beside him. "I'm going to tell you some things and I need you to listen carefully. Most of all, I need you to be patient, Sue."

I nod.

He locks eyes with me and begins, "My name is Vinod Jankie. Many years ago, I lived in La Baliza. I fell in love with a girl there. The first time I saw in her school. The first day. Her name was Anala. I knew she liked me back, but her family didn't. I was poor. I didn't have a father—that kinda thing didn't bode well back then.

"When I turned fourteen, I suddenly began getting sick. Very, very sick. Intense fevers. I think you know what I'm talking about. It feels like they're going to kill you. Skin turns red and sensitive. It's like having every inch of your flesh exposed to the sun. A constant sting.

"Well, no doctor could figure out what was causing the fevers, but they never tried too hard, because I always felt better by the end of the day. One minute, I'd feel like I'd burst in flames, and the next, I was back to normal. They couldn't offer up any explanation except some severe allergy. My poor mother thought I was dying. The woman would treat every bruise like a

bleeding artery. She'd tie a tourniquet over a graze if she could.

"Every month I ended up in the hospital. I missed so much school. Anala wondered about me. On the weekends, she used to sneak out and see me during visiting hours. I may have pretended to be sicker than I actually was when she was around. She felt sorry for me. Poor girl thought she could take care of me. It's easy to love someone who cares for you, but it's easier to love something you can care for.

"It worked, for a while, but whatever condition, whatever illness I had—it became worse. I became drawn to grains of rice, kernels of corn, beads on a curtain. I spent hours counting and counting and counting. The doctors said it was signs of obsessive-compulsive disorder, but it was so sudden. My tongue became extremely sensitive to salty foods. And I'd feel like there was a din rising up in me every time I became angry.

"But all of this wouldn't be as bad if it wasn't for the gossip. Everyone in the village said things about me and my mother. They said it must be all the drugs from the hospital. They said I needed to be sent away to the madhouse. I was already a weak person—I couldn't deal with this. Worst part is that on some days, I believed them.

“And they made Anala believe it too. They pounded the words over and over into her head until the girl was scared to death of me. Scared, because she was told to be scared. She wanted no more to do with me. She brought me to her house and told me that. And when she did, I—”

He takes a deep breath and wipes his eyes with the back of his palm. I wait for him to finish the sentence, but he doesn't. So, I say to him, “The house on Hare Trace. The one that burned down. That was you. You're Muneerah Jankie's son.”

He bows his head. “I was so angry, I didn't know what to do. But I didn't have to do anything in the end. That fire just burst out of me. I couldn't control it. I killed that entire family. Not even my mother could forgive me. She thought I was demon spawn after that.”

“Are you?”

“Everything seems to point to it.”

“How did you start getting sick? Did something possess you?”

“I wish I had that answer. I don't wonder about it much. I've been here ever since, dragging my feet, regretting everything that's happened.”

“You can't leave the tree?”

He sighs. “The doctor eventually returned to my dead body. He cut open my chest and planted a silk

cotton seed in my dead heart. That seed grew to be this tree. I've been trapped here ever since."

"But you're here. You're not trapped."

"I am the tree now. The tree and I are one, but I can project my phantom anywhere the roots grow. I cannot go beyond them. For years, I've been caged, doomed to live here until the tree dies. I've only had these fellas to keep me company." He points to the shadow people.

"What are they?"

"*The forgottens*," he says. "Souls that walked and died alone. They're drawn to each other here in Ranahumo, lighting the ways for their fellow forgotten."

"Why reach out to me? Why did you possess me?"

"I can't possess anybody. I don't have that power."

"So what's happening to me? Why am I suffering what you went through?"

He pauses. "One day, a woman came up to me and told me that she can set me free. We made a deal." His voice falters coming to the end.

"How?"

"It was many, many years ago."

"Who was this woman?"

"She calls herself La Diablesse. She could change her form—man, woman, child. But I've seen her true form. She's a tall, skinny woman with a hoof for a foot."

"You made a deal with this thing?"

"I had no choice." He gets up and walks over to the tree, putting his palm on its bark. "You must understand."

"What was the deal?"

"You have to be patient with—"

"*What* was the deal?"

"She'd lure a girl from La Baliza. She'd bring her to me and I would... make her bear my child."

"I don't understand."

"The first girl to fall for it, her name was Maria Sukhu."

"*What?*" I spring up.

He turns to me. "Sue, you are my daughter."

*Folie à deux.*

I press my quivering lips together. The roots shudder against my heels, stirring in the soil. Before I could say anything, he tells me, "I want you to understand something. Demons aren't born—they're made. They're moulded from pain and suffering. You're only born with the risk of becoming one."

