

Prologue

The little boy's flower was made of yellow tissue paper for the petals and orange construction paper for the centre. It was cinched at the base and fastened with a green pipe cleaner for a stem. A cutout construction paper leaf was taped to the middle, giving it, he thought, a realistic appearance.

He twirled it between his fingers. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever made.

"Go show it to Mommy," Miss Katie said.

The boy pushed back on his wooden chair, which scraped against the cobblestones. He skipped out of the garden room where Miss Katie taught Art a few times a week. The boy loved it because he could see the moon high above them through the glass ceiling.

Bobbling into the hallway that stretched through the middle of the big hotel, the boy headed toward the kitchen. It was his mother's turn to help make dinner with the other ladies. His flower would undoubtedly make her happy after such hard work. He loved nothing more than making his mama smile.

Ever since they'd arrived at the resort, life had been magical, if a bit strange. In the mornings, they sat outside to greet the sun. At night, they danced in circles, holding hands, around a fire under the moon. The women dressed in bright colours and wore their hair long, tiny flowers pinned to the strands. They wove tales of gods and goddesses, mythical creatures, trees and fairies, totem animals, and spirit beings who watched over them.

In time, he would learn to see them, they assured him.

What the boy never told them was that he already could. See the spirit beings, that is, in the upstairs rooms while they had cross-legged quiet time on the floor. The see-through people always stared at him with gaunt faces and soulless eyes, whispering concerns about the creature who wouldn't let them pass. The clouds surrounding them were always dark silver or black. The boy was certain these beings were different from the ones the ladies had meant.

He was thinking about this, hoping he wouldn't run into one of them now in the hallway, when an odd smell rose into his nostrils. Slowing, he inhaled a sweet, rotten aroma, like burnt electricity that did not smell like dinner. He paused outside the kitchen door, peeking around the door frame. The women standing by the stoves, ovens, and worktables smelled it, too. They sniffed the air curiously, speaking in hushed tones.

"Is that..." they asked each other.

His mother stood at the long work table shaping bread loaves. She reached for a towel to wipe her hands clean. She looked over and saw him. "Honey, stay outside..." She and the other women hurriedly put down their utensils, abandoning their bowls.

The boy held up his flower. "I made you this."

She didn't look at it. She was trying to listen to all the women's orders at once. "Honey, Mommy said to go outside," she instructed.

The boy heard something in his mama's voice he'd never heard before, an emotion, a hiccup he couldn't name. "But--"

"Now!"

The boy staggered back, as he watched the women scatter like ants. He knew the smell was to blame for their change in niceness. His mother would never not appreciate his art.

Without warning, a blast of spitting light and heat burst from the kitchen, searing his tender skin. The boy fell to the ground, covering his face with the crook of his arm. A noise rang in his ears. The explosion's wind blew his flower right out of his hand. He snagged it, and scrambled to his feet but was knocked down again by an unseen force.

The kitchen doors slammed shut by themselves.

"Mommy!" he screamed.

On his belly, he tried to push open one of the doors when sheets of black smoke began pouring out from underneath. On the other side of the doors came the pounding of women begging to be let out. There was screaming. Coughing. The smoke burned the boy's eyes and face, so much that he had to duck his face into his shirt to protect them. He tried to push the door open again, but the metal panel on the bottom burned his fingertips.

He cried out, drew back his hand, and tried kicking the door instead. It wouldn't budge. The door shook and rattled, as fists pounded on the other side.


Suddenly, one door swung open. One of the women ran out covered head-to-toe in yellow flames that stuck to all her clothes. Half her hair had burned off her charred scalp. One hand at her own throat, the other stretched out to him, she coughed and sputtered and collapsed beside him. A single blue eye stared at nothing.

A set of strong arms scooped him up and whisked him away. Miss Katie ran with him, as she hurried to corral the other screaming kids. They fled through the lobby and out the front doors until they were a safe distance away until Miss Katie couldn't carry him anymore. She set him down to catch her breath. The children gathered, clinging and crying against her bell bottoms.

The boy watched as a monstrous fire consumed the roof. Smoke billowed out the top of the building into the evening sky, pluming toward the moon. The flames reminded him of a sea creature's tentacles wrapped around an ill-fated submarine. He watched in morbid fascination, waiting for his mother to come running out and scoop him up.

When she didn't, he hugged Miss Katie's leg and dried his tears on her pants.

She never even got to see his flower.

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