



# CUL-DE-SAC

W. R. Prasanya



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Story, Cover by

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For,  
Lexi and Ralfy.

## Foreword

Literary development is a yardstick to measure the development of a country. The Kotte and Dambadeniya eras stand out in the history of the world because they were literary enlightening periods. If so, this is the golden period in the history of the Mahamaya as well.

This is why our daughters have been enchanting through book writing for many years now. It is a unique event that our writers have succeeded in building a culture of writing books in the school and spreading it to the entire school system. This time, they have involved the global student community in it.

Beyond this, this time, the school community has also decided to rebuild the past Yatiwara writing tradition in the country to pay tribute to the founder of our school, Karadana Atthadassi Thero.

The *Pirivena* student monks also have taken up the " Herana Gatkarani" book writing project. It is a matter of pride for me as the principal to lead the way in bringing about a qualitative change in the education of schools and *Pirivena* education through this academic and religious service. It is also an achievement for the school.

This book, which is the result of recognizing one's innate talent at an early stage in life and turning to writing, will undoubtedly help future education and life.

Shashikala Senadheera,  
Principal,  
Mahamaya Girls' College, Kandy.



“I am formless and wrong, taken out of this world before my rightful time, a soul extracted from the cycle of reincarnation for human spells. When I did not give them the glory they desired, they left me confused and alone.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“...I was pulled away from nature, but they got to return to their lives. I am ageless and lifeless.”

“What’s your name?”

“No one has named me.”

“I’m Kiran. I will listen. You *do* belong.”

“You will live and die before a century. What could you know?”

“...Why don’t you stick with me for the time being?”

.  
. .  
.



The house's doors are aged and old, and they loom above her. Just looking at them makes the heaviness in her heart grow worse. The humidity of wet and rotting wood, which permeates old houses like this, invasively wafts through the air.

She wishes to take back these past months, perhaps these past few years, and eat them.

The door seems unaffected by the passage of time, unlike the steps and the porch. White paint chips off to reveal yellowed layers and dark, warm wood beneath it. Alisha traces the calloused pads of her fingers across it, feeling the texture and artistry while ignoring the dust.

A relic of fusion architecture where the eastern met the western.

So *cool*.

The patterns fade off into smaller and smaller etchings while working to frame a kind, smiling, androgynous face in the middle. Yet, there are subtle tells — the uneven ends, the uncertain cuts, the almost accidental smirk of the smiling face; these give away the works of an amateur.

For a moment, she recalls her shop, many provinces away. She thinks of Kiran, the big smile on her cousin's face when she gives him the small figurine she made of him and her as kids. Now she makes better ones, bigger ones which would make her past self seethe in jealousy and cry in happiness.

Alisha's and Kiran's faces are both slightly round and square in the same way, and their most honest smiles are toothy and slightly lopsided to the right. It is one of her favourite things to capture in wood.

She wonders how he's doing. She wonders if he knows that she's sorry.

Alisha stands in front of the door, unmoving.

There is a stutter in her heartbeat, a hitch in her breath. She doesn't want to knock at the door. She doesn't know what she'll find.

Alisha decides she might as well come here at a more reasonable hour; the sun would rise in a few hours anyway. She looks at the peripheral buildings and houses, both semi-residential and semi-town.

She sighs, going down the front porch and towards her car. The door shuts behind her.

Her head snaps back just as fast, soft tufts of hair whipping quickly as she runs back towards the door.

It is still the same. Alisha furrows her brows. She drags her palm across the door again before balling up her fist and knocking at it aggressively.

"Is anyone home?"

Alisha yells out, “I swear I’m not a thief! Or something! And I’m sorry for bothering you now, but I’m looking for my cousin, have you seen him? He’s been missing for the past few months, and his case is cold. His name is Kiran, about five feet and —”

She sucks in a deep breath and belts out, “—*HELLO!?*”

In the darkness of her mind’s frustration, a lightbulb alights itself.

She takes out her cousin’s missing flyer with her free hand, the one not occupied with banging the whole vicinity awake.

“I have his flyer — Uh, he visited here for some of his...life stuff; I — *I don’t know*, I wasn’t — *Look!* I heard you closed the door — ugh.”

It’s useless. Maybe the sound was all in her head.

Maybe she should’ve been around Kiran. Been around people instead of closing herself into an echo chamber of her mind, where nothing else than sitting inside felt appealing. Nothing was better than listening to its every whim and desire.

Maybe it didn’t cut it that she emptied her safe and took most of it to Kiran so he could keep it. She wouldn’t need it anymore.

Maybe she could’ve just called more. But would Kiran even need her?

She wonders If Kiran would've found out about her. If he didn't go missing.

Even as her impolite bangs transition into thudding bangs, the door is unwilling.

She mutters a curse and skips her way down to her car.

She hears the door open and shut several times in an almost desperate way.

What a *joke*.

The Honda element roars to life with a squeal and successive screeches as she tries to get it back onto the road with several high-level twists and turns that would give her cousin a heart attack. The memories feel like knives. She steps on her gas and heads out.

Searching for a hotel seems to be the most challenging thing in the town, especially at night or, better said, day. Most of the neon signs are lonely or hang limply to the side. The shops are all closed. The blurry sights of the windows become more precise as she slows down.

Alisha rolls down the windows with a mechanic whirr sounding out through the air, a little eerie in the silent night. Alisha looks around, scrutinizing the sidewalks as she finally catches a prize; an old lady walking a cat.

Her hair is in an updo at the top of her head, and a grey housecoat stretched across her body as she wobbles down the cobblestone.

While the obvious question of why the woman is out at this time, with a cat on a leash, runs through her mind — that is not her current priority. The woman’s shoulders shake with a laugh, pointing at buildings and perhaps conversing with the cat, peering down every few steps to pat its head.

Alisha wonders if she’s lonely, walking her cat at the time and way she does.

The cat stops as Alisha makes a stop, her car’s battered engine letting out a forlorn sigh. The old lady turns slightly to Alisha, a heavily made woman with a heart-shaped face, smile lines etched across the slight frown she wears on her face. Her eyes are an awful shade of grey as she stares at Alisha, who stares right through her.

She pops her head out, arm resting on the door as she greets the old woman.

“Hi, I’m so sorry to disturb you and the little one on your walk! But, I wonder if there is a hotel, motel — -inn — whatever, a place I could stay for the night around here?” Her tone is cheery, too cheery for any average person. Still, it is enough to battle the gloom in the other’s eyes, and the old woman’s eyes remain in the same limbo of still looking at Alisha without quite looking at her. Maybe she’s blind? But she clearly saw the woman pointing things to her cat earlier.

“Take a turn from here to your left. It’s the only hotel we have here. They’ll let you in.”

Alisha can’t help the genuine smile that crosses her features. “Thank you so much, ma’am! If you want, I could give you a lift. There’s some wood and tools in the back, but — uh, If —”

The cat drawls out a particularly disdainful yowl. The woman lets out a low hum, seemingly in agreement.

“We’ll manage.” The woman is silent for a beat, “thanks for visiting this little town.”

“I...uh,” Alisha chuckles, “Yes, sure! Uhm, I’m actually looking for my cousin. If you meet anyone by the name of Kiran, please let me know...uhm, I’ll be at the hotel.”

The woman nods, and the cat lets out a soft meow. They continue walking. Alisha still stays there, her head poking out of her car; she’s never had an interaction like that in her whole life. Hm.

Alisha often turns people away with her booming voice and crisp words, but this was undoubtedly the first time she had garnered not even a light in someone’s eyes.

She decides something’s up with the people here while a sigh slowly escapes her lips.

It is not like she’s spoken to anyone properly for a whole year. Interactions are done by memory rather than genuine desire or will. Or, preferably, yelling. She has to — If Alisha wants to find this man.

Kiran was practically her parent. It was not entirely her mother or father, but a secret third thing that could only be called Kiran. He was the only constant in her life, the only person she could go to for anything, even if she didn’t. Alisha knows he’s been struggling. She just never knew how.

Not until he was gone — he isn't, Alisha knows it, feels it in her bones Kiran isn't — but is this what he felt like when Alisha holed herself up in her shop? Never came over?  
Stopped texting back?

Alisha should really, *really* stop thinking about that.

She turns left and sees 'Hotel Carmen' in bright yellow lettering that hurts to look at. A smaller shop called 'Carmen Mini Mart' is beside it. The only buildings with lights for the eye can see.

With a slight wince, she parks her car diligently, only mildly avoiding an insurance nightmare as she reverses a little too close to an ugly neon pink jeep. Hah, it is the only other vehicle she's seen since arriving in this town, and she almost crashes into it.

As she steps out, she can't help but note that this is the most silent night she has ever heard. No vehicles, no crickets, no people, even the low electrical buzz of lights, is rare enough to only be this hotel.

