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### The Dance of Myal

The ghosts of home smell like curry. The aroma fills the house as I stir the small saucepan of chicken, and with it being almost ready, I turn down the heat on the giant pot of rice and peas. My neighbor grew the red beans in her garden, as a favor to me. It seemed only fitting that I try my mother's recipe. I even soaked the beans overnight with the ritual solemnity of reciting liturgy. This is what home is supposed to smell like: a living room with a faint hint of lemon-scented furniture polish and a dash of the aroma of moth balls emanating from the closet; meat marinating in a thick gravy; a bubbling bowl of rice and peas; and tea brewing, but not too long or else it gets bitter. The smell of my childhood home.

Sometimes I worry that I'm a broken story. That could be my title: "The Broken Story of Faren Sims." The kind where you can be reading along and you know something's not right. You can't quite put your finger on it, you just know it's not working, you lose interest, and you quit

reading. Some stories pass from parent to child, like an inter-generational game of telephone, the parents and grandparents hoping that the story will be remembered the right way by the time the great grand-children hear it. If it is remembered at all.

I once toyed with the notion of becoming a caterer. I guess I still do, late at night when I toss and turn, unable to commit to sleep, my mind racing with ideas, could-have-beens, and dread. As if one story of who I am, or was supposed to be, was overwhelmed by another. I portion out a serving of food on a jade-colored Fire King dish from a set of dishes my grandfather used to own. I was never the best at plating food, probably another reason I ought to let the dream of catering go, but this wasn't about presentation as much as it was about respect.

I back out of the patio door, careful to not let the door clatter shut and risk jarring the precariously balanced plate. The house belongs to my grandfather—we called him Pap—a two story home in our little corner of the Riverside neighborhood in Indianapolis. When Pap lost it, a slumlord owned it and nearly ran it into the ground before he skipped out on the taxes and took off to Florida. I bought it last year in a tax sale. Its façade is cracked and chipped, but the bones remain intact. The backyard opens onto a trail.

The air smells of rain-soaked logs. A wan breeze barely flutters the leaves. The trees hide the path, crowding the little used trail. A gate concealed by bushes blocks the route to the canal from the other side, not that it has ever stopped the occasional shortcut taker. The walk to the canal used to remind my mother of her home in Jamaica. She said that every morning she, her brothers, and sisters had to walk five miles to collect water from a cave for the day's use. I never envied my mother's stories.

All manner of foliage presses in until it finally relents at the clearing. A bank of exposed roots, a conspiracy of tree limbs and tall weeds, ring the canal near the concrete bridge. Brackish

water feeds the dark earth. A fraught silence freezes the air, as if I've interrupted an ancient argument between stream and earth. A large rock shaped like a raised fist juts from the water. A neighborhood group had received money to erect a statue of a long-time elementary school principal. The base is as far as they got. The River Mumma rests upon it like it's an altar in her honor. My mother, now another ancestral spirit waiting to be remembered in story and passed along, whispered of the River Mumma's impending arrival to me in a dream.

The River Mumma follows the river. By the noon day sun, their ilk are the most radiant of women, and this one is no exception. Her flawless skin is a delicate shade of mahogany. Black hair falls to the small of her back. She presses her hands against the cold stone, her body perfectly poised, waiting with a regal air as I attend her. She shifts. At her waist, her body morphs, her skin fractures like crystal petals, and the scales of her fish form glisten. She tucks the rest of her tail under her, eclipsing it from view.

She runs a gold comb through her hair. I never quite meet her eyes. Her eyes see truths.

"In days gone by, we would come and dance *myal* for a River Mumma, but you don't know about that," my mother once said to me, but the words hung in the air between us like a question. Or a test. She wanted to know, without asking directly because that was never her way, if I were born with the gift. Too? Another word that went unspoken because perhaps she also had the gift and hid it within her practice of being a nurse. *Myal* speaks of the old ways and runs even deeper than the science, *obeah*. People think of obeah and voodoo as the same thing. Close enough, I suppose, as far as outsiders need understand. But those who practice *myal* call on spirits and they dance. Lord, how they dance. Everyone joining in, both a community practice and the practice of community, bridging the spirit and the physical worlds. Bringing healing.

I dip my toes into the water, about as much of me as I trust in the canal's current condition. Abandoned and mistreated, its presence taken for granted when all it wanted to do was do good. Or at least be. In peace. Safe in its own home.