"But I'm... not a demon," I stammer.

"It's the only way I could communicate with you like I did, Sue."

"But my father died. He died before I was born."

He rests his forehead against the tree. "I know this is confusing."

“My father died —”

“He did, yes, years before you were born. Right here in Ranahumo. He was stabbed by the doctor and his brother. But not even death could set him free.”

I swallow hard. “How did I become a demon?”

“You should know your own pain and suffering.”

“And what about La Diabliesse?” I ask.

“What about La Diabliesse?”

“What was in it for her?”

He pauses. “What do you mean?”

“What did La Diabliesse get from all of this?”

He pauses, taking a deep breath. “Talking to La Diabliesse was a mistake.”

“Mistake?”

“She tricked me.”

“How?”

“Let’s leave it at that.”

“No. I want to know.”

He turns to me and gives me a lingering look of worry. “It was a hasty decision. I was desperate.”

“Tell me!”

“La Diabliesse knew you would grow up in suffering. She knew that life would cripple you. She knew your mother would abandon you, just as mine abandoned me.”

As he says this, a sudden snapping, snarling pain in my head weighs me down. I hadn’t even noticed I’ve

been crying. I wipe my tear-stained face with my sleeve and feel the heat build inside me.

He continues, "She picked your mother for that reason alone. Your mother wasn't strong, Sue. La Diabliesse fed off of her suffering. All of our suffering. Mine, yours, your mother's. We were her food supply."

I whimper, "I'm a demon because of you." I throw my arms up in protest. "You created me so I could suffer!"

I scream and burst into flames, illuminating the scraps and pockets of darkness between the boughs of the tree.

The shadow people raise their palms up to the spreading fire and it quickly disperses, transforming into a swarm of firefly-shaped cinders.

"Your rage will torch this entire forest if you're not careful," Vinod says. "Don't make the same mistake I made. Know that your fire is meant to only burn one thing."

Between my panting, I hiss out, "One thing?"

"Me."

"What?"

"I didn't think about what I'd done. I was desperate. Knowing your suffering made me suffer more, and La Diabliesse ate well for years. She tried to stop you from reaching me, but I had to tell you everything, and I had to tell you that I am sorry for all of it. Seeing you

now fills me with the greatest sadness. As long as I'm here, suffering, La Diabliesse will continue to feed on me. But right now, right here, we can make things right."

"Make things right? Right, *how*?"

"Burn this tree and set me free. Allow my soul to dance in the ashes, so I can be released from this world. I have suffered here for too long. The forgottens can form a dome around me. They can keep the fire from spreading to the rest of the forest. Only I will burn in your fire."

"That is why I'm here? This is the reason for my existence?"

"It was the reason for your conception, but it doesn't have to be the reason for your existence. You must go back to the people and live with them."

"You made me into what I am—and now you ask me to live a normal life with those who know that I'm a demon?"

"That can be fixed." He snaps his fingers. The tree rumbles loudly as throngs of forgottens descend from its branches, hanging and tangled together like ristras of fruit. They fall to the floor, alighting on their feet.

He continues, "The forgottens will set out what they are meant to do—make people *forget*. Forget they ever saw us. Scrape their minds clean of our voices and

faces. Nobody in La Baliza will remember anything that happened today.”

“Everyone would really forget?”

He smiles. “The few who won’t, nobody will believe.”

“What if it happens again?”

“This isn’t the first time the forgottens have done this. This is what they do and they’re good at doing it.”

The forgottens assemble in a jagged line at the edges of the roots. They march out of the forest until they only appear as black specks dotting the soil.

“They’re going to La Baliza now?” I ask.

Vinod says, “Not just La Baliza. They’re going to everyone who saw you today.” He sits on the root again. “These creatures, they’ll miss their home in my boughs once I’m gone, but they’ll find other places to live. The mountains, the rivers, the gullies.”

“You’re really asking me to go back and continue my life as if nothing happened?”

“Yes. All memory of today will be gone.”

“I’ll still remember!”

“Regardless, life will continue as normal.”

“Life is never normal for me!”

He heaves a sigh. “The people of La Baliza killed me and covered it up. They made me an outsider in my own village, my own home. Sue, you are a demon, and you will never live a normal life. You are different. You

may find people like yourself, but people will always watch you strangely, judge you based on their first impressions, try to cut you down. They will make you into an even worse demon. I told you, Sue—demons aren't born, they're made."

"Then I'll just be *made* into one, over and over."