Hm.

Alisha grabs the bag of spare clothes and utilities, which sits disgracefully next to some of her tools. The passenger seats of her car are ruined with all kinds of stains and wounds. A small, curved carving knife has fallen into the bag. She supposes it's not harmful to keep it in her room. She straps it on her back and heads for the gaudy-looking entrance of the hotel.

A burly man has fallen asleep next to a desktop of the same middle-age next to him. The bluish light of the screen falls onto him. It's then that she realizes that the entire lighting of this weird 24-hour open hotel slash convenience store was on a tight budget, with the sparse fluorescence lights absolutely irritating.

She dings the little bell on the counter, and the man wakes up at the sound but collects himself at record speed. His large doe eyes find Alisha's, and she presses her lips into a thin line. At least this man doesn't look like a damned ghost.

"Good evening," the man grunts, his lips hidden beneath a forest of facial hair; she can only see his upper lip vaguely moving beneath a Roman nose. "A room for one?"

"Yes." Alisha supplies. "For, um..."

The man raises eyebrows whilst clicking around on his desktop.

She can't leave unless she's leaving with her cousin in tow.

"Could I keep paying daily to keep a room... I mean, it is probably against any principles or whatever. I —" The man stares at her with his eyebrows raising higher and higher, and she stumbles across her words. She can't keep explaining her quest to find her cousin to every person she meets!

Mercifully, the man says mechanically, "Pay every morning for the day. Breakfast on the house if you pay in advance."

Alisha nods. She rummages through her bag, her fingers finding one of the many wads of cash she had taken directly out of the safe in her house. Her shop and house were just two areas of the same building, but this was her savings for a few years. A grimace falls across as she looks at the bill the man hands him.

She pays in advance. Her cooking skills end and begin with cooking rice and frying a semi-eatable egg. Everything else just burns.

The tag in her hand is brand-new, surprisingly. In all block letters, '909'.

“Do you have an elevator?”

“Stairs right ahead of you.”

Alisha sighs. When she finally reaches the front door of her room, it is with the exhaustion of several days that she finally makes it into her. The weirdness of the last address she visited made her go the other way. The only way to silence the what-ifs would be to sleep for at least four hours.

She unlocks the door, and absent-mindedly runs her hands across the switches on the left. The whirr of electricity is almost comfortable as the room is illuminated with a bed at the centre, a table to the right with a tasteful window sill, the bathroom to the left and a small dressing table.

It's as if the sight of a washroom makes her bladder feel the urge to burst. In the mirror, she catches a flash of the mess she has become. More than a flash as she pauses in front of it. A hunch has set itself into her normally perfect posture.

The square of her chin and fellow angles of her face are sharper — her teak hue turned pallid, and her eyes sunken and bloodshot. Her hair hangs around her as a grimy mop, a loving relationship between every speck of dirt and every strand of hair.

She looks away almost in an instant. The past few months since New Year's Day flash by her, she realizes that Kiran would have killed her if he had seen the absolute mess she had become.

Kiran's fond laughter echoes in her ears. She adjusts her sweatband, feeling its dampness and the matted hair that sticks against it.

A familiar guilt decides to take a seat within her heart. She was not there for her cousin these past few years, and her ambitions often left her with tunnel vision, succumbing to the will of a project.

Focusing on the figurine and forgetting you left the unfinished table to rot in the rain.

But she refuses to accept that his case has gone cold because it couldn't have. And even though many investigators told her to stay put and even put her on a watchlist, she couldn't just sit doing nothing the same way the authorities did. Her heart thrums with the visceral pain of childhood memories running through her mind. Of the very first, horribly misshapen little figure of Kiran, she handed to him. He pried it away from her tiny, perfectionist grasp and always kept it with him.

Those moments are the very roots of her tree, yet they have suddenly turned malevolent and begun to rip at the same soil it should sink into. The memories of her cousin flash through her mind, the comfort turning into something unidentifiable but undoubtedly hurtful.

It's almost as if he's asking her why she hasn't found him yet.

She decides to set it aside, answers the urges of her bladder and attends to her hygiene. Kiran would kill her if he saw her like this.

It is only as she dries her now soft and lighter hair with a towel that the *ache* sets in. She then lays on the bed, which is more of a bunch of planks cosplaying to be a mattress. With no cell reception, she treats herself to studying her surroundings, cosied under a blanket.

The hotel room has mauve wallpaper with golden flowers that almost look as if they are made of foil. The ceiling is low, and an overly grandiose chandelier is hanging. It feels like a cheap palace, and she sleeps like a princess.

At first, It's dark.

And then he's running.

Now, there's a light from a bulb, a source he cannot see. He glances around rapidly. Everything is tainted in its slight red light. His heart hammers against his ribs as the

space around him contracts. The walls become closer by the second. He feels sweat running down his body, then slender hands roaming his neck and shoulders.

The slightest touch to wipe away his sweat. Soon followed by another, which tenderly wipes away the tears on his face.

He breathes heavily, leaning into the touch he desperately wants and does not want.

He can't see the hands. Someone, something, embraces him from behind. A coy press of lips against goosebumps rose across his shoulders.

He's crying — his voice, it's like it is ripping his own throat to scream out — but what is he screaming!?

He screeches until his voice turns into two and then into hundreds.

Alisha wakes up with a scream, shooting up into a 90-degree seating position, cold beads of sweat running down. She squints, eyes adjusting to the sunlight pouring through the un-shut blinds of the window. Alisha runs her fingers over her face and lets out a low groan. It's only then she feels the wetness of her cheeks.

Her mind is still in a haze, blinking in and out of the reality and the dream. For a moment, she lays down in the Alisha-shaped bed indent again.

"I'm sorry," she says to no one in particular.

The muscles of her arms throb with ache. Not the pleasurable ache of the careful work of her shop, not of a job well done. Perhaps lifting a heavy bag up nine endless flights of stairs is unsuitable for the back.

Alisha's body screams against getting out of the stiff bed — perhaps the true villain of this evil hotel.

What was that dream?

She rummages through the table of her room before stubbing her toe on the table. A bullet train of curses leaves her mouth in a yowl, not unlike the cat she saw before. The pain blooms further, wriggling the toes to relieve the hurt and assess the functionality.

Thankfully, pain tends to clear Alisha's head.

Wearing covered shoes was going to be a royal pain today. She supposes it fits the royal architectural theme of the hotel to cause such royal pain.

Alisha decides to sit down for a moment before feeling like killing someone.

She can't help but zone out, staring at a particular spot of yellow paint on the window's glass before her eyes wander to the haphazardly built pseudo-town.

Even as the sun begins to check in for the day's work, there isn't a single person on the road. In a room with a high-up view, the window sill offers a view that could have been a

postcard — if the view was worth looking at, like a picturesque city instead of a lonely ghost town.

It is then that some children dressed in uniforms stroll around. *Huh.*

Why would Kiran have such a place written in his diary? What was going *on* with him, genuinely?

While Alisha would've gone missing herself rather than read Kiran's diary, she went through it to find out what exactly led a man who worked at a library during the day and took pets for walks in his free time to vanish. He was the epitome of normalcy if one ignored his love for VHS tapes and non-fiction books. Lost media or whatever that meant.

And then she stumbled on things she should never have laid her eyes on before asking the detective to write down the addresses mentioned, only to realize the detective had already done that himself — he gave Alisha the list with a frustrated sigh. Still, then, something in his tone was agitated. Resigned, even. She didn't like it one bit.

"I don't think he *wants* to be found."

She knows the hint, perhaps in its closeness to herself, in an unsettling intimacy. She doesn't know what she'd do if that was the case. If Kiran just didn't want her to see his body.

"I didn't ask."

It was a plea to not pursue this for her own benefit. But Kiran knows Alisha best. He knows she stops at nothing. He's missing, and she is going to find him —

Passingly, she realizes that she has a reason now. A *purpose*. It is tentative initially as it descends into something bolder and expansive.

It is climbing and penetrating her mind as an infant climbing plant, stretching and growing in search of the sun.

She finishes rolling the sleeves of her worn-out overshirt. The lime green faded with time. The purple-sleeved tee beneath it does not fare well either. She puts on her sweatband, pushing the shorter pieces of her dark bangs to hang over it. She decides she won't go for the gloves yet and merely pockets it for later. Her getting-readying is interrupted when someone begins to aggressively knock at the door.

"*Who the* — I'll pay up when I'm downstairs!" She responds loud enough for her ears to hurt and to force her escalating thoughts to recede back into the crevices of her mind.

"*Open up!*" A voice booms, an invasion of her hearing range.

"Crappy customer service," she mutters under her breath.

"Open up right now! You have to! *Please*, please open the door for me. Open up!"

