

UTTER FABRICATION

A dark, weathered wooden house with multiple windows. The house is constructed of dark, horizontal wooden planks. The roof is steep and dark. A brick chimney is visible on the left side. Several windows are visible, some with dark frames. One window in the upper right contains a skull. Another window in the middle right contains a plant. The house is set against a dark background.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF UNUSUAL
BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES

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Table of Contents

[Foreword](#)

"[Every House, A Home](#)" provided by Evan Dicken

"[Heart of the City](#)" provided by Ian M. Smith

"[The Orpheus Well](#)" provided by Dorian Graves

"[Кориолан \(Koriolan\)](#)" provided by Alexander Nachaj

[Art by Luke Spooner](#)

"[A Pocket Guide for Mistress Horne's Home for Weary Travelers](#)" provided by Gwendolyn

Kiste

"[Can't Be Locked Down](#)" provided by Alanna McFall

"[Thump House](#)" provided by M. Lopes da Silva

"[Stand not Between a Cat and his Prey](#)" provided by Christine Lucas

"[Outlier](#)" provided by Julian Dexter

[Art by Ray McCaughey](#)

"[Kingsport Asylum](#)" provided by Diana Hauer

"[Oshima](#)" provided by Nyri Bakkalian

"[The Safe House](#)" provided by Georgie Hinojosa

"[The Language of the Mud](#)" provided by Betty Rocksteady

"[The Girl Who Gives Me Sunsets](#)" provided by Ali Abbas

[Art by Scarlett O'Hairdye](#)

"[Hum](#)" provided by Audrey Mack

"[Remnants](#)" provided by Timothy Nakayama

"[Caution](#)" provided by Lyndsie Manusos

"[Visitor's Guide to the Waterfalls of Froskur National Park](#)" provided by Kathryn Yelinek

[Art by Kristen Nyht](#)

"[Sector 5](#)" provided by E. R. Zhang

"[The High Cost of Answers](#)" provided by Michael M. Jones

"[The More Things Change](#)" provided by Carolyn A. Drake

"[Memories of Farrowlee Beach](#)" provided by S. E. Casey

[About the Editors](#)

[About the Artists](#)

Remnants

An account by Tek-Kuan Chin, as provided by Timothy Nakayama

My third eye is closed. But I don't need to use it to know that there's something not quite right about the abandoned orphanage at the end of the lane.

From my vantage point in the middle of the street, I take in the orphanage in its entirety. There's not a single picture of it online, but thanks to Google Earth's Street View, I was able to get a good look at the building before driving all the way here.

The building itself is unremarkable. A two-story brick and stone affair, plain red-tiled roofing, wooden railings on the balconies of the top floor. The small plot of land it sits on is enclosed by rusty wrought-iron fencing, the spear-tipped pickets standing like flimsy, spindly black sentinels who long ago lost their battle with the encroaching thicket of trees that hem the orphanage in on all three sides save for the entrance side leading out onto the street.

I've never been to an orphanage before, but the Fairfield Girls Home looks exactly how I imagine a decommissioned orphanage built in the early 1900s would look.

But it isn't the building's architectural charms, or lack thereof, that has led me to the conclusion that there's something weird going on with this orphanage.

No.

It's because of two phone calls I made to my cousin a week ago.

~

It began when I received his message.

Just finished meeting with client. Need your help. Cleaning up property. Call me when free.

I knew what sort of "cleaning" he was after.

"Hey, where's the property?"

"What property?" he asked.

"The one you messaged me about."

"What message?"

This was only an hour after I'd received his message.

After checking his message history, he laughed and apologized, telling me about the rough day he'd been having and how he must have completely forgotten about it.

That should have been my first clue that something strange was going on. But at that point, I was merely skeptical, wondering whether he was hiding something from me. Chee Kong doesn't do rough days at work; he doesn't do forgetful either. He's the anal-retentive, workaholic, Type-A cousin who hired some hotshot interior designer guy to work on his house and office space in the CBD to make them "maximumly efficient." Chee Kong is a fish that swims in the great ocean of stress.

But I kept my silence as he told me about Fairfield Girls Home, how the Fairfield City Council had been meaning to tear it down for years but never got around to it, and how they've now hired his company to do it so that the council can reclaim the land for the construction of a local college.

Then came the interesting bit. In the file the council had given him access to, Chee Kong discovered that all five of the contractors who had previously been awarded the project dropped it soon thereafter, declaring the project unfeasible. The reason Chee Kong got in touch with me:

one of those five contractors had also noted that several of his workers refused to set foot inside the building--they claimed that the place was cursed.

"Sounds exactly like your kind of gig, Kuan," he said.

I told him I'd think about it.

It wasn't long before my intuition started kicking into overdrive. Playing a hunch, I called Chee Kong again, two hours later.

"What are you talking about? What orphanage?"

