

# Through the Tunnel

(Shani)

by Michael Copperman

Shaya, she tell me the stories mama been passed to her. She wait til after the lights out and the door closed in the basement room so Grandpop ain't gone hear. She sing me a world that bigger and brighter than here in Blessing, Mississippi, starting in her silver-bell voice, beginning with a prayer the way folks do on Sunday and Mama did each night to pass the gift of story and sleep, "And then Lord, we beg your mercy; reveal to us a truth." She let the dark rise and turn about us so you can hear only your own heart and the far off click-clack of the train and them cicadas calling to they love somewhere alone in a dustbin or yard, in the shadows where they love ain't gone find them if they don't call. The shadows where the souls of them that gone still sing they silver bye the byes all whisper-quiet, tickle or hymn half-heard half-felt in the dreams of us still calling back to kittens and teacups and kites and sparrows and mama-fingers tucking us to bed. Shaya take a breath and let it out loud so I know she still searching out the story, finding mama's voice in the many. And then she start to whisper in the warm dark:

"Once upon a time bout now they was a bright, smart girl named Shanique who we called Shani. She live with her older sister Shaya in her Grandpop house and it just them three cause Mama been passed and Papa never been there at all. And sometime Shani feel sad and alone, but she have Shaya to keep her company. And what she don't know is that she also have Jesus, who the Son of God and who send all of his creations for to comfort Shani. And so that how Shani met

her secret friend Farique the Fox, who would come up to that basement window by starlight and put he little black nose to the glass so the pane get white with he breath. Who speak to her without speaking by scratching words into the mist on the glass with the claw of one paw, stopping now and then to think and pull he long black whiskers straight as he thought of what to say."

And Farique the Fox, who always was the champion of mama's bedtime stories, would tell through Shaya of the world beyond the world. Not the cotton fields with they white fat bolls going on and on. Not the bayou with that green-black water and the snakes in the grass and the cypress coming up like reaching fingers. Farique tell bout the world you can only find if you follow the path down to the bayou behind the bridge back by Percy Street, climb the tall willow tree that hung like a long bridge out over that water, walk that branch until you can jump the biggest cypress that stood out the water, scramble to the center where there a hole, and squeeze through into the tunnel. The black narrow tunnel where right away, even though at first there no light, the air already fresh and smell like spring. The tunnel you walk through feeling how it open out so that soon you can't touch no walls or see no roof, and then can make out, distant, the light of paradise where everything easy and happy and good. The world Farique come to tell Shani she always gone have a place.

And then she tell me of all we gone have there, with Farique the Fox and butterflies of magnitude and grace and flowers of petals like

gold and angels who are the light and everything sweet easy beautiful joy.

Cept sometimes, lately, Shaya get off mama script, and you can tell she hearing other voices out the dark. She start telling how out the dank, tangled forest beyond paradise, the spiders and they spider king and he minions the ugly, fat-faced, chittering squirrels with they fumbling hands and they ugly voices start closing in. How they chants they spells and sharpens they swords and knives and demands a sacrifice or they gone fall on the butterflies and shoot them up with they arrows and make theselves capes from butterfly wings and stomp all the flowers. “The spider-king sends the handsomest of the squirrels to demand and barter, a squirrel near as tall as Farique with soft hair and a noble-sounding voice and a fine belt made from three branches woven together and some squirrel-boots of good make. That squirrel named Devontacious and he say it gone be fine to come on with him and sacrificed, that things not so bad in the forest beyond. No saying no to the spider-king and he demands. And so Shaya have to do it, and she turn to her sister in tears, and hug her farewell.”

I whimper even though I trying hold it back, and I can tell Shaya hear me, and she stop. Then she say, “But *that* was just a ploy to deceive Devontacious. As she leaned in to hug she sister she whispered in her ear, “Dispatch the foul squirrel!” And when they turn back together, the two sisters take Devontacious by the ears and lead him to a waiting butterfly, which fly him out of Paradise and over to the swamp where it pitch him into the smelly water like the ugly squirrel he is.”