Alisha takes a deep breath, face furrowed into an all-consuming frown as she unlocks the door. Her slow opening is quickened by the sheer speed of a blurry outline of a human, questionably pink.

A woman whose hair is *the same shade as* the ugly little Jeep she almost hit before quickly shuts the blinds of her room. The woman moves erratically and rapidly.

“You’re Alisha?”

“Yes?” Alisha hurriedly sidesteps towards her bag, which rests upon the dressing table, and fetches her curved carving knife. “You better explain to me who and why—”

“You’re looking for Kiran, yes?” The woman, whose eyes keep fidgeting around the place, looks at Alisha wide-eyed. It’s only then she notices the shade of pink is dark and maroon at the base and pale at the ends.

Her features are jagged pieces of glass, a sharply upturned nose and a well-defined cupid’s bow. A rich shade of terracotta. If Alisha touched her face, her fingers would bleed.

“You are looking for Kiran?”

Is that a statement or a question?

“... Yes, I am,” Alisha replies; she clangs the carving knife to the floor.

The woman laughs in waves, deep and husky.

“Why do you know me?” Alisha approaches the woman and takes her hand. Though of a more petite frame than her own, she has Alisha’s wrist in a vice grip as soon as they sit on the low-quality bed.

“Are you alright?” Alisha asks softly. “Maybe, uh, take it easy for a second.”

Surprisingly, the woman does listen to Alisha, even though they are both strangers and the slightest seeds of fear are still littered across her mind. The woman’s body sways with several breaths.

“I worked part-time at the library Kiran did. We both liked to read about forgotten civilizations. He’s my good friend... And well, my cousin was in love with him.”

Alisha cannot help her eyes bulging out; “Did — *Did he like*—”

The woman’s grip tightens, her face breaking apart. “*No*, no, he didn’t. You know Kiran, he doesn’t like people. But regardless, I — I don’t know why the detectives didn’t let me meet you, but I was the last person who saw him before he disappeared.”

Alisha’s eyes widen an appropriate amount, unlike before. “The detective mentioned you, *Nesrin*. I’m not considered an immediate family member, so I couldn’t access all the information and calls on time... And it was just, I was kind of — Did he mention where he was going, any signs or, *Nesrin*, is he dead?”

She doesn't want to sound so weak.

Not in front of a person she just met, but their goal is the same, and the detective's words now return to her mind.

"If he did mention such a thing, I'd imagine this meeting between us would have been very different."

Alisha sighed, slouching with her head in her hands, but Nesrin continued.

"I think he has a lover here. These letters were hidden in the restricted section of the library — they're in my ride — they led me here three weeks ago. I've been here for *three weeks*."

Kiran, the man, is afraid of the old uncle who used to bring the post. Kiran, the man fearful of their other cousins that he pretends he isn't home? Kiran, the person Alisha must forcibly send to social events?

"...What does this lover have to do with him going missing?"

Nesrin takes a deep breath and hugs Alisha. "We need to stop talking. I've been here for three weeks, and I've... I have *learned*."

"You gave his lover a stern talking to, then?" Alisha enquires. Nesrin lets out a wheeze.

Alisha doesn't know why she does not want to dismiss whatever Nesrin says.

There's no one left to trust, but trusting only herself has proved tiring. She scans Nesrin as her previous words tumble through Alisha's mind.

Nesrin inhales deeply; "Let's talk in the car...I find that it helps."

Nesrin all but forces Alisha to pack her things in a condensed emergency bag resembling a package, constantly muttering as a sense of foreboding makes itself plain in Alisha's head.

Nesrin then puts something into her back pocket that feels strangely like folded paper, which Nesrin tells her not to take out until later.

Well, whatever.

While Alisha feels a strange desire to trust the woman, she can't help but feel uneasy. It is not like she has anyone else to believe.

What on earth is this situation?

They both speak at the same time.

"How do I know you're *really* Nesrin?"

"Why does everything you own smell like sawdust!? It is *disgusting*."

“...I asked first.” Alisha huffs.

“He has a small wooden doll, a sloppily finished bed frame, and a finely crafted dining table way too big for his apartment that was all your work at different points in your life...”

Nesrin cracks a self-satisfied smile: “I suppose that answers both our questions.”

Alisha tactfully ignores the comment, “how did you figure out I was also in the city?”

“I...” Nesrin huffs.

“*Well.* Your cousin always said you own an ugly little toaster of an excuse for a car and that it had a cartoon woodpecker printed across the back. Kiran said he almost laughed to death the first time he saw it. He mentions the car a lot. *You* a lot.”

“You must be good friends.”

“I don’t like what you’re insinuating, and we don’t need any byplay.” With a sigh, Nesrin addresses the subtle venom, “Romancing him is not my intention. Do you not want to work together with me?”

Now, a moment of strife, a tension which builds up in their bodies and minds, is exposed through words.

“Well...I just find this situation, and well, *you*, off-putting.” Alisha decides mid-speech that she should not poke around too much, so she lightly finishes, “I also find your neon pink jeep off-putting.”

Different iterations of a scowl and smile morph into a self-satisfied smirk all within *a second*, “Sensitive! he said that too.”

The tension in their bodies leaves with their breaths, slowly yet steadily returning to their tentative company. They both laugh for a moment.

Alisha wheezes more than she laughs, the sound of an old locomotive.  
This is *nice*.

To talk to someone properly. To bicker. To entertain each other.

This is a meeting moment where maybe Kiran isn't missing, and they're friends, meeting for the first time at a dinner party, talking about their mutual friend and then their jobs, families...

“You know a lot about Kiran, though.” Alisha returns to the tense topic again, with none of the insinuations of before, as she tries to keep her lips from turning into a scowl and her tone even.

This is Kiran's friend. Coworker. Someone.  
Someone he relies on that isn't her.  
She supposes she hasn't been that reliable in recent years.

The pink-haired woman glances at her subtly. Alisha is aware her face is an open book.

Perhaps Nesrin is a little gracious, still offering a response.

“He’s helped that cousin of mine more than me. She has cancer and keeps getting weaker and weaker. She loves visiting the library, even though she’s tired these days. We went out for lunch together. He thought she had feelings for him, but I’m sure he didn’t. He felt all guilty about it.”

Oh. That is Kiran.

“He also...he also gave me a lot of advice. On my job, on what to do with it.”

“What is your job?”

“We’ll open that can of worms after we take him home,” Nesrin quirks her lips, “we’ll discuss everything over a nice, warm curry.”

Unfailingly kind and loving to everyone. The wisdom of an old man with the curiosity of a little boy.

“I miss him,” Alisha says. “I owe him.”

“I’m indebted to him.”

Nesrin’s face loses whatever happiness it had a moment ago. It darkens in a matter of mere seconds.

“I only now realized what we’re getting into because I’m sure you’ve noticed there’s something very off about this place, these people, and I cannot speak these words in full. Be—because of eyes and the ears in the sky and the walls.”

Alisha has no idea what Nesrin means.

“Let’s go to my car?”

“Yes. Let’s talk there.”

“We’re going in *my* car.” Alisha leaves the room first.

It is not like she’s leaving anything valuable besides her laundry. They descend the stairs, footsteps echoing and the panels of it creaking against their weight and slow increment of speed.

Nesrin frowns. “Why not mine?”

“Nesrin, It’s a crappy pink target on our backs. Especially since you sound —”

The shorter woman elbows Alisha so hard that she suddenly lets out an unsuited squeak.

“What was that for!?”

Then, Nesrin quickly moves her eyebrows in worm-like movements, and it takes another moment for Alisha to realize that more people are around the hotel. Nesrin skips down to land at ground level before Alisha.

There are so many people, and the mood is a bit brighter. Even that exasperated man from earlier sits a little bit straighter this morning.

It's a more sociable atmosphere, and yet.

It isn't.

Alisha mutters loud enough for Nesrin to hear, "This place is so..."

The entrance is right in front of them. The front desk is to their right, and the hallways are further to their left. People quietly mingle.

"Absolutely boring, right?" Nesrin says louder. "There's nothing to do in town, nothing at all. I don't even know why we came here. I wonder if there's a film hall or something? Alisha, you up for it?"

"...*Sure.*" Alisha sighs inwardly but matches whatever act this woman has going on, "Um, but I have to pay for —"

"You can come back and pay." The man at the counter says, the lips beneath his moustache curling into a smile, the sagging skin of his eyelids crinkling with it. "The morning officially ends at twelve. Plenty of time."

Alisha does a double-take. This man is. What the hell is happening in this town?

"Thank you, sir! We'll be off now." Nesrin smiles. It is so sweet and genuine that if Alisha had not realized this was an act midway, she'd have thought it was real.