That confirmed it: something seriously weird is going on at the Fairfield Girls Home.

~

I embrace the quiet, study my surroundings.

A thick swath of trees lines the edge of the cul-de-sac, wild and ornery things packed so tightly together that it's hard to see beyond them.

The progression of houses on the orphanage's side of the street stopped three-quarters of the way in from the main road, giving way to fields of overgrown grass and thickets of trees. The houses on the other side, however, continue all the way to the end.

Catching movement out of the corner of my eye, I turn around in search of its source, and find myself looking at the house directly across from the orphanage.

Like all the other houses along the lane, it's decades old, the exterior paintwork peeling off in patches, the roof sagging in most parts, the lawn the size of a postcard.

The movement came from the people gathered behind the front window. At this distance, I can't see enough to make out their faces, but the three of them are standing in a way that makes it obvious that all three are looking at me. They probably know all their neighbors, so I imagine they're wondering what I'm doing here, in the middle of nowhere, looking at a ...

I frown. Something's wrong. Feels wrong. I'm on the proverbial train of thoughts, heading *somewhere* because trains are supposed to take people somewhere, but I can't remember which stop I'm supposed to get off at. I know I'd been thinking about *something* just a moment ago, but when I try to recall my thoughts, I get nothing. It's like someone placed a huge black blot over the last few minutes of my memory. It's a black hole in my mind, and I cannot peer through.

Without knowing why, I let my gaze fall upon the house before me. I see the three figures crowding behind the window; they're too far away for me to get a good look at them but I know they're observing me. Wondering what I'm doing here. But ... the way they're standing, they're also looking at something directly behind me.

Curious, I turn around--and see the orphanage.

What happens next is surreal and disorienting. The black hole is whipped away, and all my thoughts and memories are exactly where I left them a moment ago. I remember why I'm here and what brought me here.

What just happened?

In only a matter of seconds, I completely forgot about the orphanage. As if I'd never known about it. It was only because I intuitively grasped that the people behind the window in the house were not just looking at me but also at something behind me that I had the presence of mind to turn around.

Something strange and unnatural is at work here. I think I'm one step closer to understanding Chee Kong and his memory lapse. The Fairfield City Council, why they've been taking forever to tear this place down. The contractors who were awarded the job but abandoned the project before they even started.

There's an immediate itch to take my eyes off the orphanage again, to test out my semi-solid theory, but I know if I do that, there's a risk I might walk away from here without ever knowing why I came.

I keep my gaze steady, and begin walking.

My first few steps are slow, unsteady, but my ravenous curiosity lends vitality to my body and soon I stand before the orphanage's black gate.

It's chained and padlocked. Not a problem for me. But there's an easier way in. A little to the left of the gate, two of the pickets in the fence have broken off due to rust.

An exercise in flexibility and balance and I'm through.

The seed heads of the waist-high grass blow gently in the breeze, a slow, dancing cloud of yellow and red. I use my hands to part the grass and make my way onto the stone path that begins just past the gate and leads to the orphanage's front door.

As I walk, I wonder whether the people who live in the house across from the orphanage are calling the police. After all, I'm trespassing on what is very likely government land. I'm not bothered by that though. I've got Chee Kong and his buddies on the council on my side.

What worries me infinitely more are the secrets hidden within Fairfield Girls Home.

A person with my set of skills *and* any measure of self-preservation would have rejected Chee Kong's offer. But what I've discovered over the years is that, for people who have my skillset, self-preservation doesn't come into the picture.

Sure, we take precautions; it would be extremely foolish otherwise. But for those of us with the sight, it's as if there's an invisible thread fastened around us, and no matter how far we drift away, that thread will eventually draw taut, catch us, swing us back in an arc so that once again, we come face to face with the other world only we can see. We see the ebbs and flows. We see things in this world most people can't. Most of these beings are benign, a rare few even all right to be around. But some hate us and refuse to co-exist peacefully. That's when you need the precautions. And a great big helping of common sense.

It's been awhile since I've utilized my eclectic skillset. I left that part of my life back in Malaysia. Chee Kong knows that about me. I've been here in Sydney for two years now, working a mundane 9 to 5 office job, an underwriter at a small, family-run insurance agency in Circular Quay.

He thinks that offering me a cut will entice me, get me to make use of my talents again. Well, the money's great. It'll whittle down the loan on my new two-bedroom in Balmain.

But the money's just an added incentive. The hunger to discover the truth, that invisible thread tugging me closer, these two are a lot stronger than whatever money Chee Kong is throwing on the table.

I reach the steps that lead up to the front double doors. Whoever the current owner of the orphanage is, they didn't bother with chains and padlocks for the doors. The only security to prevent unlawful entry is the doors' deadbolt lock.

The windows on either side are too high up for me to see anything more than the beige walls inside.