She give a little laugh, and I giggle too, glad there a happy ending. And then she say, “So it been told, lift us on up to Jesus, Lord, Amen. Good rest, my sister.”

And she go silent and there the slow beating of my heart and the cicada crying for he love out the real dark and the fuzziness of coming dreams.

And this is how you sleep, when you got Shaya to tell how God gone make a way for us, her voice the only path you got to lead you home.

We getting on to school through the cool, sun-bright morning on that route we been walked since I started at Blessing-Lower. Out the kitchen door after calling “Good-day!” to Grandpop who nod to show he heard but not to show he think it actually gone be a good day. Down the long alley of gravel and dirt with the long brown triangle-top fence on one side and the chain-link fence on the other with that waist-high grass coming up out Mrs. Bradley yard where Mr. Bradley don’t mow too close, hiding most of the fat ugly face of that bulldog Yowler who a black shadow behind the grassline growling and gnashing he sharp teeth. As we come past they house before we turn I see Mrs. Bradley with she white hair up in curlers staring for to see what the folks doing—she do not like it that Grandpop have his house up in what was once only white folks place and she ain’t never gone like it, always watching us with her blue watery old-folk eyes. Happy to turn right on Percy and then we cross the street so as to walk the side that go downhill and fall into the green-black waters of that bayou, which full of lily pads and swamp grass and cattails and wisps of white mist and held in by low-hanging willows and skunkweed which smell sharp and rotten. We cross the red and white bridge over the bayou and below in the center is the big knot of cypress like a small island out the middle of the big pool where the road turn and I look but ain’t no foxes going nowhere, only a few turtles who slide theselves into the water trying get away from folks watching them. And then we back along Magnolia past Grayson where Shaya go, and there are them boys in they little pack with they hungry eyes gone slice my pretty sister up, and I wish she wouldn’t go. And that skinny tall boy D who hang with that tall slow ugly troll Piece give a little whistle and say something that

got they whole group laughing, and Shaya glance back at them and tilt she head to the side a little and blow them a kiss and they all singing out Ooowee like they one many-toothed monster mouth and I don't want them to get a bite out my big sister. But she ain't scared.

She lean down and hug me and kiss the top of my head and say, "Shay-Shay, don't do nothing I wouldn't do," which is always what she say and which I take to mean I should do anything I want cause Shaya would run along fence-tops fly across buildings walk the lily pads of the bayou and now she gone throw herself into the mouth of the boy beasts. And then she skipping off to see her friends, through and past the group of boys who got they paws on her but don't catch nothing but air she so quick and then she through and past toward where her girls are leaned to the wall and I take a breath and keep on past that Academy football field with it tight sharp white lines in a cage of fence and hoops of razor-wire shiny and sharp in the low light against the heavy blue sky, and I glance at the empty carport where that Chinaman middle-school man-teacher Mr. Okimoto live and I keep on further and faster running a little until I come to Sunflower Avenue where folks is driving they cars and getting on into the coming day and I hurry even faster cause so's I can catch up to them Wickett girls who walk together and who ain't really friends and who I don't even speak to cause we ain't got nothing to say to each other but who would rather have somebody else with them cause it don't never pay to be alone. And sure enough I catch them walking slow waiting for me to come and we fall along in step together down Farrow with the sun on our faces telling us to grow wings and rise, fly fly into the sky.

Grandpop is not a man of many words. Of words at all, to tell the truth. He see you and you doing right, he lower he gray-whiskered chin toward he chest to mean, 'Good,' and he see you

cutting up or acting the fool and he tilt he head to the side and he brow furrow and he eyes narrow and you get to changing what you doing. Which don't mean he ever whipped me cause I go on and change me up quick, but Shaya got to test he patience if the answer any kind of no.