Silence descends as Alisha refills the oil tank out of anxiety and climbs into the driver's seat, fumbling as she puts on gloves and buckles her belt. Nesrin takes some more time, carefully removing all sorts of packages and dust lying around before carefully folding the skirt of her dress and closing the door.

"Alisha, ensure the windows are rolled up as high as possible." Nesrin whispers, "and that everything is locked."

"*Yes, ma'am,*" Alisha says. Still, the situation is not funny for either of them to continue with it, so she does everything asked of her. She takes a steep turn into the main road.

"Would you mind telling me who approved you as fit to be a driver? This license *has* to be forged."

"Would *you* mind explaining why the longer I spend time in this town, the weirder it gets?"

"...Because this town isn't real. It's desperately trying and hoping to be real."

It takes everything in Alisha's power to not drive them off-road and into a building. Nesrin rests her hand on Alisha's wrists as her fingers dig deep into the steering wheel.

"Let me take over, Alisha."

"You're bossy."

“You’re welcome.”

With the seating changed, Alisha puts her head in her hands and sighs. She feels a sob threatening at the back of her throat.

“I just want to find Kiran. What do you mean this town is fake? I felt something deeply wrong about this place but didn’t think too hard about it.”

“You only just arrived here; of course, you didn’t. Let me ask you, how many people did you see on your way here?”

“Well, no one — but I went to that address in that diary. Lovely house, but whoever was inside was so rude. Shut the door to rub it in or something- I mean — I was there at night.

The damned house. Then I was driving, searching for someone, and saw a creepy old lady with a cat, and I asked if there were places open at this time...and went to the hotel.”

“Alisha, you went to the house already?” Her voice is absolutely brittle, worse than the vulnerable moment in the hotel room.

“You think there was someone inside?” The constant sinking feeling of Alisha’s chest becomes worse. “Is that place fake, too? I don’t know about this supernatural stuff. I just... I went up and yelled at them to open up, and then as I was going, I heard the door shut behind me.”

“The...the door shut behind you.”

“...”

Nesrin’s hands start to shake. “Don’t you see, when you wanted a reaction, it gave you one but didn’t understand *how* to. It gave you one when you wanted to see people, but it’s still learning. Whenever you wish for something when you notice the town’s oddities, it tries to fix itself...but when you figure it out, you know.”

They drive in silence for a long time.

“Do you see that?”

“See what, Nesrin?”

“There’s a *film hall* on the left side.”

Oh. *Well.*

“...This morning, I wondered why it was so empty in this town, and then I saw children going to school.”

“it wants to appear real. It wants you to feed into its illusion and further fit itself into reality. It is trying to manifest itself into reality.”

“But if it’s not real...then it’s not real. That’s how it is?”

“It’s not as simple as that.” Nesrin sighs, “For example, we can only converse because a moving vehicle is not in direct contact with this ground for extended periods. It is like a muffler. There is a sound, but it is difficult to decipher. It can trace our thoughts, but not as fast or directly.”

“Are you a teacher who works part-time at the library?”

“...Did I use my explanation voice?” She depreciates in an alien tone that doesn’t really suit Nesrin, Alisha decides.

Alisha sighs. “It’s a good thing you made me understand. So basically, we can still draw conclusions, but it’s all within our unfamiliarity with this being. How long do we have before the muffled noises may begin to make sense?”

Alisha does not know what she and Nesrin have tentatively dubbed ‘it’ to be, but she does not doubt it.

“...Soon.”

“Well, what do we do when ‘soon’ comes?”

“I don’t know.” Nesrin blurts, “I don’t know *anything*. All I know is that it loves Kiran.”

*“What.”*

The despaired radio's static is the loudest noise for an endless moment. It yearns for reception. Alisha can feel warm grey eyes fixated on her, awaiting a reaction.

But Alisha doesn't know how to react to that. Is that what Nesrin meant by the letters?

*"What!?"*

Nesrin opens her mouth to elaborate. She can sense another explanation on its way, but Alisha quickly shushes her.

"Nope, that's for later."

*"You're the one who asked."*

"Nesrin! It doesn't need any more ideas, but what the hell has my cousin been up to," Alisha rests her head back against the passenger seat, clutching her temples, "he's gotten himself into a real one. Damn it, Kiran!"

She can't help the feelings of pricks along her skin, as if a thousand needles press against every pore. Her body can't decide between making her cry or scream — so Alisha takes a deep breath.

Alisha turns towards Nesrin and squeezes her shoulder. "We can get through this. Yes, yes. *Yes.* We're going to survive. Somehow, someday. We'll live. Yeah? Yeah!?"

Nesrin looks at her for a moment before groaning. “Unfamiliarity and unawareness is a gift and a curse. You don’t understand these kinds of malevolent Inhumans to the scope that I do. *You can’t.*”

“How on earth can you know about this? Why does Kiran even...He always was fascinated by worlds we can’t see.”

“Alisha, please understand me when I say this, but Kiran wants to protect you from this... People who grow to understand these kinds of things, the supernatural, have often interacted with them before.”

Her mouth falls agape ever-so-slightly, “...And he hid it from me. Since we were kids.”

Kiran hides things. Well, that shouldn’t be as surprising as it feels — everyone hides.

Alisha doesn’t. Besides hiding herself, Alisha has never known how to finely omit things. She didn’t think Kiran was too fond of it either. Maybe it wasn’t fond. Perhaps he had to. The questions in Alisha’s mind have self-decided conclusions, which all seem to culminate into this grand, epic one-liner; *he lied to her, or at the very least, hid significant things from Alisha.*

“I can’t know, only he does — and for why he did not tell you, I can’t know. You and I can only say it was for the best. This town, whatever it is...They are fascinated by us. They very much want to become us and be revered by us. They love us. That is why this being chooses this method of trying to love us — yet I ask myself, what kind of twisted love is this?”

A broken laugh leaves Nesrin's lungs in a rush before she hits her breath in the motion of a sob.

Alisha reminds herself of Kiran. She doesn't know how to respond to the other woman's subtle shivering and panicked eyes.

"Everything loves," Alisha begins lightly, "Every single thing, Nesrin. We may not understand it or desire it, but maybe that's why Kiran also loves them. Crappy taste is obvious in all involved, sure, but that must mean there is more to — *You know what?* I can't move on from his crappy taste in lovers. Honestly, why?"

Nesrin tucks a slight pink curl behind her ear and wipes her face roughly with the palm of her hand, smudging the colours on her eyelids and cheeks. Her hand then returns to the wheel to join its fellow.

"*Sure*, Alisha..." She begins shakily, Alisha can't help but break out into a grin.

They both can't afford to lose their composure, so all they can do is keep each other in check, huh? So much for awkwardness when you first meet someone. Everything is set in an excellent perspective when something is dooming you.

"You clearly have your priorities straight, trying to comprehend your cousin's relatively monstrous love life and not the *life-and-death situation* we may be in."

Alisha shuts up momentarily, afraid of her mouth's free will for once.

A few more cars surround them, leisurely grazing the road. Alisha didn't know when they arrived.

Nesrin silently laughs.

For a moment, their eyes lock as the steering wheel is left uncared for.

*"Nesrin."*

There seems to be no solution.

"Yes, that's my name."

They must do away with the needless yet comforting banter in the precarious safety of the car.

They don't know how many other cars turned up on the road.

Alisha feels a nauseous, ferocious tingling at the edges of her every nerve.

"Shall I drive?" She asks quietly, watching Nesrin grow restless once more and finding it a reflection of her predicament.

"It's fine, I want to drive." Nesrin asserts, "And you are perilous behind the wheel."

“...Do you reckon that there is a way to drive far enough that we...leave?” Alisha asks slowly, her hands balling into fists as she looks through the car’s side mirror to see the many others joining them.

Nesrin and Alisha’s eyes meet through the interior rear-view mirror. Behind them, the vague shapes of other cars are visible. Alisha’s deep brown eyes and Nesrin’s dark grey ones meet with a mutual understanding.

“You got oil?” Nesrin smiles bitterly.

“Everything anyone will ever need...but what about your ride?”

“—It’s an office vehicle. We can forget about it. We must drive like we’ve never driven before.”

For a moment, Alisha wonders how powerful Nesrin must be, firstly that she doesn’t mourn the loss of a whole vehicle and secondly, the fact that she has customized it beyond recognition. Alisha then shoos the irrelevant thoughts away because she can properly befriend the woman when they’re not about to perish.

They are going to drive forward until *it* breaks. It or *them*.

“I can’t believe this is real.” Alisha sputters out, akin to her car’s engine on a particularly rough day, “I can’t believe I am in a ghost town which is trying to kill me with a pink woman who is an expert about it but also not, and my cousin is still missing. And I’m going to die.”

“Take a few deep breaths. If it’s of any solace, remember I’m here too, resigned with a similar fate.”

Alisha glares at her.