For a building that's been abandoned for more than two decades, it looks to be in very good shape. Which is surely part of the mystery. After all, if I got through the missing pickets in the fence with little difficulty, what's stopping anyone else from doing the same? Even if they couldn't pick the lock, they could just bash the door down or smash the windows to get inside. From what I'd read online, that's exactly what happened to a decommissioned orphanage in Goulburn. People just ransacking the place, hoping to find anything of value. Squatters making the place their own. Graffiti all over the walls. Arsonists setting the furniture alight. Even ghost tours organized for thrill-seekers.

So why hasn't anything of the sort even remotely touched Fairfield Girls Home? Why are there just a grand total of three mentions of Fairfield Girls Home online?

I move on to the backyard, making sure I keep the orphanage in view the entire time; this building is not going to get the better of me.

On one side of the backyard are two wooden posts that once served as a clothesline, on the other a tiny toolshed. There's a back gate built into the fencing on the farthest side, chained and padlocked like its front counterpart.

The back door is my next stop. Simple deadbolt like the front door. I take my lock-picks out and it takes all of ten seconds, but when I try to open the door, it doesn't budge. Could be one of two things: something heavy stacked up against the door on the inside, or the door has swollen badly over the years.

I make my way back to the front of the building. As I consider the double doors before me, I begin pondering why my third eye has remained shut. There's a definite conflux here. It's weak, but strong enough that even those without my talents could pick it up if they're sensitive enough and know what to look for. Like those workers who thought this place cursed.

I've been expecting my third eye to show me something, anything, that would offer a clue to the orphanage's mystery. If there are non-human beings in the vicinity, whether benign or malicious, it should open.

The fact that it hasn't worries me. I wonder what it means.

I take the steps up to the doors. When I'm done picking the locks, I gently push both doors back; they swing open to reveal an entrance hall, and a narrower staircase hall beyond it.

The smell isn't as bad I expected. But just because I'm helpless to resist the pull of whatever forces are at play inside the orphanage doesn't mean I've given up on common sense. From my jacket, I whip out my P2 respirator and strap it onto my face.

And then I enter.

The floor is tiled, the ceiling made of stamped steel. On the right of the hall is a small room with two baroque-style sofas and nothing else. A reception room.

Two more steps and I pass under a molded archway that leads into the longer, narrower staircase hall. I don't go up the staircase for now.

I continue down the hall. There are two smaller rooms, which, judging by the size and the furniture in them, could have been sitting rooms. Another room is longer and has a chalkboard--a class or study room. A room that's much bigger has two trestle tables, each paired with two benches of the same length. A refectory. There's a laundry room, although the two machines inside look more like creepy alien spaceships than laundry machines. Farther down the hall is a short flight of steps that leads down to a steel door. Storage probably. Another staircase at the end of the hall. This one is made of stone and girded by brick walls.

Finally, I reach the back of the house, where the kitchen is. There are shelves, tables and chairs, an ancient stove, and a small space that must have served as a pantry.

I try the back door again. It won't budge. Swollen door it is then.

Considering everything I've seen so far, this orphanage looks perfectly ordinary, perfectly mundane. Nothing I've seen so far suggests that there are entities here or that the building is rooted to anywhere but the physical world.

Maybe I'll find what I'm looking for upstairs.

I head back to the stone staircase with the brick walls around it. I realize now that this must be fire-proof stairs, an alternative escape route in case a fire broke out.

I'm halfway up the stairs when my third eye finally opens. Only not in the way I expect. It bursts open so suddenly and forcefully that I stumble backward, almost losing my footing.

My insides are roiling with a fear so cold it burns. It's never happened before--my third eye going from completely shut to wide open instantaneously. I don't know what it means.

The only thing I know is this: I must get out of here right now.

Acting on fear and instinct alone, I throw myself off the stairs. My heels thump heavily down onto the tiled floor but I don't feel the impact. I propel myself forward with each pump of my legs. There is nothing else in the world but me, the double doors, and a world of life and safety waiting for me on the other side.

My fear gives way to recklessness. I push myself off the floor and sail wildly forward into the air, hands desperately scrabbling for the world outside.

Eternity is passing me by as I hang in the air. Graceless and lumbering, I fly past the doorframe. The small part of my mind that has yet to sink below the ocean of panic engulfing me recognizes the possibility of tumbling down the steps and injuring myself. But another part of me, a more primitive part whose skills have been honed by dozens of encounters with beings not of this world, knows that there are some situations where pain, even death, are preferable options.

I don't land so much as crumple into a heap on the ground. I stretch out my hands before me to soften my fall, cry out in pain when my palms and knees slam into the ground.

Cursing, I get up to my feet--then stiffen.

No.

I am in the same entrance hall I just jumped out of. In front of me is the same staircase hall I sprinted through. To my right is the exact same small reception room, with the exact same sofas.