I sense eyes watching me. I'm fully aware of how prey feels being stalked. My palms sweat. My thoughts become an inchoate jumble, driven only by the impulse to run. To hide. Packing up my things and heading back to the house, I retreat to safety in the nearest cover. When I glance over my shoulder, the River Mumma has abandoned her perch.

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A man knocks at my door. A few tremulous heartbeats later, my cell phone chirps. Groceries have been dropped off. I have the delivery people text me when they arrive. The first time they knocked on the door, the sound filled me with a gnawing dread. My mind drifted off. I don't know how long I stood at the door before I moved to answer it. I didn't recognize the man on my porch. He turned and stared right at me. I ran to the far corner of the room and refused to open the door. The hollow erratic beat of the knock threatened to consume me. I left the groceries out there until someone took them that night. At night, things are always taken.

So many weeks later, that dread hasn't improved much. I sleep with the lights on. In the dark I swear I hear things moving around in the room.

Still, I've gotten better. A baseball bat cants at an angle against the door frame, like it fell asleep on a friend's shoulder, within easy reach. I steel myself. I always have my tennis shoes on now, always prepared, even sleeping with them on. I'll never not be ready again.

When I swing the door open, Kevin Paschal—known as Pass within the community, a part time drug dealer as well as would be real estate mogul—paces my porch as if he owns the place. He certainly wants to. He's made it clear that my house would make a fine addition to his

collection of properties throughout the neighborhood. He calls himself one of us, but he's no better than the slumlord who ran down our neighborhood. Pass lives on the border of the Golden Hills neighborhood which sits next to ours, but on the border nonetheless. Golden Hills represents old money, the family names of mayors and governors and executives. Kevin represents hood money.

“Nice necklace, Faren.” His half-shut eyes, as if perpetually bored, focus on my exposed cleavage. Suddenly uncomfortable with his level of scrutiny of my neck, I cradle my necklace—an eye of Horus on a gold chain—in my hand, blocking his view.

Kevin is bald, the rest of his face completely clean shaven. A lone skin tag protrudes next to his left eye. He carries his stocky build in the manner of a firefighter wrapped in a lab coat. His bearing is familiar. Not in the face, because I never look him in the face, but in his lumbering swagger, both brutish and confident.

They all move the same way. Though, I know in my head that he couldn't have been the same man behind what happened to me because the police caught that man the same week, less than a mile from Pap's house. His fingerprints and DNA matched, and he was ready to plead out without too much of a fuss, as if part of him secretly wanted to go back to prison. Kevin slips sunglasses onto his face, an irritating affect meant to hide—for those that see—that he comes off like a once bullied nerd not used to playing tough.

“What do you need, Kevin?” I can never bring myself to call him Mr. Paschal because I know how he runs his rental properties. Nor did I presume to call him Pass, as I wasn't part of his clientele's world. A pair of glasses aside, it was like recognizing Clark Kent as Superman but pretending not to notice in order to maintain the veneer of civility and avoid making things awkward.

“I wanted to see if my man installed everything,” he said.

“Q does good work if you let him.” Q was an old head around the way. The neighborhood handy man who Kevin didn’t use nearly as often as he should. “Thank you for the recommendation.”

Kevin pretends to inspect the locks, an excuse to cross my threshold. He’s the kind of person you quit inviting to cookouts. All to-go plates, cutting in line, and spreading drama wherever he went. My grandfather impressed upon me that we should never criticize our own in front of outsiders. Outsiders didn’t know us, didn’t understand us, and had no connection to us. They searched for anything to reinforce their backward beliefs. Still, Kevin’s a blight on us by any measurement. “No problem. I always liked this house.”

“Can I help you?” I lean against the edge of the door, preventing him from seeing any more of my home.

“Just wanted to see if you’d thought about what we talked about.”

“I’m not interested in selling.”

“I know this place means a lot to you and your family. I just thought that with your recent trouble, you might want to be free of the neighborhood.”

“Thank you for your concern.” I continue to hold the door open. A stinkbug buzzes in, equally unwelcome, but it takes the hint of the opened door and flies back out. “I’ll let you know.”

“Faren, I saw you by the canal.” His voice thickens, suddenly serious.

“That must’ve taken some doing.”

“There are no easy roads in life, but if you’re determined enough ...” He bends close to my ear, perhaps attempting to intimate a threat. His presence pales in comparison to my mother, so I remain unmoved.