“I’ve lived a normal life, I think. I don’t know anything about what you call this — actually, I’m surprised by my composure right now — but I know that I have to find Kiran. Kiran’s definitely in the house,” Alisha says with certainty.

Nesrin glances at her before sighing.

“There’s no other reason why we feel like leaving when we are at the door, is there? I went there several times, and my brain seemed to want to leave every time. Everything was screaming at me to leave.”

Alisha’s eyes widen; “Even that was...it’s work? Then it shut the door on me for a reaction, but it didn’t open. Every other wish is directly accepted. It didn’t want me to go in there. Kiran is in there. It doesn’t want us going in there. Maybe it’s a weak point?”

Nesrin affirms her with a nod, “I refrain from trusting gut feelings most of the time, but...”

“That gut of yours is correct. That place might be HQ if it’s so strong as to interfere with our emotions — “

“— Yet *scared* enough to force us to turn away —”

“— Because Kiran is there, with his loving ghost town-husband-wife-partner-friend.”

Alisha lets out an easy chuckle. “So, we may have a chance to break the fence and go off-road.”

“to break the wife-husband thing’s own town. But none of this is for sure, and yet...Nothing expands infinitely on a finite planet.”

“Exactly. But how long do we wait around to find out its limit? We’re on a timer... I think Kiran’s in trouble. The thing has got one crappy love language. Let’s make it scream in it.”

“Your act-first-think-later stratagem is going to get us slaughtered before Kiran.”

“Your ‘thinking first and wasting time’ will kill us before we know what’s happening. Three weeks here, Alisha. Why didn’t you go ahead?”

“I know more about this issue than you, Alisha.” Nesrin scowls, “You need to sit back and listen — “

“...I know I’m not an expert, but whatever you know is a weight to you; it can sense what we feel and say. It’ll catch up to our thinking soon enough. Maybe we met because of that; you do the thinking, and I do the...doing.”

Alisha turns to really look at Nesrin; “He’s in danger, Nesrin. He’s...scared. I saw, I — I felt it.”

“A *dream*?”

“Yes. I know it seems stupid — maybe I’m just scaring myself — “

“Alisha, it’s *not* stupid, but...So we just make it dance around, and then what? Turn around, break the house down, *acquire* Kiran, and run away screaming?”

“Well, when you put it like that...”

“You’re *kidding* me, woman.”

“As I said, anything you’ll ever need is in this toaster car of mine—”

“—And one extraordinary thing to protect you is in your pocket.”

Nesrin makes a U-turn and mutters something that is either a curse or a ‘sorry’. Alisha is too busy being plastered to the front passenger’s window in the violent turn to decipher it.

“And *I’m* the road hazard!” she cries, only to be ignored by Nesrin, who violently presses on the pedal. The car growls with speed, racing forward.

“Nesrin, the old woman I met first here, thanked me for visiting the town.”

Nesrin raises an eyebrow as they pass the arcade, now on their right, and turn away from the bend that leads to *Hotel Carmen*. “Does it mean something?”

“I think it’s funny.”

“What a philosophical — “

“—Just drive.” Alisha rolls her eyes. “I told you. You do the thinking, and I’ll do the doing.”

They sit in an uncomfortable yet strangely comforting quiet as the car rolls down the street to the cul-de-sac. The building becomes more precise and more apparent with every passing moment.

“Do you believe in God?” Alisha asks as the car stops in the same spot as yesterday. “Or fate?”

“...*Inconsistently*. You?”

“Huh, I have tried to be a good person. I can only hope the powers greater than me will respect the effort.”

Nesrin unfastens her seatbelt with a quiet hum, which could mean anything. Alisha gets out in tow as they rummage through the two back seats.

“I’ll take the chainsaw and this wonky-looking carving knife. Anything that catches your eye?” Alisha rummages through the many bags and containers which litter the passenger seats. While they may be unconventional weapons, they have a town to kill. She lays out her many knives, but they are all too small.

“I have a gun,” Nesrin says, “but I’d like that.”

“Which thing? And why do you have a gun?”

Nesrin picks up a chisel from the many tools splayed on the seat. Alisha’s brows rise. “For what?”

“...You never know.” The woman says, and Alisha rolls her eyes.

“I’m going to forcibly come over once we get Kiran back. You have no escape from me. We’ll get to know each other and learn what the hell any of this is. And question his taste, and also smother him with love.”

“I’m not in love with him, okay?”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

“He’s a good person, so I want to help. I’m not interested in men and their matters.”

*Okay.*

Alisha smiles, one that feels a bit too honest. “Then I think we make an excellent team.”

There is a soft silence for a few seconds.

“...Don’t pin too many hopes on if we’ll get out, Alisha.” Nesrin warns with a steady voice, “We’re only human. We’ll do what we can to get him out, and if we don’t, we don’t.”

Nesrin takes the gun out of a previously unknown pocket of the skirt of her dress. The skirt of her dress is wrapped around like the petals of a rose, stitched together carefully and creatively to mimic an in-bloom look. Maybe she stitched it herself. The gun makes a weird clicking noise as Nesrin fiddles with it to disarm the safeguards.

“Nah, you must trick yourself. If you make it real, it will be real.” Alisha laughs, “We need to play by its rules. We can’t win if we have already admitted defeat. Don’t they say your dreams have to scare you?”

“I thought you would leave the thinking to me. You’re you, and I’m me.” Nesrin rebuts, but Alisha doesn’t know what she’s rebutting. The woman cocks her gun and has her arms in a readied stance.

“Shall we knock, or will you see to its death?”

“*Happily.*” Alisha grins. Nesrin shoots her a deviously fond smile.

Cutting down a lovely door is a crime. Still, they aren’t exactly the pinnacles of justice, considering they conduct their own investigations.

Alisha lets the pent-up frustration exhaust every cell in her body escape through the roaring machine as it desecrates the door, chips of wood and dust flying. Her heart thumps in her chest, rattling around in her rib cage as she finally takes the door off its hinges.

“From this moment on, we’ll not make any funny comments since we’re on direct ground,” Nesrin swallows. “And no more mentions of anything we have discussed. Only the most important questions are in the most desperate places.”

“You know — “

Alisha opens her mouth — the question of why Nesrin is so ready to die for Kiran at the tip of her tongue — but then the porch starts trembling, layers of dust falling down.

They share a glance and head right in.

The house has the markings of a refurbished courtier's manor, with its many passages and rooms linked by various verandahs. The paint is a pearly white, with the fractured areas exposing yellower, older layers the same as the door. There's even an internal courtyard with roses in bloom.

A charming feudal manor house with modernized elements, something she always admired when crafting.

She admired this. She manifested this.

“Alisha, did you know my name means wild roses?” Nesrin deadpans.

It's here. It knows.

Alisha and Nesrin should go all out. They need to. Fear climbs its way up Alisha's spine, sinking its sharp nails deep into her nerves and squeezing them.

“Kiran, are you in here? Kiran! Kiran!” Alisha yells out loud. “It's Alisha! Where the hell are you? It's not nice to keep your family waiting.”

Nesrin grabs Alisha by the V of her shirt's cut, “What the hell are you trying at!?”

“Alisha!” A voice echoes from inside the manor. Nesrin lets go of Alisha instantly, lips pressed into a thin line of understanding. “Oh, and is that Nesrin? What are the two of you doing here? I’m sorry for keeping you waiting.”

Kiran has always had an inviting, tenor voice with an ethereal quality. Alisha has always been sonorous and rich, something people said was similar to her biological father. Yet Kiran and Alisha have always stressed their vowels in the same way.

The echoing voice is the same as Kiran’s. The same mellowed, concerned and awfully careful tone he’d used when she’d scraped her knees in the playground all those years ago.

The same tone when he found her when she held her father’s body as it lay in a pool of blood.

Nesrin cocks her gun. They are careful not to speak.

What echoes now instead of the voice is footsteps. Slow and as steady as they could possibly be.

Kiran walks out from the shadows, where the house’s architecture fades into obscurity as it hasn’t had enough time to develop itself. His round face is sharp and impossibly thin, a mere stick of the branch it was, even if it was no trunk.

All of Kiran’s features and hers were similar. All except for his lips being longer and his nose being flatter.

His eyes and the arch of his brow are the same as she remembers, the same as her own. Almond shaped and unruly in respective order.

His body is willowy, limbs poised in a way that can only be distorted, wrapped in white bandages fastened at odd places. His entire body is covered in a draping of white, the same pearly white as the walls. His hair's dark, tight curls have grown and fallen across his shoulders. There is a thin cut where his lips jut out.

“Are you hurt?” The sentence leaves Alisha’s mouth without stopping.

What the hell happened?

“Oh, me? No! No, no. I’m sorry, Alisha. This is going to be very hard to explain, but.”