I swivel on my heels, but I already know what I'll see.

Through the doors I just jumped past is the mirror image of the entrance hall I'm standing in now. It's like I'm peering into a mirror. The only difference is that there isn't a me standing on that side.

The effect is so disorienting that I fall to my knees. My breathing comes in ragged heaves, and I smell sour fear sweat on me. Gripping the edge of the door, I pull myself up and take slow, deep breaths to calm myself as I try to come to grips with what I'm seeing.

When I've beaten the panic back with the iron fist of calm, I try walking out the front doors a few times. It's no use. I just end up walking into the other side's entrance hall. The effect is so eerie that I soon forget which one is the original entrance, the one I leapt out of, and which one the mirror image.

I look out the windows on either side of the doors. There's no grass, or stone path, or any sign of the outside world--the only thing I look out on is the mirror image of the entrance hall. Going through the windows works exactly like going through the doors--I just end up in the same place.

My first guess is that I've inhaled some sort of airborne spore or toxin that might have spread throughout the inside of the orphanage over the years and I'm now suffering from the subsequent mental hallucinations. But I quickly dismiss this possibility. I'm wearing a P2 respirator *and* spores wouldn't account for my third eye opening so forcefully. I take out my phone--there's no connectivity.

Whatever's causing this is beyond the realm of science; I'm firmly in otherworld territory here.

My mind returns to the moment on the stone staircase. This is the first time my third eye has opened so widely, so quickly. In the past, it's always opened a fraction upon entering premises where a spirit resides, and continues opening the closer I get to the spirit. The more powerful and malevolent the spirit, the faster and wider it opens.

But never as wide as it is now. Not even when I came face to face with that penanggalan in Sumatra. It's as if this place is forcing it to go beyond its limits. My limits.

That means I'm in uncharted territory. It detected nothing at first, then somehow picks up the emperor of spirits? Is there something lurking here that can somehow *mask* its presence? A spirit that can change my perception of space? Is that even possible?

If the answer to that is yes, I am seriously out of my depth here.

It almost feels like a trap of some sort, like I took the bait, entered this place, and now I'm stuck in the trap's slavering jaws.

I take slow, deep breaths, chant several mantras to sharpen my focus. The tension in my muscles dissipate, my mind beats the waves of panic back. I'm resolved to finding a way out. I'm not about to give up and die.

If the front doors and windows don't work, perhaps those in the kitchen might.

As I pass the two sitting rooms, something at the edge of my peripheral vision draws my attention.

It takes me a moment to realize what had caught my eye. It's the room itself, everything in it. The furniture is several shades lighter. The mold growing on the wall is gone. The blanket of dust on everything is nowhere to be seen.

"What are you doing here?" says a husky voice from behind me.

I recoil in horror, my heart jackhammering in my chest. I spin around to stare into the face of an elderly woman covered head to toe in the black and white of a nun's habit. Her face is set in a scowl, her almond eyes shining with naked irritation.

"Sorry, Sister Mary," say two voices in unison behind me.

I turn around with trepidation and see two young girls standing together, both dressed in navy blue tunics over white short-sleeved blouses, cinched at the waist with white crochet belts. They are skinny little girls, maybe six or seven; both are dark, their features clearly that of Aboriginal people. From their lowered eyes and look of guilt on their faces, it appears that they're the recipients of the nun's ire.

"Get going to class now," Sister Mary says.

"Yes, Sister Mary," the girls mumble. As they flee down the hall, their outlines blur and they fade away into nothingness.

The nun harrumphs and ambles off in the opposite direction, disappearing in the same way. I'm standing alone in the hall once more. I peer into the sitting room; age and dust cover everything, as they had before.

Thoughts race through my mind, coming to me fast and furious.

The state of the room before and after, the way the girls and nun spoke and dressed, it's obvious that I've just seen a vision of the past, a moment in time before the orphanage was decommissioned.

But it's the nature of the vision that puzzles me. The girls and the nun are not spirits. Whether benign or malicious, all spirits have an aura about them, the aura's color depending on the spirit's nature and intent. My third eye picked up no such aura about them. They're not specters of the past, doomed to replay the events of their lives repeatedly. But then, what are they?

I have always trusted my third eye's observations without reservations. But right now, I'm at a loss to interpret its observations. It makes no sense to me.

And why am I seeing visions of the past? I know, from Master Yu's teachings, that there are certain places and conditions that will produce visions visible to those with the sight, but I've never actually experienced that.

Something happened here, something that made this place more than just an orphanage.

I continue walking down the hall.

Before I can take more than a few steps, I hear a woman's voice.

"New South Wales was founded in 1788."

It's coming from the study room. The room has two doors, one on either end. Warily, I step up to the door closest to me, and peer in.

A nun, younger than the first, stands in front of the class of girls, gesturing at an unfurled map of Australia hanging on the blackboard.