It been like that ever since Grandpop come and got us almost a year ago from that place them white folks had us after the fire after the questions and before that funeral where so many folks carried on with their weeping crying sadness over that black box that had in it what was left of Mama. But Shaya and me didn't do no crying or carrying on. And I didn't go near that box cause Shaya been told me the truth, which was that Mama had flown up to heaven with that black smoke from we house all bright with flames until she in heaven while what was left here was all turned to ash and soot, that Mama was borne up by a dozen angels with wings of blue-black silk, rising rising rising like a flight of doves flock of geese hawk turning turning almost out of sight and then gone from what we can see, and that what was left for a box was nothing but what was before she rose. Shaya had already told me how Mama felt no pain but only sadness she had to leave us back here to keep on, how she had come to Shaya before she went and told her for to keep me safe and to know she was watching over us both and love us and to be strong now, not to be sad and carry on. So I pretend for her that I ain't scared. And so we wasn't sad there at the funeral and we wasn't scared even at that place they took us after with other childrens who didn't have no parents but who stared at us and snickered and whispered. We was almost happy to go when the lady come and say, "Your grandfather is here for you."

We looked at each other and didn't say nothing but we both knowed we wasn't sure what this gone mean cause this can only be our father grandfather since Mama folks been passed and we ain't never met him. But still I wasn't scared

until I saw his face like stone. Deep grooves like black marker triangles down his cheeks. Tall and thin and gray-whiskered with his hair cut short but not brushed, shaggy patches of salt and gravel, standing there in his old-time loafer shoes and his brown suit and white starch-collared shirt so straight and stiff and silent like he got the idea speaking's something folks did to waste their time. Not saying "Come on," or "Welcome," or "Hello, I your Grandpop," but just eyeing us. Shaya winked to me to let me know she got it, she went ahead the way, and she said, "Hello, Grandpop!" and opened her arms like she knew him her entire life.

He stared at her like she was offering something he wasn't sure he wanted to buy and just waited until she let hers fall, and then he nodded his head toward a pickup so old the paint some color which might have been red orange yellow but now was just the color of rust. And right then was when it started, how Shaya is with Grandpop, cause she didn't go on to the car but went over and put her arms round Grandpop right at his elbows while he stood there without moving with his eyes wide and unbelieving and she squeezed and said, "Thank you for coming for us!" before she skipped on past. And I followed her but when I got to Grandpop he looked at me with his brow furrowed and his chin tilted in warning, his face saying, 'Don't touch me, child,' and so I kept on past. Because I can read what Grandpop means and Shaya would rather make him say what he won't or can't or doesn't know how.

It's hard to say if Grandpop always been so silent and grave cause we hadn't known him before we came. We ain't never seen Grandmom before she passed and it ain't clear what she passed of but her mark all over that house, in the furniture not too expensive but nice, big chairs with wooden feet and cushions that sewn with flowers and angels and drapes in yellows and purples and pictures going faded all up the walls of Grandpop with black hair at least looking at the camera

though not smiling and Grandmom who have her hair waved up and who have a kind smile most times and portrait-pictures of Papa who we hadn't seen before in pictures cause Mama didn't keep none looking all mischief with a sly grin and shine to his eyes looking just like Shaya do, tall and lean and happy to be playing the world for all it got. Nothing make you think Grandpop the type who frame pictures or buy drapes, though he do keep up the way things supposed to be in a house on Sunday morning when most folks go to church. I been seen him there in his undershorts with his dark nobby wrinkly knees sticking out and tiny, bony shoulders and sharp elbows almost alarming exposed out a white undershirt as he start in early before that sun even come up, sweeping the first sound I wake to, swish-swish scratch-scratch as the broom pulls the corners of the kitchen dining room laundry room on the wood floors with them rugs pulled up and then wisha-wisha as he mops them clean and then click-squeak as he open the door and then thump thump out the window as he beat them rugs and then grahhh as the old kind vacuum sputter and suck its way through as he get the carpet in the family room. And then just the creak here and there on floorboards as he going all about with the duster getting the side-tables and the glass of the pictures and the cobwebs about the tops of the drapes. It go on for hours, always the same order, no corners cut, him keeping that house clean doing what mama would have called women's work. Which maybe it was when there was a Grandmom still, or maybe he took to doing it if maybe she got sick, it hard to say. Hard to say how things was in times you ain't never knowed, specially when nobody gone tell you nothing.

