The House at the Edge of the World

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Orion

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For Auntie Khutch

Part 1

There's a cliffside that feels like the end of the world. Its ragged edges, silver and sharp, plummet towards a sea that crashes upwards, like a hand wanting to claw back whatever it finds. It's a place of white foam and harsh blues and the never-ending steel of rock – a sheer drop, an endless horizon, a feeling of nothing, *nothing*.

And on this cliffside is a house. If you saw it now, it wouldn't look like much – though it once did. It was once loved. In the village far below the cliffside, they all have theories about how the house came to be. Some say it appeared overnight more than a hundred years ago, its owner humming happily while she dusted the shelves. They say the smell of warm bread floated down on the breeze – impossible given the distance between the house and the village, and yet undeniable as it filled the villagers' noses and invited their stomachs to dream. Others say it was built slowly, steadily, but because of the fog, so characteristic to the area, people didn't see it until it was already complete. All wonder though: who would build a house on a cliffside that feels like the very edge, the very end, of the world?

I know the true story of how this house came to be. It's empty now, no more warm bread, no more dusting of shelves – it's a house that creaks, a house cracked along its sides, a house lonely for someone to love it. I know the story of that too. I know its *why*.

What you need to know is this: that there is a cliffside, with jagged rocks and unknown depths. And on that cliffside sits a house: four walls and a roof. Hope House. To truly appreciate its name is to show that you understand it. For what else is the last sanctuary at the end of the world, but Hope?

EMERGENCY APPEAL TO SAVE HONEYDEW LIBRARY



Rollie, Mariam, Sara (14) and Amal (11)

Honeydew Library has been a staple in Low Town for years, providing books, events for children and adults, computer and printer access, warm spaces and community support initiatives. However, due to funding cuts, the library is facing closure if the family who run it can't find the money to keep it going. 'It's a part of our family,' Mariam explained in an exclusive interview. 'We established it when our first daughter was born, beginning as a humble set of bookshelves in our living room. By the time our youngest came along three years later, we'd secured the building that became Honeydew Library.'

'Without the library we have no jobs,' Rollie added, 'and without jobs we're facing serious questions about how to pay our rent.' Despite it all, both Mariam and Rollie concluded that their daughters always remind them of one thing: 'We built this library from nothing, and even without the funding, we still have what made us do it in the first place: we still have hope.'



1

Chance

It was the quiet that told me
we had arrived.

Until then, we'd spent the whole day
surrounded by sound:
the sound of our car,
packed full of our belongings,
trundling away from our home in Low Town.

The sound of my sister Sara turning the pages
of a novel that she'd snuck out of the boxes
jammed in every corner around us,
each one marked: 'Honeydew Library:
Books to Keep.'

The sound of Mum humming as she drove,
and Aunt Muriel's operatic warbles:
'The aria I'm aiming to sing
has some famously elusive notes,
but this diva loves a challenge!'

The sound of our dog, Po Tato,
huffing in my lap.
And of Dad
folding and unfolding the letter
we'd received just a week before,
telling us that we'd inherited a house
from a relative we'd never heard of.
Just when we needed it most.

Looking out of the car window,
I remembered Mum's face
as she locked the library door
for the last time.
She looked like all of us felt:
like she was trying not to cry.
Even Sara, whose sassy wit
had lately become snappy and sharp,
hadn't had anything to say.

It had been quiet then, too,
standing outside the closed library,
until the wind had swept in a gust
so loud and strong
that the leaves
of every single tree lining the street
rushed off
in one motion,
the air filling with swirls
of green and gold.

My family didn't pay much attention to it.
They didn't stop to ask how,
in early summer,
a single gust of wind could cause
every tree
to release all its leaves
exactly at the same time.

But I did.

I remembered how one of those emerald leaves
landed on me. I looked at it,
wishing I could hold on:
to the library, to the past,
to everything time seemed to be
walking us away from.

The leaf trembled once,
the wind nudging it in a dance.
I wanted to tell that leaf how scared I was
that my family had nowhere to go.
I wanted it to hear how much I wished
it was like we'd said in the newspaper article
a month before:
that we *still had hope*.

And then that gust of wind came again,
blowing the leaf away.

Less than a week later,
we'd packed our car full of
boxes and suitcases
and worries and memories and us,
to travel over motorways,
and down country roads
with bumps so big
my stomach jumped to meet the sky.

As we drove, the sky became darker,
the air heavier.
What began as a grey drizzle
descended into a hazy mist,
partly covering a faded sign:



We must be close, I thought,
as the car climbed up
the steepest of steep hills,
the mist only growing thicker,
white tendrils pressing against
the window.
It reminded me of the noise in my mind
that I keep trying to push away:

What if moving here was the wrong decision?
What if it was a mistake?
What if we end up without a home?
Now that the library's closed down,
what will Mum and Dad do?

I clutched the small notebook
that I always keep in my pocket,
and remembered the word that I wrote
in there earlier:
Chance. How likely or unlikely
something is, like the leaves
of every tree falling off
at the same time.
Chance. You can have a chance,
but you can also take it,
jump into it like my family, on this journey.
Chance. Like fate, or luck,
not knowing what will happen next.
It was that word that I held on to,
that carried me to this moment now:
our car tyres finally crunching to a stop.

Sara and Aunt Muriel and even Po Tato
suddenly jerk awake, and we all lean forward,
looking out towards the shadow
looming high in the distance,
the shape of turrets barely visible.

Quiet. Like the pause before someone
is about to speak.
A quiet that falls upon all of us,
even my Thoughts,
waiting to see
what comes next.

ARRIVAL

Mum turns the car engine off
and we peer out through the mist-lined windows
into the dark night outside.