The girls in the front appear to be doing their best to sit upright and pay attention. Those at the back are doing a good job of hiding their restlessness. Two blonde-haired girls in the back row wait until the nun has her back to the class, before they grin and make faces at each other across the empty desk between them.

Nun and girls dissipate into nothingness, and I am left staring at a blackboard that hasn't seen chalk in twenty years.

My ears suddenly pick up the soft susurrus of many young girls talking at once. I make my way toward the refectory, where I see the girls sitting at the trestle tables, eating and chattering, all under the watchful eyes of two nuns seated at a small table in the corner.

The girls have split into two very distinct groups, each group claiming a table for their own. The larger group of girls in white; theirs is the louder, more gregarious group. The Aboriginal girls number only five; theirs is the much quieter table. The five of them exchange nervous glances as they eat.

One of the girls from the larger group says something and suddenly the chatter at their table dies down. All of them stare at the Aboriginal girls, eyes and faces set in quietly menacing masks. The Aboriginal girls huddle closer together.

A heavy sadness starts descending on me. These Aboriginal girls must be part of the Stolen Generation--Aboriginal children who were taken from their families, to be assimilated into white Australian society, on the premise that it was for their own good. It is an indelible strand of history that, to this day, threads its way through the very fabric of this country.

One of the white girls says something too soft for me to pick up, upon which her whole table laughs. The Aboriginal girls say nothing but hold each other's hands in solidarity. The nuns watch on, but do and say nothing.

The moment in time fades away.

I walk on, past the stone staircase, stepping into the kitchen at the back of the orphanage.

Sister Mary and one of the nuns from the refectory are preparing food. They wash, chop, slice, cook, and move about the kitchen briskly, effortlessly, without getting in each other's way.

"But why'd they refuse?" says the shorter, stockier nun. "They must know we're full up here."

Sister Mary harrumphs. "They only care about what's just under their noses, Agnes."

"But we're all the same, aren't we?" Sister Agnes protests. "We're just trying to do right by these girls. Give 'em a better life."

"They don't care if we're chockers," Sister Mary says. "Getting them to take in one of our girls is like pulling teeth. Always looking down on us. Oh, Parramatta Girls Home is so great, not like Fairfield Girls Home. Pure bunkum. Just because they get the state's money!"

Sister Agnes shakes her head. "If they've got all that money, they'd be able to do wonders with our troublemakers!"

"Troublemakers, hey? Girls got under your skin this morning? The usual lot?"

Sister Agnes nods. "Always the same." A frown breaks out on her face. "Sometimes I feel--"

The good Sister Agnes never completes her sentence because she and Sister Mary fade from view.

I try the backdoor again; it still won't budge. Moving to the only window in the kitchen, one that faces the backyard, I peer out and see yet another strange sight. Instead of the green of grass and the clothesline and toolshed, I see only thick, billowing clouds of gray, through which I can see nothing. I try to open the window, but no matter how hard I push, the panel, like the door, refuses to budge.

I check all the other windows on this floor. They're all tiny hopper windows, barely large enough for a cat to pass through. Gray clouds, all of them. Yet somehow, the orphanage is lit by sunlight coming in from the same windows.

This feels more like a trap every passing second.

I climb the stone stairs. It takes me to the balcony I saw from outside, with a wooden railing that comes up to my torso.

I should be looking out at grass, the street outside the gate, the house on the other side, the sky, the trees beyond the cul-de-sac--but all I see are clouds of gray.

I slowly walk to the edge of the balcony, grasp the rough surface of the railing, and try to pierce the billowing grayness with my third eye.

I see ... nothing. Not the absence of anything, but a complete, total void. Over the wooden railing, there is only non-existence. The orphanage is bounded on all sides by void, by nothing.

Vertigo overcomes me. My knees start buckling; I grab hold of the wooden railing to steady myself.

After a while, I regain my sense of gravity. I let go of the railing and look out once more at the grayness. There will be no escape for me here.

I inspect the long landing that is the balcony. There are doors on both ends of the balcony. Next to both these doors are the two flights of stairs that lead back down below. Between them are two more doors.

I go for the door at the end of the balcony that's closest to me.

Inside is a long and narrow room that runs to the back of the building. Two rows of bunkbeds line up along opposite sides of the room.

Suddenly, the beds are no longer grimy and dusty. There's a girl for every bunk in the room. Away from the prying eyes of the nuns, the girls are carefree, unguarded. They are also all white. For a moment, an inexplicable feeling of envy washes over me--the wish to belong to a large group of friends and family, to be part of something greater. But before I can put a name to this feeling, it is gone. And so too are the girls.

I walk out onto the balcony and am about to open the second door, when a girl, one of the two blonde-haired girls I'd seen making faces at each other in the classroom below, appears before me, looking pointedly at the door.

