

MORGAN CHRISTIE

DISTANT WHISPERS

THE CANE STALKS USED TO WHISPER THROUGH MY WINDOW. At night, the breeze would come and the sugar cane's song would sing with it. If the breeze were a colour, I imagine it would be pink, purple, or orange like the horizon because there's never an end to the soft smells and quiet hums it would bring. I knew the smell before I knew the sound. Our house sat only yards away from the neighbour's cane field, and I would pass it walking to and from school. The scent of sugar would bounce off the air like a duppy when it first learned it could fly. It would surround me and hold me like a loose blanket. I came to know its smell well. I didn't learn of its sounds until a bad storm came through town and the wind blew the cane stalks against each other in an anger they couldn't understand. I won't forget it, small screams whipping through the field like fear was stuck quaking somewhere beneath the stalks' leaves, unsure if it was safer to stay hidden or fly free. I loved when the sounds found their way through my window. I loved that they found somewhere to go.

Now it's the rats that whisper through my window as they dig for their supper in the alleyway dumpster next to our apartment. I do not like the sound of them so much, but I prefer the sound to a visit. They don't come often, but sometimes when I hear Mama yell from the kitchen I know one has come in from the dumpster to satisfy their hunger. She carefully sprinkles dashes of rat poison along the edge of the kitchen, never too much and never too little. I think it is a small thing that makes her feel safe. Mama is very proud, and I don't think she is proud that rats sometimes come inside our home. We have been here for months now, but Papa says the apartment is just a temporary placeholder while we get settled in.

Mama and I came to Canada after Papa had been here for a year. He got a job as a FME monitor, but I don't remember exactly what that stands for. I know he checks on things that other people do not want to check on. Mama tells him it is dangerous work and being so close to such things cannot be

good for him. That is the reason they made him sign such a big life insurance policy. Papa says the job pays well, and the Canadians do not want to work around those chemicals, so he will take what he can get. Papa works long hours. He is gone when I wake up in the mornings and does not come home until after I am asleep. Some nights he is home early, and we watch the Raptors play. Mama does not like watching basketball, so she stays in the kitchen and rewarms the stew chicken or curry goat for Papa.

I do not like spicy food, and Mama doesn't so much either. She prepares our meals first before adding pepper for Papa. Sometimes I think of trying to eat spicy food like he does, so we can have something in common besides watching basketball, but I never do. Mama and I sit and eat at the table every night before Papa comes home. I like eating with Mama. We talk about our days and laugh about the new things we see here. I tell her about seeing a squirrel for the first time and how it looks like a bushy-tailed rat, which makes Mama laugh. I cannot understand why people here think a squirrel is cute and a rat is ugly, when only one thing really makes them look different. Mama says people can be funny that way, that sometimes one thing can make all the difference. Mama and I eat, laugh, and fill the apartment with joy the way we used to back home, when it was just us and we learned to make that work.

Now, when Papa gets home, all that stops. Mama mostly focuses on him, but I do not mind. I am just happy we are together again. She asks about his day as she seasons the food to his liking. The house smells of hot pepper and maybe sweet pineapple, too. It is one of Papa's favourite hot pepper seasonings, but it makes me sneeze. He will go behind Mama when he thinks I am not looking, hold her hips, and sway from side to side, even when there is never any music playing. Then Papa eats and tells us about all the dangerous chemicals and how they bubble, pop, and leave holes in his clothes. Mama says she notices them when she does the laundry. We listen to him and feel like a family again. It doesn't matter that we are in this tiny apartment with visiting rats and not cute squirrels, and it doesn't even matter that I can no longer see the horizon. It only matters that we are together.

I am the oldest student in my class at school. It is a rule here that when you come from a foreign country you must stay back a grade. Mama didn't understand because my math was so good, and so was my science and social studies. English was the problem, the counsellor said. Mama still didn't understand because we spoke English. By the end, it became clear that it was

more about words, like how we call an avocado a pear.

“Do children from Britain get held back?” Mama asked. “Cus I know they call women birds and toilets the loo.”

The counsellor didn’t respond. Mama spoke with him a little longer, but it didn’t help, as I’m still in the wrong grade.

That was the last time I was in the office until today. We played a game of King’s Court in gym class when I fell and hit my knee. I rolled up my pants, and there was not a lot of blood, but seeing any was a big thing for the other students. When the teacher told me to go to the office, I said I was okay, but she insisted, so I went. The halls were barer than I had ever seen them. I could hear the echo of my footsteps jump off the lockers and linoleum tiles that always shined too bright against the light. The blood on my knee came through my pants as I walked, but there was much more blood than this at the market back home. The meat was always fresh, and after you took your pick shallow pools of blood would sit where the body used to be. I never thought about my food being alive until I saw what it left behind.