What worst is that Shaya don't let his silence be. She ask question after question and she treat he grunts and nods and head-shaking and eyes narrowing like he answering, like it ok to keep on. "So what was our Papa like when he was

growing up?” she ask when he sitting there at the kitchen table reading that *Rosedale Gazette* before we going to school. And he look at her with eyes that mean ‘danger,’ and she say, “I mean, was he wild? Did he cut up? Was he good at sports? Did y’all like it that he went with we mama or was y’all thinking things was gone be trouble? Was you and Grandmom proud of him, before he went off and left Rosedale for Atlanta doing who all knows what that ain’t right?”

And Grandpop sit and look at her and shake he head like answers do not exist, and there a little shake to he chin that to me mean her questions almost hurt and he do not know where to start. And she smile and say, “Well, of course you was proud of him! Cause that how parents is. Well, we got to go on to school. Glad we could have us this conversation!”

And when I try to tell her she ought to stop, she look at me and say, “Shani baby, if we want him to talk and we want to have us a life here then we got to get to know each other. And don’t you see that he care in his own way, except for he so sad and lonely he lost he faith? Look at how he don’t go to Church on Sunday, just set his own house clean like he waiting for hisself to be the part of it that ain’t kept up that can get cleaned away. Look at how when we get here there was two beds in that basement room, one of which was Papas maybe which you got and one of which I has that is new-bought and put together from Wal-mart and both of which had on them clean sheets? You see he spent the whole day when he knowed he was gone get us doing what he know how to for to make us comfortable. He may not know how but we all he got. And if he gone have us and we gone be here then maybe he should learn to let his sadness go, cause it sadness that got his tongue. And it only letting Jesus take back that lonesome that gone bring he voice back.”

And I don’t tell my sister that I have doubts she the right instrument of the Lord, or tell her

that when I look into he eyes when she poking at him that Grandpop look like a man drowning in a pool of he own tears. It not that I think she wrong that he trying to do right by us, just that cause I pay attention, I know his secret: he want to be let alone with he sadness and silence. He just want what he once had. And I know how that is cause mostly I don’t want to follow Farique the Fox to a kingdom of beauty and joy. I just want back the happiness there was before the flames and angels stole Mama away.

Some nights Shaya don’t want to tell no story, but to talk. She call it ‘sister speak,’ say there some secrets only sisters gone tell each other, but she do not seem to notice that she always the only one speaking. I keep my words careful and quiet and most times I don’t see what use it is saying what ain’t gone change nothing. I been like that for a long time, so much so that Shaya used to get on me bout how I shouldn’t creep folks out never saying nothing, but when she saw that hurt my feelings she quit getting after me, and lately she have so much to say she don’t hardly notice I ain’t saying nothing. Shaya, she talk like she think I know what it mean to be her. She talk like I can get in she head and then see the world through she eyes and then take all her troubles and solve them—only I can’t, cause I ain’t her. Cause I ain’t grown. But that don’t stop her from keeping on.

Tonight she telling me bout how that boy D trying go with Keysha at Grayson Middle, and how she do not like it.

“I tell them boys keep off that little girl, let her be,” she say, her head propped on her fist as she lay by me in my bed, her warmth sweet breath tickling my nose as she talk.

“They go on and find her by the ballcourts and I get in front of them and lead that girl off and she fighting me the whole way, saying, ‘Let me be! You ain’t the boss of me!’ And them boys cursing me saying “Get out of here girl, who you

think you is?”

“And I say, “Y’all know who I’m is.”

“And I pull her off away from them, and when we around the corner by Grayson Middle suddenly Keysha stop running and catch her breath with her hands on her bony little knees, and say, “Thank you. Can’t have them thinking I won’t go with *that* boy, but I don’t like him none. Maybe Piece, but not that ugly skinny boy D.’