"But there are good people out there, Sue. Seek them out and keep them close to you. As you go on, you'll see other demons. You'll see how miserable they make themselves. Demons are lonely, so they like revealing themselves to others. Sometimes for good, sometimes for bad. Most of them are stuck in a cycle of pain, revenge and regret, fixated on objects, unable to detach themselves from rooms, unable to move on with life. Please—this cannot happen to you."

Immediately, the image of the spider-lady in Zee's haunt comes to mind. I shake my head. "This is too much."

"Please, Sue."

"Why did you do this to me? Bring me into this world like this?"

"Please. You must understand. I've suffered here for so long, so many years."

"And you shouldn't suffer?" I wipe my teary eyes.

"Sue? Sue, please." His voice cracks.

"Tell me why you shouldn't suffer! You deserve to suffer for what you've done!"

He reaches his hand out to me. "Sue, you can't leave me here!" I slap him and I run away. He chases after me, but he cannot cross the roots. He cries out my name over and over until it cuts his throat.

I don't look back.

I scamper, pushing through the needles of cold, searching desperately for a way out of the forest. I come to a glade, where a swish of air eddies from above. I grab my knees and look at the sky, now uninterrupted by canopy. The sun is coming up, and I can spot the road through the brightening thicket.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **CALLING**

So much has happened since that day.

I didn't go straight home that morning. I sat under the glow of a streetlamp, near an old standpipe and washed the mud off my feet. I observed my reflection in a car window. My skin was still red, but it wasn't as bad as before. The colour now resembled the rosiness after a good workout rather than the complexion of the Devil.

The streets were empty, except for two stray dogs lapping water from a cracked bucket. I waited for the call of the keskidees and the roosters from Sat Ram's chicken shed. I absorbed any familiar sound that reached me.

A man emerged from his yard, wearing short pants and a tattered vest. It was Old Brother Bally. He mumbled to me, "Ood morny," as he took the neem twig out of his mouth and spat in the drain. Music poured out

from the house two doors down—Tantie Petra’s cassettes. I was never so happy to hear chutney music.

Life continued as normal, just as I was told. Images flashed through my mind of the forgottens hovering over these people’s beds, waiting for the flutter of their eyes, waiting to latch their gazes onto them. Turning back the clocks of their memories.

I went straight to bed and fell asleep immediately. I never felt more thankful for the weekend. I stayed in bed until late in the afternoon. Everyone left me alone that day. It was as if my existence halted during those few hours. I pulled the curtains and stayed within the confines of my room.

Once in a while, I tugged the edge of the curtain and let a ray of light in. I put my hand under it and let it form a tiny bright dot in the middle of my palm. I let it put me in a trance. That day, I felt like I had slipped outside of time. Perhaps that’s what it feels like after a revelation, like you’ve changed so much, you don’t even feel like you’re part of your own body anymore. Time distorts. Clocks tick backwards.

I didn’t think much about the day before. The day before could’ve been a month before or a year before—that’s how I remember waking up feeling.

However, as night approached, I lied awake, soaking myself in childhood memories and it began to dawn on me. Perhaps I’ve never been seen as a child. I

was always something to be pitied and avoided. I was picked last for teams. I had to be the one to try to please others, always trying to fit in. Nobody ever said I was cute or pretty. Whenever I tried to be funny, nobody ever laughed. Children at school disliked me for some reason—children I had never even spoken to.

Perhaps that's what it means to be a demon.

The word rang through my head like the solemn tolling of a bell—*demon*. I am a demon, and I do not belong in this place. Even in my hot little bedroom, I know I don't belong. I'm unclaimed flesh. Born to parents who never saw me as a child.

I was just a *thing*.

They say you can't choose your parents, but I remember hearing a woman cry out once, "You can't choose your children!" as two policemen carried her son out in handcuffs. Her own son had robbed her.

Maybe that isn't the best case to use as an example. But indeed, you can't choose your children—but you can choose to ignore their phone calls, choose not to carry them with you, choose to push them away.

That night, I heard my father call out to me, whispers cracking with despair. My name over and over in a crescendo of pain and hopelessness. I wasn't sure if I was dreaming or not. It continued for a while, but I paid it no mind.

I don't consider it betrayal. Not rebellion either. His constant callings were a reminder of the truth. I just wanted to escape and forget about what I really was.

The following day, I came off social media. I logged off everything. Zee tried to talk to me, but I ignored him. I left the house and wandered to the southern side of La Baliza. There, at the edge of a dead-end, a brush-fire danced atop a pile of old tyres. The wind carried the smoke to the squatters' settlement in the distance.