"Your stories are horrible!" she says. "Baby-killing giants! What sort of rubbish is that! We don't want your jungle stories here!"

The girl is about to say something more but fades away before she can.

I open the door and peer into another dormitory, this one barely larger than a broom closet, with three bunk beds, one for each side of the room. I see the five Aboriginal girls, huddling together on one of the bunks. They speak softly, in a language I don't understand. It sounds like they're comforting one another.

The vision fades. I move on to the next room. A shower room. I wait for a bit, but I see no vision here, so I make my way to the final door on the other side of the balcony.

It opens into a small anteroom with four doors. Each door leads to a bedroom that holds a bed and mattress, a desk, and a private bathroom. These must be the nuns' bedrooms. One of the rooms is larger than the rest and has a metallic five-drawer filing cabinet in the corner. There are many folders inside. I peruse a few. Admin stuff. Invoices and expenses, student records, records one can now easily store on a hard drive. This room must be the head nun's room, serving as both bedroom and records room.

I pace around a bit, but there is no vision here for me.

As I step out onto the landing, I freeze. A dark shape is hurtling toward me, cutting the distance between us in fractions of a second. I try to fall back into the anteroom but the creature's movements are unlike anything I've ever seen. I've barely taken half a step back into the room when it leaps up into the air and slams into me, causing me to lose my balance and fall.

The only thing I register before my world turns black is that, once again, my third eye confirms that this is no spirit.

~

The tiles of the floor feel icy cold against my cheek.

I'm still alive. But strangely, there's no pain.

I open my eyes, all three of them. I get up, dusting myself off. How long was I out for?

Bigger question: what was that thing?

I check all four private rooms again. Nothing. Shower room and the girls' dormitories. Nothing. No sign of it.

If it's not a spirit, what is it? It can't be a vision, can it? Visions don't slam people into the ground and knock them out cold. But now that I'm free of the fear that had paralyzed me, I begin to wonder. Did it knock me over? Or had I been so terrified of a vision that I stumbled, fell, and hit my head?

I don't know.

If it's a vision, like the nuns and girls, does that mean that this thing too is a moment in time? Is everything strange about the orphanage linked to it? Did this shadow creature prowl the halls and rooms of the orphanage all those years ago?

Suddenly, a new possibility presents itself. The trap becomes a puzzle. If the visions are of what happened here in the orphanage in the past, there must be a reason why I'm seeing them. Perhaps the key in my escaping this trap is to figure out what happened here all those years ago.

I should scour the orphanage for clues. There may be more that I've yet to discover.

Time is the one thing I have a lot of.

~

The next vision plays out in the refectory.

There are no people in this one, only a completely devastated dining hall. The trestle tables and benches are black and in pieces. Broken plates and glass litter a floor so black I can barely make out the individual tiles. The scorch marks go all the way up the brick wall like shadowy fingers reaching for the ceiling.

I see what might be a clue on one wall. Three long black slashes, too well-defined to be scorch marks.

The vision fades and the refectory is as it was before, with the only black in the room being the spots of mold on the walls.

What was that scene about? A fire or explosion of some sort? But if what I'm seeing are visions of the past, why is the refectory and everything in it in one piece right now, with no scorch marks anywhere to be seen?

The three black slashes against the wall. My mind immediately goes back to that shadowy *thing* that I encountered on the upper floor.

Is this creature the orphanage's mystery? Is it the reason why I find myself trapped here, doomed to view visions of the past until I finally die of thirst and starvation? Well, I'm not going to lie down and call it quits. I may not be as powerful as Master Yu, but I'm no lightweight either.

I head over to the kitchen. Physical weapons do about as much damage to supernatural creatures as bullets do against a tank. But I feel naked without one. My third eye can see many things, but it is not a weapon. I have chants, mantras, symbols, and my will, but those require focus and time, things I might not have when some shadow creature comes barreling at me at the speed of sound.

A rusty chef's knife is the only thing I can find. My fingers glide over the edge of the blade, my lips whisper a chant. When the final syllable has been uttered, I tuck the knife under my belt. The knife's better than useless now. *A little* better.

Before I can trudge off in search of more clues, another moment from the past plays out before me.

"What are they doing out there?" says one of the two nuns standing by the window that looks out into the backyard. Their backs are to me.

I sidle up to them. It's Sister Agnes and the younger nun, the one I saw teaching in the classroom.

"I don't know," says Younger Nun. "They don't really play with the other girls."

"They are different," says Sister Agnes. "Their kind were here in an earlier age. They know things the latecomers do not. They know things we know."

I didn't notice it at first, but now that I'm standing beside them, it becomes apparent: there's something different about their voices. Deeper, coarser, raspier. There's the other thing as well: wispy jet black strands, moving sinuously within the confines of their eyes.

"Where's the other one?" Younger Nun says.