He looks different from what Alisha remembers. He is unhealthy, but there is this divine glow to his skin and eyes as if he is an angel. And his eyes focus on a point between Nesrin and Alisha behind them.

The hammering in her chest grows faster and faster as she turns around in sync with Nesrin. Their weapons clatter to the ground as shivers run down their spines.

“You see... my wife is a bit unpredictable at times. Sometimes, he gets a bit carried away trying to impress me and my loved ones. She only wants to show how much they can provide for me. Isn't he the most loving?”

Above the hole they came in through, above the frame of the door and its artistic wood structures, are two eyes in the wall. They blink out of sync, crinkled in a way Alisha supposes is happy. Red pupils focus on Kiran.

Alisha turned to see Kiran standing right behind her, his face contorted affectionately. She doesn't know what the hell she's looking at.

But one thing is sure. Kiran is as real as he could be. Nesrin beats her to it with the interrogation.

"Kiran, you didn't even tell us you'd go missing. Nara was devastated, and I... well, I didn't apply for the exorcism position. It was too stressful for me to do that, knee-deep and *alone* in grief when Nara passed away.

Alisha's eyes widened, and she looked at Nesrin with lips pursed tightly.

She didn't know that.

Kiran's face falls, a silence permeating around them, and for a second, it's a normal reaction that Kiran would have with typical facial movements. It actually feels like him. And any doubt that it doesn't disappear.

The exact playing of a crease in his cheek and the precise amount of wetness in his eyes are too actual.

“Oh, she was a wonderful person to be around...How long has she been” Kiran clears his throat?  
“...How long have I been gone?”

“Too long...” Alisha’s voice trembles, “I know I got busy recently, but — but you would tell me if you were in *love*, wouldn’t you? We’re supposed to tell each other everything.”

Kiran runs in to hug her, but she does not reciprocate. He rests his head in the crook of her neck, and she can feel his bones poking her as twigs for fingers wrap around her.

“Even though it is said, some things cannot be understood.” Kiran mutters, “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. When my wife lets you go, we can talk. Okay? Please don’t cry, Ali.”

An impossibly bony thumb swipes across her cheek. She clutches Kiran’s hand and lowers it.

The eyes shriek with the power of a choir of voices. The intensity of the sound sends the two women to the ground. Still, Kiran must have developed an immunity to his whatever sounds.

The screams emerged through the irises and rumbled through the building, an assault from every direction. Nesrin and Alisha wince and stumble as they try to stand up, holding onto one another.

Alisha peers down to see cracks right under her feet. They begin to run all over the place. In their shock, Kiran’s face morphs into a slight grimace before transitioning into wide-eyed concern.

Alisha never thought she would ever be this desperate to *live*, and that *fear* is all-consuming — and the town is all-knowing and feeling.

Well.

“Are the both of you okay? My love, that’s too much, isn’t it?”

The deep crimson of the eyes begins to glow into something luminescent. They begin to squint, and the red becomes the only light source in the house, illuminating and shading everything and everyone in a ruddy tint.

Alisha and Nesrin stumble onto the ground as the floor rumbles once more. Nesrin lets out a guttural scream. Alisha turns to her instantly, her arms reaching out to grab the magenta-pink sleeve of her arm. Alisha’s fingers dig in so roughly that the fabric rips apart, and she falls onto the ground with a thud as Nesrin begins to fall deeper and deeper into a crack in the floor.

“I’m afraid my husband is not that fond of you yet...She wants to test both — *Darling, is it quite so necessary?* They’ll always protect me. Even now, they hear because they think you’d hurt me — Ah, Alisha is my daughter, and Nesrin is my friend. Is my word not enough?”

The red lights intensify, and a childish cue reverberates through the house again. Nesrin sinks deeper into the fissure. Alisha’s biceps feel like they’re being ripped apart, her feet digging into the fissures, too.

“Wifey, *please!*” Kiran exclaims. “...you must learn of compromise. Hmm, I’ll let this slip one time. Alisha, Nesrin...gather your wits.”

It is then that Kiran does the unthinkable. He giggles; “you’ll need them!”

Then, everything is suddenly quiet. Not a squeak of wood, not a gasp from Nesrin, not the coos of the lovers.

The floor crashes down beneath their feet. And they are falling, falling and falling. Nesrin’s scream echoes in her ears — a hoarse and husky voice doubling and tripling.

She gives a short shout and calls out for Kiran and Nesrin, but then she no longer knows what words have left her mouth. She closes her eyes and mouth, waiting to hit the ground.

Alisha’s limbs are flailing around in free fall. The red light at the top becomes a distant dot as she opens her eyes at intervals, the darkness all-consuming and all-enshrouding around her, an endless void which sucks her in, a silence so loud it becomes eerie as Nesrin’s screams fade into obscurity.

And she closes her eyes, awaiting the nothingness.

It is endless, and then it is not.

Her heart is in relief, glad to be alive. Or something adjacent to it.

She crashes onto what is seemingly the ground before wood, nails, and associated particles of the broken floor come crashing down on her body. Flashing pains across her body that make her vision spin. White, hot and searing pain courses through her nerves and alerts her brain that she's *apparently* alive.

Wait, where is this light source coming from?

A spotlight — on this pile of rubble. Where is the light? Alisha shuts her eyes tightly and screams.

Bits and pieces crush her fingers and fellow upper body segments. Alisha groans as a floorboard lands squarely on her head, making her see double. The dust burned in her lungs. She coughs, and then she heaves, clutching at her throat even as her legs are covered beneath the rubble. She crawls out of the destruction on all four limbs, hair all across her vision as she swipes it back up, eyes wide and slightly blearily.

“Nesrin?”

Frantically, she looks around. Alisha sees two feet covered in pink Converse shoes with black shoelaces.

“Nesrin!” She screams, and the adrenaline in her veins wills her body to a stand. She throws away the pieces, “Answer me, woman!”

She removes a floorboard from Nesrin's face, a bent nail scraping against her palms as she does so.

“Hi,” Nesrin mutters, eyes glancing up at “I’m alive?”

Alisha groans through gritted teeth, tears rushing down her face, stinging against the scraped and sensitive skin. “Yes, I regret to inform you that you didn’t die.”

“No, no, Alisha. We were supposed to die — we were supposed to die, my gosh. Wait.” Nesrin hoists herself up with her elbows, gripping Alisha’s arms as she struggles onto her two feet. The intricate flower-shaped hair bun has unravelled and gathered a few wood chips.

The woman in a battered pink spectrum dress’s face twists and turns, “Its smells like crap.”

It is then that Alisha actually pays attention to a smell.

“Huh? It smells like rotten eggs and boiled cabbage. Hm, also like...”

“Piss, poop and rotten meat. *Rigor mortis*. I didn’t know it could smell like piss, too. Cause of death, perhaps? Alisha, is there a dead body anywhere?”

“Heh, you said poop.”

“Are you five?”

Alisha makes an interesting sound between a groan and laugh, an octave deeper than her speaking tone.

“Nesrin, I don’t know the smell of dead bodies. I don’t know why *you* know it. *I don’t know what the hell happened.* Or *what’s* happening. I didn’t know my cousin straight-up married the buggy-eyed house devil! I feel like crap — “

“—*Alisha* — “

“—Kiran was very much like Kiran but was so forward. And so open? I like him, but he generally doesn’t — he’s like that with only me. I’ve never seen...not with another person I — I—”

“Breathe, Alisha.”

“I *wish* I was still five!”

Nesrin’s hands rest on her shoulders and stop them from shaking. There’s a gash dangerously close to her right eye, right next to the mole under her thick lower lashes. Her eyes are bloodshot.

Alisha breathes heavily, composing herself.

If Alisha touched Nesrin’s face, there would be blood on her hands.

She wonders why Nesrin didn't tell Alisha that her cousin was dead. Nara. Nara had died.

This grief is perhaps why she pursued the person her cousin loved. Alisha couldn't know the depth of these relationships. She barely knew what her own with her cousin was now. She only knows what anyone chooses to share with her.

Their gazes meet, each piercing in their own way due to their own persons, and Alisha is thankful.

Thankful for what they have shared with her.

He called her a *daughter*.

*His daughter.*

Then why — why choose a lover like this? Why not be honest?

Then why didn't Nesrin tell her Nara was dead?

Maybe — Alisha sighs. She doesn't have to *understand* the people she loves to *know*. *Alisha must help*. That they mean everything to her, and she does, to them.

She recalls Kiran's eyes and the slight falseness in his every act here. The smog of her mind parts away. The thoughts blew the sawdust and waste away to ready the figure for its finish.

Kiran will never hate or scorn her for what she did and didn't do. He doesn't care if she isn't normal or has never managed to settle down with school, college, or jobs. He doesn't care if Alisha doesn't get along with the rest of their family or their efforts to marry her off or give her a job of their liking, their suit.