The office is better lit than the rest of the school. The windows are cleaner, and the air is fresher. I tell the woman at the desk what happened, and she leans to the side to make sure what I’m saying is true. She pulls a box of gloves from her desk and covers her hands before peeling small medical wipes from a canister.

“Roll up your pant leg,” she says rather than asks.

It stings more than I thought it would—not the wipe but my pant leg running up the bruise—and she covers it with a bandaid and takes off her gloves before pushing a telephone in front of me.

“Call your parents, let them know what happened, and tell them you’re fine. Press 9 before you dial.”

She walks to a back room before I can tell her Mama doesn’t have a phone yet. She’s been complaining to Papa about it since we got here, and he keeps promising that he’ll get her one soon. Papa has a cell phone, though. I’ve never had to call it, but he told me to learn the number in case there was ever trouble. I dial 9 like the woman said and carefully push the numbers Papa taught me until the phone begins to ring.

On the fourth ring a woman picks up, “Hello?”

“Hello,” I say. “I’d like to speak to my Papa, please.”

The line becomes quiet. Soon, I can hear gentle rustling and shaking mumbles like loose leaves breaking from trees in what they call the fall

here.

"Hello," Papa sounds worried. "What is going on?"

"It's me, Papa," I say. "I fell in gym class, and they told me to let you know I am fine."

Papa takes a big breath then coughs away from the phone before he whispers, "You had me worried. Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yes, it was nothing. But Papa, why did someone else answer your cell phone?"

"No, this is my work phone. They have to transfer it to me," Papa explains. "I must get back. Should we keep this one from your Mama?"

The question surprises me. "Why?"

"Oh," Papa chuckles. "You know how she gets, one little bump or bruise and she will be out there asking who is responsible for hurting her baby."

"Yeah, that's true." We both giggle.

"It'll be our secret." He didn't have to say it, but I knew he winked.

Mama and I have a bunch of secrets, which aren't really secrets at all; it just feels special to call them that when we tell each other things. But I've never had a secret with Papa before, as we've never been that close. As he tells me to have a good rest of the day, I feel my chest lift and widen like beams of cassava are growing out of me. I thank Papa and want to wave, but I know he cannot see me. We hang up, and the woman who is behind the desk sends me back to gym class.

I don't see Papa that night. It is just me and Mama, as usual. She prepares our portions of the curry chicken before reaching into her spice cabinet and grabbing her hot pepper tin to add to the rest of the pot for Papa. I love the smell of curry and the way you can feel it in your mouth even before it lands on your tongue. Whenever Mama makes it, the scent swims around the house for at least a day after she is done. It stays in my skin, too. Sometimes after my bath I push my nose onto my arm, take deep whiffs, and tell Mama it's still there. She laughs and says that means I didn't scrub hard enough.

I finish my homework and reading before I go to bed. The sounds of tiny rat feet scramble below us and run through the window as I hear Papa come in from work. I think of going to hug him, but I know I should be asleep, so I just listen to them together. The walls in the apartment are thin, and even whispering from behind them can be clear. I hear Papa greet Mama, but not with a kiss, as I do not hear the puckering sound I have before. Then she

goes to warm his dinner, and he goes into the bathroom to clean up. He is through in a few minutes and coughs again, but this time harder than on the phone and more times.

“Are you feelin’ alright,” Mama asks when he sits to eat.

“Yes, dear,” he says with a mouthful of chicken and rice. “I might be coming down with a little cold.”

“Or maybe it’s them work conditions,” Mama says with a tone.

“Everything is fine. Don’t worry.”

Before, this would be the time when Mama would ask Papa about the discrepancy in his pay. She found one of Papa’s paystubs while she was doing the laundry some months ago and studied the numbers along with their bank account. I heard her and Papa talking about it in their room later that night. Though not much, his checks had been at least a few hundred dollars short of what they should have been after taxes. Mama was worried someone was taking advantage of Papa, being new to the country and all, and she told him to talk to his boss because money was too important right now for someone else to be profiting off of Papa’s back. He told her he would sort it out, but Mama kept asking for weeks until she finally stopped.

“I’m going to bed,” he says as he coughs strongly. Then he goes to their room, and the bed screams when he falls on it. All I hear now is Mama rummaging through the kitchen and packing up leftovers for Papa to take for his lunch tomorrow. Hearing Mama toss around the house with no one in her way reminds me of home, where she used to move so freely, like a steady unstoppable force.