Sister Agnes looks back toward the staircase hall. "I saw her a moment ago."

"She's the troublemaker."

Sister Agnes nods. "I--" The nun cocks her head. "There's something--"

"What is it?"

"I don't know. I think--" Sister Agnes stops mid-sentence, turns around, and looks straight at me.

"What manner of creature are you?" she says, her eyes trained on mine.

I stumble back before Sister Agnes' steely gaze, flinching as if I'd been hit. She's speaking to *me*.

Younger Nun walks over. "What is it, Agnes?"

"There's something here."

Her hand shoots out and clamps onto my wrist. Her grip is bone breaking.

Thin lips curve into a hideous grin. "Got you."

My other hand shoots straight for the knife at my belt, but before I can draw, the nuns dissipate into thin air and I am standing alone in the kitchen, my heart racing wildly.

A vision isn't supposed to be able to leave its imprint on the material world, but the dull ache in my wrist tells a different story. I consider the myriad of possibilities until I settle on the only one that makes sense: the longer I remain trapped here, the more I become part of the orphanage's past. That's how Sister Agnes, or whatever's possessed her, could grab me--the past and the present are somehow overlapping each other.

And I'm trapped between both.

~

The next vision is that of Sister Mary in the laundry room. I don't know how, but Sister Mary seems to tower over me, her hairy palm brandished upward and outward like a sledgehammer about to mete out punishment to the wicked.

"How dare you raise your voice!" she roars. "Don't you dare talk to me that way, girl!"

Sister Mary's hand descends from the heavens, righteous fury lending power to her ferocious swing. The sound of a furious smack reverberates down the hall. I spin round to see which girl she's slapped, but I see no one. Sister Mary and her fury are gone.

That's when I hear it. A girl singing. I don't understand the words, but I don't need to speak the language to know a sad song when I hear one. The words aren't the most important thing about the song. It's the rhythm, the pace. It starts off languid and slow, a musical lament to the beginning of all things. It continues with several variations, before the tempo speeds up and the words drive home the song's theme in a fierce counterpoint, reaching a high-pitched wail, before coming down again, dying off with a somber finality that crushes hope, joy, and life. And then the song begins all over again.

It's coming from the stairs that lead down to the room that I haven't been to yet. Funny, I've been all over the rest of this building, but I didn't think to go down there. The steel door is unlocked. I step into what appears to be a store room. Ladder, brooms, mops, buckets, and broken chairs.

I wait for a moment from the past, but there is nothing. Only the ghostly singing. Where is it coming from? I check all the dark spaces of the room where a spirit might hide. But my third eye finds nothing.

My two normal eyes however, are drawn to a spot in one corner of the room.

I walk over and get down on my knees. About a foot from the floor, someone's drawn something on the wall with black paint. The art is rudimentary at best, but more important than the drawing's artistry is the story it tells.

There are two groups of stick figures. In the larger group, six figures stand in a row, holding hands. Under one stick figure is the word "Me". The five others are named: Bimbeen, Jippa, Nardoo, Toora, Wyuna.

The stick figures in the second group are bigger than the first. The four of them have names as well: Mary, Agnes, Stella, Jane. All four are enclosed by the tail of what appears to be a half-lizard, half-human creature, and they have what appear to be flames or a fire burning above their heads. The creature's tail and body weaves around the four, but the creature's head comes to an inch above the "Me" stick figure's head.

All the pieces of the puzzle begin falling into place. It doesn't take long for me to fully understand the significance of the drawing.

The drawing is not a vision. It's a drawing made by a girl decades ago, a girl who must have sat in this exact spot, lonely and scared.

It's the mystery behind Fairfield Girls Home.

Only once I fully grasp the girl's story do I realize the singing has stopped.

I get up, stamp my feet to get the blood circulating again. I glance down at the pitiful knife under my belt and I smile ruefully.

What a fool I've been.

I'm not here to kill a monster.

I'm here to guide a soul.

~

There's a decent organizing system in place in the metallic filing cabinet, so it only takes me a few minutes to find what I'm looking for.

As I expected, the Sisters had two files to help them keep track of the students--one for the Aboriginal girls, another for everyone else.

I open the file I'm interested in and go through the papers inside.

But why'd they refuse. They must know we're full up here.

I should have paid closer attention to Sister Agnes' words. In the dormitory reserved for the white girls, there was a girl for each bunk. But in the much smaller dormitory, I saw only five girls, even though there had been six bunks.

I shudder as I come to the list of names.

Jippa. Wyuna. Toora. Nardoo. Bimbeen.

There's another one. A sixth name.

The one who's in none of the visions because they're all from her point of view.

~

From the inner pocket of my jacket, I take out two important tools of the trade: joss sticks and a lighter. I take three joss sticks and light them up. A few seconds later, I blow to extinguish the flames, leaving the ends smoldering. The wisps of fragrant smoke curl and dance through the air, rising toward the store room's ceiling and out through the air vents that lead to outside the orphanage.