He has never hated her for the things she hated all by herself.

And he needs her, now.

It is freeing to finally understand that. A clarity, a meditative state, births itself in the depths of her mind.

Watching the concerned grey eyes that scan Alisha for wounds. She smiles and lets a hiccup escape.

She closes the space between them. Alisha coughs on a sob that tries to wrack her body and lets her mouth run on. "— Ah, I was *so* glad to see him that I couldn't even get a real observation of it — but it is like he's on drugs. Like he's high."

Nesrin hums, echoing through Alisha's chest; "he probably is. He was calling that thing husband, wife, darling — and — and —"

“—And it was scary,” Alisha wraps her arms around Nesrin in a desperate embrace, “we’re going to die. As you said, we should have.”

Nesrin’s fingers stretch across the expanse of her back before balling up the dirtied fabric of her shirt into her fists. “Did you forget, Alisha? Your cousin’s husband-wife has a test for us.”

Alisha’s eyes roll so far down they might as well be stuck at the back of her skull. She just wants to take him home. She wants this all to stop. She lets go of Nesrin and looks back at the rubble.

“Where the hell is my chainsaw?”

Nesrin lets out a soft *‘Oh!’*

She points to the Nesrin-shaped space in the rubble. “It was poking me under there.”

Alisha raises an eyebrow, lips forming a downturn. “It’s sharp, isn’t it?”

“Yes, a saw is certainly sharp, Alisha.” Nesrin pulls at the sleeve that ripped from earlier — slight cuts across a previously unmarred expanse of skin. She purses her painted lips slightly. “You and your cousin are so different and similar simultaneously. Skin like saffron, Kiran’s marginally deeper. You tuck your shirts the same way, make the same squeaks of surprise, you both like to wear these bandanas —

“—It is a *sweatband*— “

“— and you are both kind to a default. You are paler than Kiran, with a little jagged scar at your temple and strong hands but a soft face. You’re pushing forward, not out of fear, but a mix of sheer stupidity and love — so great that it — that it just makes me want to kill you.”

“For what?”

“For not abandoning me. For, for forcing me to push forward.”

“...Okay.”

“I have grown to enjoy your company.”

“Nesrin, we will live. Stop telling me your last words. He’s my cousin, and you are the only person with me. I *try* to not make it a habit to abandon people.”

“...There was more than work, yes?” The honest question is an arrow to her heart. “It kept you busy at that time, wasn’t it?”

The arrow doesn’t hurt. It just stays there, stuck. Alisha’s heart accepts it.

Alisha opens her mouth and closes it, then opens it again. “I tried to disappear. How could I ever say this to Kiran?”

Nesrin smiles, one so beautiful and warm that it burns to see. “It’s okay. I’m glad you’re here with me.”

Alisha understands the unsaid.

“...I won't ask about her, too.”

A deep laugh from Nesrin before silence.

The quietness descends between the sweaty stench of fear and the warmer, cosier feeling of something else between them. A bond, maybe one they could have fostered with Kiran's presence.

Huh.

They'll set it aside for now.

They rummage and retrieve their items, their locomotion the only sound in the quiet pit they were thrown into.

Alisha chuckles bitterly, “Who knows if the exam allows people to bring their weapons in.”

Not a moment passes after she speaks this sentence; spotlights turn on. One and two and three... They purr into their luminous life, the mechanical sounds echoing from nowhere and everywhere.

A parallel line, centring the two of them.

Alisha only knows the sound of spotlights and associate tech from the many theatres she made props for. The mechanical punch of bright white lights turning on is familiar, and a hollowness consumes her mind.

The ground they stand on rises up into a platform. The sudden movement makes Alisha fall flat on her butt.

“Need a hand?” Nesrin mutters almost silently, extending a scraped wrist to grab, which Alisha gladly does, swinging her entire body weight with it and causing Nesrin to stumble forward.

Dust particles fly around in the air, and the runway has risen. Dark and empty space surrounds it, like riverbanks around a river.

Nesrin’s hands begin to shake. Her pupils shrink as she turns around to face Alisha or, most likely, something behind her.

“Please don’t push me away.” The woman pleads, her voice turning into a cry as she sinks to the floor slowly. Her hands run across the top of her blouse, across her collarbone, as if she could stab herself with her hands.

Alisha shrieks, “Nesrin, behind you! Duck — *duck!*!”

Alisha rolls down onto the ground next to the crouched Nesrin. She hears a whoosh of air above her. When she looks up, her mouth falls open.

Rows of teeth on warped titan tongues, razor-sharp and bleeding — as if they are in pain. The solo muscles lick the platform in intervals, like waves on the shore.

“What — what — *what are these things?*”

“The landscapes of forgotten underworlds, a collection of — ” another tongue attempts a lick, “ — of accounts by Xerxes — ”

The side of a tongue grazes Alisha’s side in its aftermath, leaving a trail of blood as it stings. Pain roars through her skin as it rips apart in the face of rows of teeth, the saliva leaving a stinging aftershock.

The pain clears her head. She smiles wryly.

“NO!” Nesrin bellows.

They’re failing the test.

Alisha sees the spaces between the tongues, and they seem to evolve. The teeth protruding further outwards. The tips start to turn green, a drop of its spit burning a hole in the ground next to her feet.

She rolls, grunting through the pain of the side of her body as wounds mix with ripped clothes and debris,

“Nesrin, stop thinking!!” She bellows over the distance between them as a tongue laps at the ground between them. They both lay themselves down on the cold ground. “It smells you! It knows whatever you think, so you have to stop! You have to stop! *Stop thinking.*”

“Then you need to stop doing it! We need to run away! Alisha! The—” Nesrin screams before the might of her voice descends into a low whisper that Alisha cannot hear. The woman extends her arm out.

“NO!”

Some of the spit of the tongue hits her arm, and she retracts it at record speed with a cry. “Alisha! The harder I try not to, the more it fills my head. The thoughts won’t leave me alone.”

The same choir from earlier echoes around. Alisha closes her eyes for a moment, and the red eyes of the wife-husband stare right back at her.

Kiran.

She takes in a deep breath and opens her eyes once more.

She runs, ducking around from the tongues, gritting her teeth and biting her own cheek as she fights the urge to scream, the taste of rusted iron filling her mouth as she rolls onto the ground and grabs her chainsaw.

In the moment she drags it around it, the tongue smears itself against her back just as the machine whirrs to life, her scream and the motorized birth all in sync.

Her vision doubles and triples, so she closes her eyes and screams, chopping the double and triple tips of tongues she sees. As she opens them, the fronts of the tongues fall, the smell of sizzling meat absolutely rancid.

Alisha bites the inside of her cheek until she can taste rust; she stands before Nesrin with her chainsaw, waving at any tongues that come their way.

Figures drop from the sky, wherever that thing is. It is playing a game with both of them. She spits out the blood in her mouth.

Stick figures made of twisted flesh and blood as if they were recently wrung from bodies. The narrow panels of meat lunge themselves at Alisha, and she screams, feeling the blood lathering across her skin and her wounds. They don't have fingers, feet, mouths or teeth — all they can do is try to suffocate her — but just looking at them is enough to make her retch.

“NESRIN! STOP THINKING!”

“I can't.”

Alisha screams loud enough that her voice cracks and blood mixed with spit flies from her mouth. She channels all the years of woodworking strength into her muscles as she pushes the bodies away and chops them in half. The fleshy stick figures are not like wood. They are not dry and sturdy but moist and squelch when pressed. They pressed against her like magnets to a fridge.

“Die!” She rages, turning 360 degrees with her chainsaw. The twisted meat flies around until there is only one.

The platform begins to roll forward and is decidedly a test indeed. A test of upper body strength, as Alisha swings the chainsaw to and fro, blood and associated bodily fluids splattering onto Alisha, rows of teeth scraping against the blades' metal.

“NESRIN. Nesrin, think about your pink Jeep. It definitely wasn't pink when you bought it, right? That shade of irritating pink isn't a colour manufacturers consider. Somewhere, a child is looking for their pink highlighter all over their room — too bad the hue has been sucked into the car.”

Drops of crimson fall to the ground, forming a pond between her feet. It's unclear if it is hers alone.

The last fleshy stick figure is a tough one. Its limbs morph into something so close to a human in real-time. Fingers sticking out and skin growing. The stub of its neck extends into a head, veins running across the mangled flesh.

Alisha's chainsaw is wedged deep within its chest, right next to a bleeding heart whose veins and arteries begin to grow like vines across it.

“And for all your weird knowledge, imagine you were robbing an ancient library. Or whatever it is, you'd steal. Maybe books, huh? Ah, it's the *most* unlikely and likely getaway car if you were to commit a crime.”