“And then before I can even say that Piece the worst of all of them and the slowest too and she too young for any of that nonsense them boys gone ask a little girl to do getting on they knees all chickenhead, and how is she gone answer to Jesus or even she mama when she doing things like all that, she gone. And I thinking, my God, how is any of us going make it in this world?”

I shake my head like I get her, like ‘right indeed, what is we gone do to get by in this world?’, but really I thinking, what chickenhead is? And what is that girl Keysha doing for all that attention from all the boys, and is it just cause she have a way of swaying she round backside wiggling she hips batting she eyelashes which caked solid with mascara until they notice? And is they gone come after me? And how is it Shaya gone stand up to them and how is it she just ignore them? But now she already on to the next trouble.

“But the thing is, don’t nobody have nothing figured out. Cause maybe Janisha do know what she doing with that eleventh grade boy Daron Farley and maybe she do not know what she doing, thinking he loves her and all. I been told her boys gone say anything for to get you on your knees doing what they want, but she don’t listen. Talking bout the things he say he got to mean. Saying he wouldn’t lie to her when that boy snake tongue talk from one side he mouth and then the other side. But what do I know? Who is we gone trust, Shani? Cause I don’t want to always be on my own. Maybe I the one who needs

me a man. Maybe I wants me one like Devon who play ball who have this wave to he hair and muscles in he back like oowee and who I heard maybe might like me. Or maybe I wants me a man like that Reverend Wilson who gone stand tall and speak loud and make everybody listen up in church. Or maybe I wants me—”

And something in my face makes her stop, and it maybe is that my lip trembling cause I scared. Cause I hadn’t knowed my sister wants, but I know full well that when you want is when the fire gone come and you gone burn. Cause Mama wanted and I know it why God sent fire and he angels of vengeance down to punish her and hers.

“I scaring you, huh, baby?” Shaya say. She put a hand to my cheek and then she draw me close and hug me tight enough I can’t hardly breath. “Don’t you worry, Shani,” she say. “I talking bout what I want, not what I gone get.”

“Okay,” I say, though it ain’t. I don’t waste my words. I don’t tell her my secret, which is that I always know when she telling a lie, just like I know what Grandpop mean or how I always know when the spark gone mean flames. Just like I know she already burning.

Sometime I talk to mama in my own head. Not saying no words to nobody but myself and her up in Heaven. Not expecting no answers and not getting none. *My mama who in heaven*. Letting them words go like a prayer from my heart to hers. *Mama, since you been left it has been hard to know what to do*. Letting them words rise up. *Mama, I know I supposed to trust Jesus but he has not been taking much interest lately*. Trying tell somebody the truth. *Mama, I scared for Shaya cause she wild. And she try to be you, try to tell me the stories to lead to dreams. She say the name Farique the Fox and she have him write the words on the glass but she just repeating them stories you would tell, pretending there still a tunnel here when the tunnel that you told of was the tree back in the yard of our home that gone where*



*you still was. Wishing my words had wings. Mama who in heaven, all we got now is stories you left us. And I afraid Shaya doing the sins you was. How that man Mr. Mason who work at the grocery and pretended to cry at you funeral when he was the reason for it would come by after I was supposed to be asleep. I know you told me not to leave my room but I come to the door where it was cracked. I seen bodies moving in the heat and shadows, that scar along Mr. Mason back like a question mark, and what you was doing beneath with fingers on he back which sound like it hurt and yet something you wanted all the same. I knowed it was wrong cause of what they says in Church bout only in marriage is sacred or it sin and I know it called down the fire. And now I afraid the same gone happen to Shaya, and she gone leave me all alone.*

*I pray to the Lord and I talk to you, but all I got is prayers nobody hears. Wishing she'd come back. Mama, if you hearing me, know I love you. We miss you. We hope you happy in heaven, and we pray you love us still.*

Wishing for too much. Praying to shadows and clouds, to flights of birds in the sky. To wings that ain't for a heaven that ain't. To Mama who gone.