I was mesmerized by it, the way the fire whipped its swaying frills upwards with the breeze. I imagined flying with the smoke. I could curl myself into a ball of fire and soar to the Walsh residence in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. I could drift across the sky at night. They'd think I'm a comet, or a meteor. I wouldn't come down. I'd just linger in the sky, like a descended star.

I like the image. I picture it from time to time. It wouldn't do any good, though, if I could actually do something like that.

Sometimes I walk to the parlour and I receive stares from fellow villagers, as if there's a smidgen of memory left of that day. Maybe it's all in my head, but I can't look at anyone in La Baliza the same ever again. Dr. Dass and I crossed paths once on the street. He just gave me a nod and went along his merry way.

Now and then, I think back to what my father told me. Demons aren't born—they're made. Having my

demon self set in has incapacitated me in so many ways. I try to live normally but as time passed, I began to thirst for blood. I suppose that is the kind of demon I am. I could quell the craving with blood sausages and pudding. They've become my new favourite snack, but they are hard to come by. The vendors only come out at night, so any time I can sneak out, I have to make sure to get my fill.

I avoid rice. It's difficult, but I manage to do it. It's not good for me, anyway. Most people don't kick up a fuss if you turn down rice. Just one word and they understand: "Carbs." As the weeks went on, it became less and less of a problem. I just have to focus on other things in the room if someone walks in with a plate heaped with rice.

Salt burns my mouth, so my diet is now low-salt as well. My skin is also highly sensitive to it, so I have to stay away from the beach—at least, away from the water. I hate it, because I've always liked bathing in the sea. Even when I sweat, it stings a little.

A week ago, I found a bottle at my windowsill—one of the same bottles from La Diablesse's cavern. I'm still not sure how it ended up there. The string still dangled from its neck.

When I put my ear up to the bottle's mouth, I heard muffled sobbing. "Rafael. Rafael, why?" It was Aunt

Judi's voice. La Diabliesse had been sapping her heartache as well.

I knew what was inside the bottle—tensions, blame, regret. I knew it wasn't going to be easy letting it out. I spent the entire day wondering what would happen if I did. At night, I finally decided to confront Aunt Judi. I went to her room and told her, "I know she's not coming back."

She had no idea what to say. She had grown so accustomed to my hopeless naivety. I then said, "You're the closest thing to a mother I have."

She immediately became defensive. "Too late for this now."

I shook my head. "I know I pushed you away when I was little, but I was just a stupid child."

"You're still a stupid child."

I sighed. "It's not my fault."

"It is!"

I smashed the bottle on the ground. A shrill tyre screech rose from the shards. It dwindled into silence until there was a loud shatter. The lights began to flicker and the entire room began to shake. Aunt Judi collapsed, but I had my feet planted firmly to the ground.

"Sue, what did you do?" she asked, her tone soft and shaky. I didn't reply, because I wasn't sure either. I

braced myself for whatever was to come. I kept telling myself that this needed to happen.

When I spun around, I saw him—Uncle Rafael. A vision of him. He smelled heavy of perfume. He glanced at me, and then at Aunt Judi, still on the floor. Her face flushed red, her hair in sweaty tangles. For some reason, the way she locked eyes with him, I felt like this wasn't the first time she had seen this apparition. It had appeared to her many times before.

"She wants pizza, Judi," he said, pointing at me.

Aunt Judi clasped her chest, panting heavily. She looked at me, her face contorting as the agonizing memories spilled from her mind.

"It's not my fault." I addressed Aunt Judi, not the vision.

The vision spoke again, "They say the delivery boy's sick, so we have to go pick it up." The lights were still flickering.

"Rafael," she muttered, tears flowing down her face.

He turned to Aunt Judi. "I died because of her."

"Don't listen to him," I told her.

His aroma of perfume was slowly fading in the growing stink of blood from his body. His neck twisted to the side, as if it were broken, and blood began to leak down from the side of his head. "Stay with me," he whispered. "I don't want to die. Not like this."

"It's not real. It's not him," I told her. "It's a demon, and it knows what tears you apart. It knows how to hurt you!"

"He only went to get the pizza because you wouldn't shut up about it!" she cried out.

"Aunt Judi, I was a little girl. Just a little girl who wanted pizza. I didn't know what was going to happen. You don't think I miss him too?" I reached my hand out to her.

*"This child is a stain!"* the vision bellowed, its neck snapping even more.

I kept my eyes on Aunt Judi. "Would he want this?" I asked her. "Would he really want you to blame me? He would've wanted you and me and Zee to be all right. He would've wanted us to be happy, as happy as we could."