“I handle my own business.” I pad my voice with steel, both hard and unimpressed. “I suggest you leave things be.”

Back in Jamaica, River Mummas guard each of the great rivers. Since places are sacred and have a history to be respected, they are terrible water spirits, protectors of the sources of the rivers. Some people whisper that if one was captured, the river would dry up. Few dare risk fishing near where a River Mumma might rest because the fish of that river are thought to be her children. Fewer still dared to anger her. The water whispers its secrets and guards them fiercely.

“We’ll talk soon.” He turns to leave. “Oh, by the way, someone left this on the rock.”

He hands me the River Mumma’s comb. The glint in his eye says that he’s not finished with me.

#

*There were many stories of the River Mumma in Jamaica. One time an owner of a great estate stumbled across the River Mumma. When she vanished, the owner rushed to the waters to find any trace of her. He only caught a glimpse of something bobbing just beneath the surface. It was like a table of pure gold, with intricate drawings carved onto its veneer. The inscriptions spoke to him in a language before words, stirring his heart. Its image filled him with its terrible beauty. His pulse quickened with lust, excited by the fire of the dark obsession possessing his mind. His thoughts collapsed into a singular desire: he had to claim the table as his own. When he disturbed the waves, the table sank, taking its mesmerizing beauty and story and secrets with*

*it. The only evidence he had of her presence was a gold comb. On it he vowed that the golden table would one day belong to him and him alone.*

*No one encountered a River Mumma and remained unchanged.*

#

Pap lived in Indianapolis his entire life. When he was young, the canal bridge served as a boundary. He used to catch fish from the canal before companies started dumping their wastes in it. The owners of Riverside used to live over on Harding and 28<sup>th</sup> Street, big time politicians, and businessmen. No black people crossed 28<sup>th</sup> Street back then. All my grandfather knew was that he and his family and anyone who looked like him couldn't go to Riverside Park because it sat on the other side of the canal. Signs that read "Patronage Whites Only Solicited" barred them. On several evenings, he and his family would line up along the bridge and watch the lights of the Ferris wheel go round and round. They listened to the laughter and shouts and sounds of enjoyment with a mix of expectation and envy, like the ancient Israelites unable to enter their Promised Land.

One day a year, Polk's Dairy company sponsored a "milk top" day to thank customers for collecting their milk-bottle caps. His mother collected the milk stoppers—with the face of Elsie the Cow plastered on them—washed them off and made a necklace of them for each of her children. On that blessed day, the children would rush into the park with the guarantee that one milk top meant one penny meant one ride. One day a year, they were allowed to feel equally human.

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Momma used to wash our clothes in the canal. She'd hang our clothes on a line in the backyard to dry because she had no use for dryers, except in the winter.



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*The land fell under a great drought. The workers of the land grew worried. Some met with the land owner in hopes to persuade him to make sacrifices to the River Mumma so that she would renew the land with her healing waters. The owner had little patience for their superstitious nonsense, but he withdrew from them and began to scheme. Within their plea he saw an opportunity to approach the River Mumma. He could bring workers to accompany him to confront her. With so many marshaled before her, she would have no choice but to surrender whatever treasures she guarded.*

#

I quit my job not too long after the Incident. The Incident is as close as my mind allows me to frame what happened. I can't put any more into words.

Only once the court heard his plea—ironic since he paid no attention to any of mine—did my nightmares lessen. It took months before I returned to something resembling routine, allowing me room to cling to the hope that my life might return to normal. Some part of me secretly knew that couldn't be the case. That the neighborhood took a piece of who I was. Friends advised me to never return to this place, this pain, but I had to come back.

Now I work from home. I wake up and head downstairs to fix a cup of coffee. Drinking it while checking my e-mail, that's the time I wrap my head around the work I am going to do that day. I can provide tech support from anywhere. I shuffle from kitchen back to the bedroom to get dressed and back down to the living room. Rather than remain in pajamas and tennis shoes, I get dressed so that I feel like I am going to work. This is my life. I can't help but feel like I am doing penance.

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There was an eclipse not too long ago. In Indianapolis we had 91% coverage. Most of the sun's light was blocked by the moon. The day was still bright, but the world seemed off. The remaining light was eerie and lonely and sad, like it knew it wasn't what it was supposed to be. But people put on their eclipse glasses and stared at what remained.