Eucalyptus leaves would be more fitting for the smoking ceremony, but dry eucalyptus leaves are notoriously hard to store inside one's jacket.

Once the smoke grows thick and strong, I begin the ceremony.

"Whoever is here," I say, "I want you to know that it's safe to come out." I blow on the joss sticks to create more smoke, and to guide it toward the air vents.

"I bring safety. I know the way." I look up into the smoky tendrils wafting upward, my words directed to the air. "Follow the smoke, Apanie. Follow it. It will set you free."

I repeat those words three more times, always careful to blow the smoke in the right direction.

After a while, I don't need to look behind me to know that I'm not the only one in the room.

She isn't a vision.

"Ngaluunggirr?"

I only know a few words from the various Aboriginal languages, but this was one of the first I learned. I turn around, get down to her level so that we stand as equals.

She is apprehensive, confused. To my third eye, she shimmers brighter than the stars.

"No, I'm no Cleverman." I smile. "But I'm here to show you the way, Apanie."

"You know my name."

"Yes. I know what you've done. You've been lost. Caught between here and there."

She nods.

"I bring safety," I say. "I'm here to show you the way."

"I'm scared. I jump among the soft spots, but I can't see the land."

"I understand your fears. I understand what happened here, Apanie."

"I was scared," she says. "I couldn't control it. It was too much for me."

I nod. "What happened here is not your fault."

"I was sad," she says. "I was sad because they took me away."

"From your family."

"Yes. From my family, from my life. Lonely. Sad. So sad."

"I understand. What they did to you was bad."

"I didn't want it to happen. I didn't want the Malingee to come."

"You were scared," I say. "You couldn't control your powers. It came from the Dreaming. It came here, grew stronger because of the hate and the fear that was here."

"I just wanted it to stop. To stop hurting everyone."

Even though it was hurting the people who hurt you.

"What you did was very brave," I say. "You stopped it from leaving the orphanage. You took it away from here. Banished it back into the Dreaming."

Glistening tears flow down her cheeks. "But it killed everyone."

I choose my next words carefully. "You stopped it from harming anyone else. It was the right thing to do. The only thing you could do."

She looks at me with those big round eyes of hers, eyes that now hold hope within them. "I can stop standing on both sides?"

"Yes. Travel on into the Dreaming. There's no need to linger here."

She thinks about this for a moment, then smiles shyly. "Thank you."

"Goodbye, Apanie," I say. She's already gone by the time I say my last words. "Your family is waiting for you."

I look up, peer through the smoke with all three eyes.

Reality unravels around me, the fabric of my universe rips and I am lost to everything and nothing.

~

"He is not of the people. Who is he?"

I open my eyes and look up into the faces of three people hovering above me. Three people who had been watching me from a window. I see the sun, the clouds, the sky. I smell the wind. I feel the hardness of the asphalt needling into my back.

The old woman answers the younger man. "Yes. He is not of the people. But he has the way about him."

They talk like I'm not there.

The younger man snorts. "Everybody's got the way nowadays!"

"Don't be rude," says the older man. "He guided Apanie back to the Dreaming."

"We had to wait so long!" the young man cries out.

"What is written cannot be willed along or hastened," says the elder woman. "You should know that by now, Birin."

The young man, Birin, shrugs, and says nothing more.

The elder woman looks at me, and says, "Thank you, stranger." She smiles, but I know it's more than a smile because an immense wave of peace washes over me.

I blink, and they are gone.

I stay like that, lying on the street, watching the clouds go by, basking in the warmth of the sun.

After a while, I reluctantly turn my head, just enough to sneak a peek.

Fairfield Girls Home stands where it's always stood.

I turn my head the other way.

The house across from the orphanage looks the worse for wear. It's as if no one has stayed there for years.

I close my eyes. Minutes pass. The orphanage is still in my mind.

I lift a hand, reach for my jacket's inside pocket, and take out my phone. A few swipes and I'm making the call.

"Oi, Kuan," says the voice on the other end. "You calling about the orphanage again? How many times, man! You settled it yet?"

I smile, but I don't say anything. I end the call, let the phone slip from carefree fingers.

I don't bother getting up.

It's too comfortable.

Tek-Kuan Chin is a disciple of the legendary Master Yu Jang, Founder of the Order of the Seven Paths. Although he was considered a late bloomer, having only awakened his third eye at the relatively late age of sixteen, Tek-Kuan soon gained mastery over three of the Seven Paths, surpassing many who had begun their training at a much earlier age. Upon attaining the rank of senior disciple, Tek-Kuan started his new career as a spirit-hunter for hire. When an encounter with a penanggalan almost left him dead, Tek-Kuan decided to try his hand at a 9-to-5 job instead.