I try to talk to Grandpop one day, not like Shaya do, but to show him I get him. I find him where he usually is in the easy chair by the tv set with the tv on but the volume off, reading that newspaper through and through. I sit on the couch with my book which an A-Z Mystery bout kids can solve they problems whatever they is and he stop and look at me, brow tightening, but I lift up my book. I read a while and then say, "This sure is a good book!"

His eyebrows raise and I can tell he thinking, "This child is dumb as some bricks and can't see I don't want to be left alone," and so I go back to reading. Except I already finished it and know what gone happen and so soon I watching him again. His eyebrows white and thick like a Koala

bear. His nose long and sharp, and he so thin he like a stork or pelican all long awkward angles. Except when he reading his face relax and he just lost in the story. And then his eyes meet mine where I staring over the top of that book and I duck. Keep on like that for a while. And then he let his paper down to his knee and just looks at me, and clears his throat like he gone speak. He tilt his head with a question. I know what it is, and I don't want to make him talk, so I answer and the words come and come:

"I'm sorry, I know you wants to read, sir. Grandpop sir. That you wondering why I come to sit here when there a whole house you let us live in when you just want to be by yourself. And sometimes I want to be by myself, too. So I had just wanted to tell you that I know that how you is here, in your house. In your life where it just you, and you ain't got your wife my granddmom who I ain't never knowed or your son who ain't here. And so you don't want to talk about that. But you was kind and good enough to take in me and Shaya. And so I hope you know that Shaya don't mean nothing by her cutting up talking back not letting you be. I not trying to not let you be right now, I just wanted you to know I know how you feel. I just wanted you to know that Shaya not so bad a sister. That we all each other got, which ain't the same as not having nothing I know, but we misses mama and even if you didn't like her none she was our mama. And now we here, with you, and maybe you didn't never ask for us but you let us under this roof. And so I want you to know we do appreciate you."

As I talking I hearing my words and know I saying too much. And Grandpop just looking at me with he sad steady eyes and I can see he thinking, 'Wish this girl would go back to how she usually stay silent.' And so I finish and I shut my book and I walk off fast, before I have to see in his eyes that now he have a another big-mouth trying make his life harder. I walk wishing I hadn't tried to say nothing to the only person in

the world who talk less than me.

I wake to sounds of stirring and crushing and muttering, then to a tap tap tap at the window. My eyes open sudden to the room almost black but for the small rectangle of light from the crack under the door from the nightlight in the hall. I look over and there Shaya is, sitting up watching me from her bed by the window, she eyes bright with excitement. I hadn't meant to fall asleep at all in the late afternoon but I laid down on the bed after Shaya wasn't talking to me at all, cause she was all work up over some sort of fight or something that got her a split lip that she wouldn't talk bout at all.

The tapping come again, and she turn and go up to that glass and put her face close with a finger to she lips to hush who there and I thinking almost that I'm gone see Farique the Fox with he steady brown eyes he long whiskers he cursive kind writing scratching truth to the window glass. But I know what I know, too, and so I ain't surprised when there the burning blinding light while Shaya squeal a little cause it hurt when you been in the dark, and then with the ghost-flare still there in my eye I see the shadow of a long devil face with white white teeth that also a boy face with a glittering that I see finally is flashlight off fake diamond earrings and I know the face, know the boy is that boy D. Know the noise I hearing is other feet of other boys on gravel in the dark, the sound of they whispers through glass; hear a low loud laugh that belong to that grown boy Piece. They whole pack there, come for my sister in the night, and ain't nothing I can do to stop her.

Shaya look at me with she eyes bright, and then she stand and I see she wearing clothes in she bed, them jean-shorts that her favorite with them sequin-flowers down the front and she got on some lip-gloss and eye-makeup in a purple color I ain't never seen before. And so I know she knowed they was coming, know she going

with them into the dark. Into the flames.

She don't meet my eyes, just stand and start for the door and say, "I'll be back, Shani. You go on and sleep."

And I know there's nothing I can change, so I don't say what I thinking, which is 'Don't do nothing I wouldn't do.' Cause that include going at all.