She gazed up at the flickering lights, as if in a trance. "Happy." She murmured the word slowly.

"I'm willing to forgive." My eyes began to well up. "Please. We need to move on with our lives, both of us. My mother isn't coming back. I know I'm not the best, but I need us to be good to each other. I need you to be there for me."

Then she took my hand. I pulled her up and towards me, and I held her tight. She shut her eyes tight, still snivelling.

The room shook. The closets opened and closed, opened and closed. The windows rattled. Her nails dug into my skin, and she cried out. At the same time, a vision of La Diabliesse shot into my head, screaming skyward.

We held each other until it stopped. The lights returned to normal.

I offered her my sleeve and she wiped her nose on it. "I'm sorry, Sue." She hid her face in her hands for a few moments. "Oh God, I'm sorry, Sue."

She kissed my forehead and the vision of Uncle Rafael burst into black smoke.

The next day, Aunt Judi couldn't remember anything about the vision. She found a few bottle shards under her bed and had no memory of me smashing it. I guess the forgottens took care of things in the middle of the night.

Even though she remembered nothing, she suddenly regained that yearning to spend time with me. Just like when I was a child, just like before Uncle Rafael's accident. She asked me to go to the mall. This time, I said yes.

We barely said anything to each other during the outing. It was awkward. We just walked around, aimless. But it was a start. When we sat down for lunch, I told her about my mother—how I found that she was remarried and pregnant.

Aunt Judi just nodded. For some reason, I thought she already knew. She had little to say of it. She just asked me, “How do you feel about that?”

I replied, “She looked happy.”

“How do *you* feel?”

“Still sad, but not as bad as I originally felt.”

“You don’t hate her?”

My mind cut back to the young image of my mother, lost in the forest, lying in the glade. I wonder, even now, what she really went through. She must’ve had to endure her own kind of suffering. A suffering I couldn’t know. It’s not something that I can dare to understand.

“I don’t,” I said, giving a small smile. “I have to move on.”

She raised her eyebrows, surprised by my response. “You know what they say—forgiveness is for the strong.”

Aunt Judi and I haven’t spoken much after that but I know things are different now. I know things can only get better from here.

Today, I decided to revisit Zee’s haunt after school. I didn’t go with him. I couldn’t risk it. Surely enough, in the closet was the blue silk negligee. I heard the spider-lady creeping against the ceiling, her legs tapping against the walls in the darkness above.

I wasn't scared this time, though. I knew what she was—just some demon consumed by some sense of wrath and revenge, unable to leave that cabin. A jilted lover? I don't know. Whatever her story is, she let her hatred eat her. I don't know if it's too late for her—but it made me realize that I have to keep moving forward with my life.

So I've come back to the forest. I followed the brook and shuffled down the hill. I crossed the necropolis of frogs and now, I walk towards the pulsating furnace-like tree. The tree of smoke and ash. My father spots me and rises to his feet. He had been sitting with his back against the trunk, waiting for me this entire time.

There is no need to exchange words when I approach him. He nods at me, a teary glint in his eye. The forgottens swing down from the branches and rise from the foliage. They pile on top of each other until they form a black dome over the tree.

My father closes his eyes.

Perhaps he doesn't deserve salvation. Perhaps he doesn't deserve to be spared from torment. I could leave him caged here. I could turn around and go back home. I could ignore his pleas for the rest of my life.

What my father did was inexcusable. And it might sound stupid, but I forgive him. I have to. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong, after all.

I place my palm against the bark and feel the fire build in me. As the fire rushes from my hands and curls the bark of the silk cotton tree into twisting ash, I know that mine is indeed a special fire.

He smiles as the flames engulf him and his laughter burns into joyful ashes. This is what I've been called into this world to do—to abide by my father's selfishness and set him free.

One life brought into existence to bring one out of it. One life kindled to extinguish another.

He brought me here to suffer—how else was I to become the demon that I am now? How else am I to ignite this fire from my fingers? He brokered a deal with La Diabliesse to ensure that I became a demon.

And yet, I feel pride that I can forgive him. I have no choice but to accept what I am. I am reminded of it everyday, and you know, it's not so bad. This is my calling, but it doesn't have to be my only one. If I can forgive this man, this selfish demon that brought me into this world with no place for myself, and if I can forgive my aunt for making me into a guilty outcast for ten years, then I can forgive my mother as well.

Whether or not forgiveness is deserved is irrelevant. I have to move on. If I can't forgive, I have no future. If I can't forgive, I have nothing but a past that I cannot change.