Papa still isn’t feeling well on the weekend. He usually goes out looking for odd jobs or ways to make extra money, but now he is too sick to leave the house. Mama makes a small pot of spicy red pea soup and tells me to bring it to him on the couch, but I can tell he doesn’t want to eat it. He mostly complains of a bad stomachache—that and the cough. I want to ask why he won’t go to the doctor, but I know that he doesn’t trust them. He tells me to put the soup on the table.

“Eh,” Mama says from the kitchen. “You must eat to get your strength back.”

Papa nods. “I will. Just not yet.”

“Alright,” Mama walks up to Papa and me. “We’ll be back in a few hours, and that soup betta’ be eaten by then.”

Papa waves, and I follow Mama outside. She takes me to the library

every weekend so I can work on Canadian sayings instead of ours. I barely use them anymore. We walk the four blocks together, and when we get there I go pick out books while Mama goes to use the computer. The library is full and smells like dusty old things, but in a good way. I walk the aisles and brush my fingers against all the words from all of the people with so much to say. I wonder if they were ever told their words were wrong because they came from a different place and meant different things. I wonder if any of the people with so much to say ever had their words taken away from them too.

I pick out four books this week and walk behind Mama at the computer. She doesn't hear me, and I read what she was looking at on the screen.

"Help wanted?" I ask.

"Yes, I'm lookin' for work. I want to see how much I'm qualified to make here."

Mama didn't go to university, but she has a knack for business and anything else she sets her mind to. After she finished secondary school, she helped her Papa run his shop and take care of the money. Her Papa sold the store years later because he got an offer he couldn't refuse, and he gave Mama half the profits. She bought our house back home with that money before she married Papa.

"Oh," Mama says suddenly. "Look what came."

Mama switches to a different page on the computer and there is an email on the screen with Papa's name.

"Is this something for Papa?" I ask.

"No, it's for us," she says. "I used Papa's address as the return email so they would see the company name and take us seriously!"

"How did you get into his email?"

"Your Papa isn't too hard to figure out," she whispers.

We laugh quietly and begin reading the email. It is from the school board saying they received our request to review my test scores and have put me into the eighth grade. Mama sent many letters after our meeting with the counsellor, and it seemed they finally got tired of her bothering them. The email also said that they would be contacting the school to let them know their final decision.

"Thank you for fighting for me," I say.

She smiles, squeezes my hand, and says, "You don't have to thank me for that. In this world, it's important to neva' let anyone walk over you. No

matter what. What's right is right, and that's always worth fighting for."

Mama hugs me before we leave the library, and we stop at the convenience store on our way home to pick up some plantains for breakfast. She says we should have a treat to celebrate our good news from the school board. I hold the bag as Mama unlocks the apartment door, and I hear her scream as she goes in. I look in and see a rat as big as a squirrel standing next to Papa's bowl on the kitchen counter. Then it takes off towards the wall and disappears behind Mama's pans. Mama walks up to the counter and stares at the bowl full of uneaten soup. I look around for Papa, but he is not home. He would have come running if he'd heard Mama scream.

"This isn't right," she says, still staring at the soup. "We can't live this way."

"Maybe leave out more rat poison?" I suggest.

"I will," she says and sends me to read in my room while she sets out more sprinklings of poison for the rats. I hear a cabinet door squeak open then close shortly before she leaves and starts on the laundry. I know hours have passed because the sunlight is beginning to dim, and the room is soaked with shadow. I'm getting ready to turn on my lamp when Mama comes into my room.

"Why is there blood on your pants?" she asks.

I had forgotten all about the fall, gym class, and the secret. "I fell the other day. It was nothing." The muscles in my knee begin to tighten around the wound I can no longer see.

"This is sometin'," she lifts the pants. "Don't they have a policy to inform parents when their children get hurt? I should have known about this. I'm going to call them on Monday and . . ."

"Don't Mama," I say. "They did follow policy."

"What do you mean?"

"I called Papa and told him."

Mama crosses her arms. "Why didn't either of you tell me?"

"Because we knew you would get upset, and it was nothing," I say. "I called Papa, and the lady transferred me to him, so he couldn't talk long. We just didn't want to bother you."

Mama walks up to my bed and sits on the edge before looking at my knee and rubbing her fingers across the scab that no longer hurts.

"We don't keep secrets from each other," she says firmly. "Neva'."

I nod as she stands next to the bed and says, "You called the only num-

ber we have for him, yes?”

I nod again, and she continues after a short pause. “I will get a number soon, and if anything eva’ happens, you call me.”

She leaves the room before I can respond, and I hear her in the kitchen digging through the cabinets and getting ready to cook supper.