And she to the door of we room, the floorboards going creak-creak, and then I hear the creak-crack of her going up the stairs. Hear the boy's voices calling glad and wild, their ugly laughter out in the dark. Hear that front door lock click open, and then I hear her silver voice out the window and the boys singing out, and I press my face up to the glass but the window only at the ground and all I can see is boy's shoes high-tops black white red brown and there the flash of Shaya's baby-blue Converse. And then suddenly I hear a thud-thud in the front room and then a crunch in the gravel out the window and I see the black, shiny shoe and thin knobby sockless ankle and suddenly everybody go silent. Go silent and then I hear a voice I ain't ever, a loud low rumble commanding the boy-beasts: "You boys best get on."

And I afraid for a moment of what they gone try do to him or what she gone say, and there the sound of feet everywhere and then Yowler start in growling and yapping out the far fence and then Yowler stop, and I hear slow steps on gravel and then nothing but silence, too empty and full, and I can't help it, I have to know. I race up the stairwell to the top. And there Grandpop is in the frame of the open front door, him in his shorts and that white-undershirt like how he clean on Sundays, his head and body all bent into one tired curve like he praying. In one hand he have him a rifle with a long metal barrel, but it look less like danger than defeat. He have his other hand on his own elbow like he holding himself together. His lips moving like he saying a prayer to hisself, and it seem like the moment



just his for hisself and I not meant to be there and see, but I ain't got nowhere else to go. And Shaya, she ain't there, and I got to know. "Where she is?"

I run straight up to Grandpop, trying get out the door, and see only the half-lit dark, the sky knife-stabbed with stars, and I try to push past to get out and a heavy arm in my way. "Let me go!" I yell. And I feel an arm-wall, so strong-solid it stop me.

"Be still, child," Grandpop order in he voice low and crackly now like it forgot a little how to work from unuse. He look out the door, and say, like he talking to hisself more than me. "Your sister ain't gone far."

I can't even be surprised he can talk, not now. "She with them boys! We got to save her!"

He furrow he brow. "Them boys is just boys. Which is bad, but—"

"She gone burn!"

He shake he head. "Ain't nobody burning nothing."

"We got to keep her safe. From the flames. Get her back out the forest—which ain't no forest, just the home of that spider king, but see, it ain't a real forest, the fields is the forest, and the boy beasts is with the spider king, and the night is the night, which be dark with shadows and songs of souls and not just mama's stories of Farique the Fox, and Shaya say, chickenhead, which mean she with the sinners, and I don't like that boy's voice, and—"

"Alright, then." Grandpop put a hand to my shoulder to hush me. And I stop cause I sorry cause I yelling all kind nonsense, and I think maybe he be angry, but then Grandpop eyes crinkle almost shut and he mouth turn up and he teeth there about he lips and I realize he laughing. And ain't nothing funny. And I guess now I look like I mad, cause he put his hand to cover his mouth and sort of wipe his face clean. "Lord, child. You do talk."

I notice now that rifle in his hands, which

up close look small and not quite right. He follow my eyes, and then he laughing again like he can't get he happiness at other folks curiosity out he chest now that he start, and he just gone make fun forever.

"Stop!" I say, before I think bout who I talking to, and then I say, "Sir."

He grin at me, and then he raise that gun up, small in he big square knobby-joint hands. "Guess I finally found use for your father god-damn B.B. gun."

I think back to Shaya, out in the dark with them boys. How they after her and now they got her. And Grandpop see me looking past him into the night, and he set daddy's gun to the corner and put his big hand on my shoulder and push me out the door. "Come, child. Them boys ain't got the wind to run far. We gone find her."

And like it normal, to have a Grandpop to follow into the big open dark, we go out together. And the night not still, now, but rustling with Yowler chain clinking and tonking, and gravel-crush steps and the breeze-whisk sloosh of fast foxes away in the far grass, and as we go on down the drive the cicadas start they searching song, calling *Sister, sister, come home.* ▲▼▲