She lets out a hiss as the tongue's acid falls onto her skin. It sears through her clothes and is a flash of pain.

“Too noticeable that no criminal would consider it, too noticeable that the police would have you in seconds. Actually, the day I came here — Nesrin, I really am a hazard on the road—”

“STOP RAMBLING! STOP MOVING AROUND!” Nesrin grabs the back of her shirt and throws her to the ground. The half-cut tongues which writhe in pain turn to dust. Alisha laughs happily.

They can play the wife-husband’s game.

Alisha stumbles, her arms and upper back screaming as she tries to drive the chainsaw deeper and deeper.

The figure’s skin is entirely made, and his face is Kiran’s. Kiran’s eyes are blown wide in pain, eyebrows arched, and body splayed open by her hands.

She’s killing him. She’s killing him—

Alisha feels someone hug her from behind— no, Nesrin’s arms reach out from behind her, wounded and scraped as they reinforce the grip she has on the chainsaw. Steadily, Nesrin walks forward and grips the chainsaw alongside Alisha. Then, the woman carefully removes the little crafts equipment she had pocketed earlier. Despite everything, Nesrin laughs lightly before clutching Alisha’s trousers with one hand and stabbing the heart with the wooden peg.

A stake to the heart.

Kiran opens his mouth, and the blood flows like a fountain. Alisha sobs, looking away even as her hands steadily keep the machine aimed to kill.

“Don — Don’t look away! Alisha. Look at him,” Nesrin’s husky voice is nothing more than a tired scream, “You have to face him. I have to face her.”

When Alisha blinks away the tears and looks at Kiran, his face glitches when she looks at him. His body alternated from skinny and lean to plumper, feminine proportions. Curly tendrils of hair straightening into soft waves.

It’s Nara.  
Nara, for Nesrin.

It’s Kiran, for her.

The wife-husband is glitching.

Alisha’s mouth curls into a snarl as she steps on the open heart, and the veins of Nesrin’s arms grow apparent as she drives the killing blow towards it. Hot blood bursts out, lava from a volcano, a descent of crimson rain on their bodies.

The *not-Kiran*, with one last gurgle, turns into ash.

Both of them are heaving. The chainsaw clatters lifelessly to the ground, half of its edges bent and its silver beauty now red.

“We passed the test,” Nesrin utters, voice breathless.

Alisha is still panting. “Hell yeah.”

They stare at each other as the lights start flickering. None of them really want to look at anything that isn’t themselves. A gust of wind is all they feel before they’re knocked out.

When she opens her eyes, it is impossibly bright. Alisha sits next to blades of grass, wild roses growing in patches. Cool fingers brush against her shoulder, and Alisha whips around in reflex, strangling the other person.

Nesrin is caught between laughing and crying as she pats Alisha’s hands to loosen their grip. It takes a second for the tenseness to leave and for Alisha to stop.

*“I’m sorry.”*

“It’s okay,” Nesrin says hoarsely, rubbing her throat with a fond smile. “Really, it is okay.”

“Hi everyone.” Kiran greets them, and they both race to their feet, instinctively searching for guns and chainsaws.

None to be found. Only then does Alisha notice her skin is clean, the deep ochre not dripping in red, and both of them are dressed hygienically — she can’t know if they have wounds.

Kiran brings out a tray of biscuits. Neither Nesrin nor Alisha wants a bite from that. Kiran senses this, and then the plate literally vanishes into thin air.

“I’m quite sorry you had to go through that, but you exceeded my expectations!” Kiran giggles again in a god-awful manner. “Isn’t that right, darling?”

A low hum vibrates through the air. Alisha hopes it is a hum in agreement.

“Will you come home?” Alisha asks.

“...I’m married now.”

Nesrin raises a calculative brow. “You are no shy bride of the past century. Why follow the strict rules of one?”

A disgruntled hum rumbles through the garden. Kiran’s smile falls.

“As lovers, we compromise. If you further question me and my darling, she might not be so tolerant.”

A lightbulb lights up in her head, electricity buzzing with the gradual conclusion. An experimental train of thought that *must* be tested.

“Kiran,” Alisha begins, “will you visit me?”

“Uh, I...”

*There* it is. Kiran’s eyes dart around.

“I’ll visit you. I’m sure my wife will be amenable. Alisha... Won’t you visit me?”

“If you love me, why would you make me go through all this?” She asks in return. The wife-husband’s scream echoes through the house, the garden pillars shaking with intensity.

“Darling, I’ll let you do the test. What more do you want from them, from me?”

It is then that Alisha hears Kiran’s voice break. It is only then that she sees the wet sheen in his eyes.

“We want to go home,” Nesrin says. “Isn’t that right, Alisha?”

“Lead us to the door, Kiran. Show your family out!” She laughs along.

Why, of course.” Kiran smiles serenely, “*Husband!* I’ll be right back.”

Alisha and Nesrin walk behind Kiran, a bit of an oversimplification of Nesrin’s limps and Alisha’s staggering. They stand before the very same door they came in through. It opens with an elderly creak, and Kiran shoots them a serene smile.

“Take *it* out of your pocket,” Nesrin says in false absent-mindedness, voice descending into out-of-character and out-of-world laughter with only the slightest emphasis. Alisha nods with an equally alarming yet disarming smile, pushing Kiran outside the door with one hand and whipping the paper out from the other.

The paper opens itself up, bursting into flames in Alisha’s balm. She lets out a yelp before sprinting away.

The wife-husband begins to scream. Roars get louder and louder, a deep agony trying to scream itself away.

Kiran chokes on a sob as they race towards the toaster car.

“He says you have broken the rules. So, she will, too.”

Cracks appear across the sky across the buildings as they shatter and fall as broken shards of a mirror. Fissures run across the ground.

Alisha feels her heart sink, and her hand instinctively intertwines with Nesrin’s.

The wife-husband’s scream of agony pierces through their ears, and Kiran collapses as he shouts to counter it.

“Alisha, start the car!” Kiran’s silvery tone is the rasp of a ghost.

Alisha chuckles in the rush.

Alisha sits in her designated road devil spot, keys in and turns, and the engine warbles to live. In a second, Nesrin scrambles into the passenger, having helped Kiran, well, all but throwing Kiran into the back.

Alisha drives so fast that Nesrin is leaning awkwardly against the window, her hand clutching the door handle as Kiran all but floats as if he's in zero gravity. Alisha makes audacious turns after turns.

"The town is destroying itself, trying to search for us. It can't contain us. Its expansion is over." Nesrin smiles with relief, "You remember the way well enough?"

"Well enough," Alisha replies, "but help me out, yeah?"

"Of course," Nesrin says.

"How did you two meet?" Kiran asks in that kind, inquisitive tone, with the lilt to the end and everything.

Alisha and Nesrin burst out laughing. "You think you're asking the questions here?"

"Kiran, what the hell, man?" Alisha turns around slightly before Nesrin smacks her bicep. Her attention falls onto the asphalt eternity before her, stepping on the gas for good measure.

"Eyes on the road, Alisha." Nesrin snaps. Alisha sighs.

Kiran clears his throat, shifting in his seat slightly as Alisha takes a sharp, steep left, and also because of Nesrin's authoritative investigating.

“Should I explain—”

The two women turn to look at him. *Pointedly.*

Kiran clears his throat again.



End

## Afterword

According to my concept, under the project that has been running since 2014 to direct school children to writing, we have been fortunate to have planted more than sixty thousand writer seedlings in the local literary field. The objectives of this project are to improve the quality of education, to promote literature that will contribute to the future development of the country, to hone the abilities of the future generation, and to build a platform to showcase the creations of children.

Our social responsibility is to create the fertile soil for those seeds to sprout and grow. This is the only project in recent history that has been implemented continuously for several years at the school level, provincial, national and international levels for the sake of the productivity of education. This time, it is special that the Pirivena student monks have also been involved in this. The nation should be grateful for the dedication shown by the Principal, daughters, teachers, parents and alumni of *Mahamaya Balika Vidyalaya*.

The printed book is still the main tool of our education. A child's enjoyment from a book cannot be provided by anything else.

It is experimentally proven that the use of various electronic devices to store human knowledge and the distancing of children from books has been detrimental to the quality of education and has created various problems in society. This project, which is being implemented as a solution to this, has been adapting the smart younger generation of the digital age to modern technology by writing electronic works for the past two years, together with school children in the country.

To take their creations to international readers, Mahamaya girls have built digital fiction from their own literary creative abilities. My congratulations to the young writers who have entered it through their creative abilities.

Project Founder and Coordinator,  
Senevirathne Maha Lekam

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## CREDITS

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Alisha's cousin goes missing. As Kiran's case grows cold, she begins her own search. At the last address, she finds herself in a strange town. She meets Nesrin, and they realise that to s they must survive and defeat this town.