A week later, Papa’s cough and stomach are still bad, and Mama is still looking for work. She tells me she may have to take minimum wage, even though she has run a successful business before. Experience doesn’t outweigh education when someone comes from where we do to a country like this one. She also tells me she is thinking of taking classes at the community college, but that requires money to pay the school fees. I sit next to Mama and touch my once bruised knee to hers.

“What will you do?” I ask.

She looks down at me and wraps her arm around my shoulder before gripping it tight. “Don’t you worry,” she says. “Things have a way of sortin’ themselves out. Plus, I am goin’ to the employment agency today, and I get a good feeling about it.”

Mama sees me off to school, and my class goes to visit the Science Centre, which is even bigger than the library. There are floors and floors of experiments to watch and participate in. They even have a whisper room, where the tiniest sound echoes through the hollow space and ricochets off the walls, making it nearly impossible to know where it started. I never imagined whispers being so loud and clear. If you listen hard enough, it’s easy to make out what the quiet ones say, but these whispers—the ones you don’t have to try at all to hear—are special.

I sit by the window on the bus ride back and look out at the factories and open spaces around us. There are fields of wheat that look a little bit like cane fields, but they are not as high or lush and green. Soon, we start to approach the city and begin seeing store fronts and fancy boutiques with mannequins dressed better than our parents. We stop at a red light, and there is a restaurant right next to the bus with clean white linen covering tables on an outside patio. There are beautiful crystal glasses and waiters pouring bubbly yellow drinks into them next to plates that look as clean as the linen they are served on. I look around the patio at the people probably eating frog legs, fish eggs, and the other rich foods my classmates tell me they eat here. Then I press my nose to the window to make sure I’m seeing what I think I’m seeing. It’s Papa, sitting alone at a table and looking over a large

menu unfolded in front of him. I wave to him, but he is concentrating too hard on the menu to see me. As the bus pulls away, I notice that there is a big red handbag in front of the empty seat across from him. I know it can't be Mama's, although it looks like something she would wear. I stare harder as we drive off, and the red handbag seems to become brighter in the distance. Soon, all I can see is the bag, it's deep red colour against all the clean white of the restaurant.

We get back to school early and are dismissed as soon as we arrive. Before I head home, the woman who cleaned my knee gives me a letter and tells me it is for my parents. I read it as I walk home and find that it is about Mama's request for me to join the eighth grade. It says I need to take written and oral exams at the end of the semester, and they will reevaluate their decision. I suppose it isn't bad news, but I wouldn't call it good news either.

I get home and call for Mama, but she isn't there. I am early, and she hasn't returned yet. I leave the letter on the table and put my bag on the couch before heading to the kitchen. There is a small pot of chicken soup on the stove that I'm sure Mama is making for Papa because her spice tin is sitting next to it. I smell the soup and expect it to make me sneeze, but it doesn't, so I assume Mama must not have added the spice yet. I think of Papa at the patio restaurant, and I know he won't be hungry when he gets in, so he won't mind if I have a bit. I get a bowl and ladle out two shallow scoops. I wonder how it would taste with a small pinch of pepper, so I pick up the tin and sniff the already open top, which still does not make me sneeze. I squeeze a bit of powder between my fingers and dust it over the top the way Mama does, but she arrives before I have a chance to try it.

"What are you doin'?" She grabs the tin from my hand and looks at the bowl. "Did you eat any of this?"

I shake my head, and before I can speak she grabs hold of my hands, covers them with too much dish soap, and begins to scrub my skin harder than she ever has before. I look up, and she seems as focused on cleaning my hands as Papa was on his menu. The water is getting too hot and begins to scald my skin, but I'm afraid to say it hurts. I think of screaming—of making the loudest sound I can make—but then she stops and dries my hands as she kneels in front of me.

"Neva' touch that tin. Neva' eat from that tin. Do you understand?"

I nod, and she continues, "It'll be one of our secrets. None of this eva' leaves the kitchen. Now go read."

She stands up, and I tell her that I'm sorry. As I turn to leave, I look over my shoulder and see her covering the spice tin with its bright red top.

"I think something is wrong with the pepper, Mama." I say. "It isn't spicy."

She doesn't look at me as she responds, "It's fine."

I didn't quite understand this secret. I think about it as I open my book and turn to the last page, forgetting I was almost done. I listen to Mama start moving like an unstoppable force through the kitchen as she begins to prepare supper. I listen to her, and I think of Papa coughing in front of the big red bag at the beautiful clean table. I hear them too, the rats below my window, and for a moment I imagine their noises are the same as the cane stalks back home—not hungry or scary, just distant whispers, looking for somewhere to go.