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My memories of my father amount to a mound under blankets on the couch or on his bed where he stayed between working double shifts. No match to the portrait of the young adventurer painted by Momma. The man who wooed her from across the globe, two distant stories finding each other. The only other image I have of my father is at family reunion picnics. He and my uncles would assemble around his car trunk where he kept a minibar. "Grown folks' Kool-Aid" they called it with a knowing wink, as if we children didn't know what they were doing. I couldn't wait until I was old enough to join in with the secret rituals and conversation of being grown.

I avoid the cabinet above the sink. I know that Vodka, Jamaican rum, gin, wine (Riesling only), and amaretto bottles line up inside it like soldiers awaiting inspection. I used to joke that they wouldn't drink themselves. When I drank, I didn't begin to feel okay, but I did feel less and that was a start. I never saw myself as being happy. Even the word "happy" was so abstract that it lost all meaning for me. "I am happy." "I could be happy." My imagination fails to figure out what happy might look like for me. So I sit and flip channels watching nothing in particular.

I'm not very good at drinking. Or being grown, I suppose.

My father passed away nearly ten years ago. For some time my mother and I moved past each other in the hallways like *duppies*—the shadows of people left behind—haunting our own spaces. We lived in the echo of memory, of hurt not dimmed by the passage of time. Momma

reminded me that stories were built on conflict and we were forged in pain. I missed the lilt of my mother's accent, even the sharp pitch of it when it was raised in the heat of anger, which usually happened when she was telling me how I was living my life wrong. I hated to agree with her. A part of me knew, even then, that her raised voice erupted from a place of wanting a better life and more opportunities for me. A vocalizing of *myal* pouches, a healing poultice filled with herbs and earth, hair, nail clippings, and fluid, maybe an article of clothing tucked within. Her death interrupted the fraught, delicate dance of mothers and daughters.

I haven't touched the bottles since I began tending to the River Mumma.

#

People sought out the River Mumma when they wanted to make a change in their lives. Only she could coax me outside. I'm here now. Tending to the Canal Mumma like a nun in a convent. The soft edges of her shape blur as if cloaked in the heat mirage of the noon day sun. Her head is big as a cooking pot; her hair a tangled mess. She hugs her shoulders and stares at the dark swirling eddies as if lost in a dream about the water. She invites me to her.

I am broken. Broken mind. Broken heart. Broken spirit. Broken self. I am tired of fighting. I am worn out by the struggle to be better. I am a pocket watch with missing gears, the pieces lined up almost correctly, but with enough absent that there is no hope of being repaired and working. Storytelling is a part of the healing process. It allows opportunities for others to speak truth into your life. To walk alongside you and break through the loneliness. To access our hearts and end the dance of disconnectedness. I just had to learn to listen. The River Mumma tells me a story.

*There was a couple. The man used to go away and leave his wife home alone. Eventually she began seeing another man. One night the husband came home unexpectedly while her lover*

*was still there. The husband knocked at the door. Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap. The woman picked up their baby and began to sing.*

“My baby’s in my hands and my husband’s in bed

Go back and come tomorrow night.”

*The husband knocked again. Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap. She sang the song again, a bit louder, but not enough to rouse their child. The man banged again. Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap. So she sang a different song.*

“What a damn foolish man you are, can’t understand,

Go back and come tomorrow night.”

*So her husband left her alone.*

Like with most of my mother’s stories, its point eludes me. The River Mumma combs my hair. I rest along the thick coil of her tail.

“Keep your stories to yourself,” I say without the heat of anger. I never feel the stories, not deep in my bones like I suspect I was meant to. I brace for the lashing that usually accompanies Momma’s roused temper. But the River Mumma just shakes her head. She speaks with certainty, every suggestion having the mettle of command to it. But she pauses—the space of considering the sum of choices made, the little decisions that made her who she is, her own collection of stories—and lowers her voice. Thick with regret, maybe even sorrow, the River Mumma tells me how, as a girl, she repeated the stories of her people, our stories, and wants to pass them down to me. The stories make us strong, tell us who we are. Storytelling is a part of the healing process. But soon the stories and songs will be lost to television and cell phones, she fears.

Without realizing, I looked into the River Mumma’s eyes.

“Faren, forgive yourself,” she whispers, her intonation and accent without region or allegiance or history. Her voice careful and without offense, the sound of grieving. Her lips pursed in a confession of silence, like she hadn’t earned the right to say certain words, or rather the word which stuck in her throat. An apology.

My tongue is no longer able to shape the words to forgive. I shift my weight and I see through her eyes. The poison I’d held onto. The cycle of screwing up relationships as if my goal was to ruin them all along. The constant disgust and anger and resentment and depression and blame collapsing me into a downward spiral of self-destruction.

Though I had forgotten most of Momma’s stories and songs, the occasional melody flits through my mind. And a bad story bleeds out.

#

*There once was a young woman in Indianapolis. Life had thrown her more than her share of curves and she wanted to start over in a familiar place. She tried to make a home for herself in the community she once knew and felt safe in. One night a knock came from her front door. When she went to answer it, a man kicked it in and waved a knife toward her. His eyes were fixed and uncaring, caught up in the myal of heroin. He slapped her before she could process what was going on. Punching, kneeling, scratching, she fought as best she could, but the man was stronger and was soon on top of her. He choked her until she barely moved. She remembered the sounds of his grunting and panting, both distant and garbled, as she stared blankly at the open door. When he finished, he cursed at her as if he did her a favor by sparing her life. In the shadow of the doorway, exposed and vulnerable, her sanctuary violated. She wondered if she would ever know wholeness again.*

*But that was not the sum of her story.*

#

The wet heat of Indiana, accompanied by swarms of mosquitoes, makes the air too thick to breathe with ease. The noon day sun claws across the sky. The sunlight barely penetrates the thick foliage, but I walk the shadow-dappled ground like I am entering an unexplored world. The currents of the creek lap against the concrete barricade with the susurrus of a seashell to the ear whispering the secrets of home. The waters, a muddy green from the thick coat of algae, splash against the embankment. The languorous stream is all seaweed and a melody of shifting sands, with insect larvae under overturned stones trapped within chrysalis of pebbles. Too few fish swim about. From here, I see everything.

Places are sacred and have a history to be respected. The neighborhood. The house. Me.

My teeth are green as the algae bloom clotting the surface of the water.

Pass leads an expedition four diesel-built brothers stalking through the trail behind him. Bound to one another as if they shared the same cell block. Pass doesn't bother to acknowledge either of us but goes straight to the water's edge. I recognize the look: we possess something he wants and are little more than means to an end.

"Can you see it?" Pass asks.

"Man, I don't..." One of the men looks about and shrugs.

"Right there. All of you reach in."

The drumbeat of *myal* fills my ears. The rhythm rises in my heart. A deep rhythm. It knits my spirit. I am. Whole. There's a splash, like a large rock falling into a deep pool.

The men, little more than cud-chewing oxen, wait for his next command. He snaps in their direction and one of them hands him some chains. Pass glares at him, but the man doesn't know what to do. Pass snatches the chains from him and begins to inspect an edge to fasten them

to while the table remains in his sight. Eyes glazed over, he messes with the water. He's beyond the pleas of his own people or his own conscience, caught up in the throes of lust. The golden table ever just out of reach. He edges closer. His foot slips from under him. Off balance, he lands on his back, against the mud-slickened rise of the embankment. He slides into the canal. His eyes widen in panic.

My hand, long and veiny, flexing knife-sharp claws, slices through the water.

As the waters swirl and churn, Pass flaps his arms, thrashing about in the water, trapped in the undertow of its current. The clattering of tangled chains joins the rising chorus of his men's terrified keening. Pass' head dips beneath the water as if something lashed around his foot and yanked him under the waves.

Pass submerges. His men freeze on the shore in panic. His flailing slows as the waters cover him. His lungs burn as the last of his air escapes them. The waters claim all who try to remove that which does not belong to them.

My eyes gleam red against the shadow of my face. My hair floats like drifting seaweed.

This is my canal.

In my mercy, I am there, wading into his pain. I wrap my arm around him, strong despite its complexion of a mottled corpse. With a swoosh, I propel us to the surface. I cast him to the shore where his people can care for him. They cart him off not daring to look back, much less meet my eyes.

#

I dip my hands in the cool water, letting the gentle current wash over them. An invisible umbilicus runs from me to my mother back to Jamaica through the drumbeat of my heart. The *duppies* of all who try to steal a piece of the community haunt the bridge, clearly seen as the

noon day sun passes overhead. I protect the collection of stories that make up the neighborhood.

Some with dark chapters. Some best left on the back of a shelf, no longer read and forgotten.

And I make room for a new story.

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