'So, just to double check,' Sara says,
her sarcastic tone breaking the silence.
'When you packed us up to a random house
left by some relative
we'd never heard of,
you intended to bring us here?
To this haunted hill
where I'm scared to even open the car door
in case I choke on fog?'

'You should write for the stage, dear,'
Aunt Muriel says,
patting Sara's arm affectionately,
'You have such a way of setting a scene.'

With a worried glance at Mum,
Dad pulls out the letter we received,
looking at it once more.
I lean over his shoulder,
reading the words for what must be
the hundredth time.

Dear Rollie, Mariam, Sara and Amal

I am writing to inform you that upon the recent passing of my client Ms Evelyn Hope, and in accordance with her last will and testament, you as her last living relative are the beneficiary of the following:

Property - 1 Cliff Edge - Also commonly known as 'Hope House' - near Middle Morrow village.

I trust you accept.

With sincere condolences for your loss,

Horace Full,
Solicitor

‘This is the address,’ Dad says, looking
from the paper to the mist around us.
‘I messaged my cousin Cecily,
to see if she knew of anyone named
Evelyn Hope in our family,
but I haven’t heard back.’

Aunt Muriel turns to Mum,
her peach curls tickling my cheek.
‘Are you *sure* there’s no one on your side,
Mariam dear?’

‘I don’t have any extended family in this country,’
Mum says. ‘Never mind anyone
by the name of Hope.
Plus, Rollie, they call you by your nickname,
so it has to be someone who knew *you*.
If it was just standard legal-speak
surely you’d be Roland.’

Roland is my dad’s full name,
but everyone except teachers
and telemarketers
call him Rollie.

I peer closely at the letter.
Dad’s nickname isn’t the only thing
that feels strange about it.

‘The words,’ I say, my voice half a whisper.
‘They’re wrong.’

Mum turns, frowning at me.
‘What’s wrong, Amal?’

‘The grammar,’ I reply.

If there’s one thing I know,
it’s words, and the words of the solicitor’s letter
have been bothering me since we first read it.
‘It says “beneficiary”, and “relative”.’

‘Yeah, because this Evelyn lady
was our relative,’
Sara grumbles.

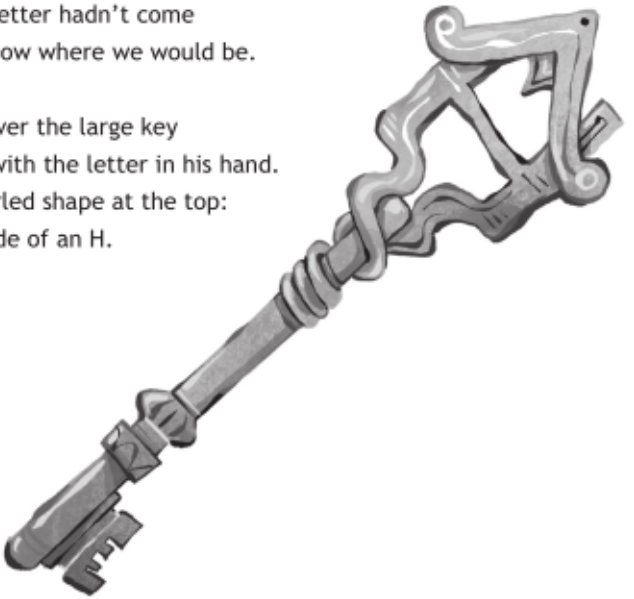
I shake my head.
‘It’s singular, Sara,’
I say, with more emphasis this time.
‘They write as if it’s addressed to just one person,
one relative, but the letter is addressed to all of us.
It should say “beneficiaries”, or “relatives”…
shouldn’t it?’

‘It must be solicitor-speak,’ Mum says.
‘They have their own rules.’

‘And it’s not *quite* addressed to all of us,’
Aunt Muriel says with a huff.
‘Perhaps they didn’t mention me
because they know those of my renowned status
like to fly under the radar.’
She winks at me,
her smile easing my worry slightly.
Aunt Muriel trained many years ago
as a professional opera singer,
and while she’s not had her big break yet,
she has a loyal social media following.

‘Whoever this Evelyn Hope is – *was* –
she has to have known us,
even if we didn’t know her,’
Mum says. ‘And frankly,
a relative we’ve never heard of,
leaving us a house at the exact time
we desperately need
a place to go …’
Her sentence hangs unfinished
with what we all know:
that if the letter hadn’t come
we don’t know where we would be.

Dad turns over the large key
that came with the letter in his hand.
It has a swirled shape at the top:
a house made of an H.



‘Time to see where that key leads,’
Mum says, squeezing Dad’s hand.
They get out of their car,
shining their phone torches
towards the dark silhouette
in the distance.

‘You don’t think they could get lost
out there, do you?’ I ask Aunt Muriel,
as the white haze wraps around them.

‘Well, dear, sometimes getting lost
is half the adventure,’ Aunt Muriel replies,
but even she pauses as she looks
at our surroundings.

Worry starts to build in my chest,
a jittery jangle.
I reach over Sara to open the car door,
my hands moving of their own accord.

Sara grabs my wrist, stopping me.
‘Wait –’

‘I want to get out –’

But her hand doesn’t move.
She peers out
into the misty dark.
‘I thought I saw …’

She doesn’t finish,
and I don’t wait for her to.
I climb over her,
Tato jumping off my lap
as I launch myself into the night.

THROUGH THE MIST

Cold air hits my face,
fresh and damp against my skin.
Mum and Dad's torches
are a smudge in the dark ahead,
floating yellow orbs making their way
to the large shadow of the house.

I start towards them, my shoes crunching
on uneven gravel.

Behind me I hear Sara get out of the car.
'Amal, wait!'

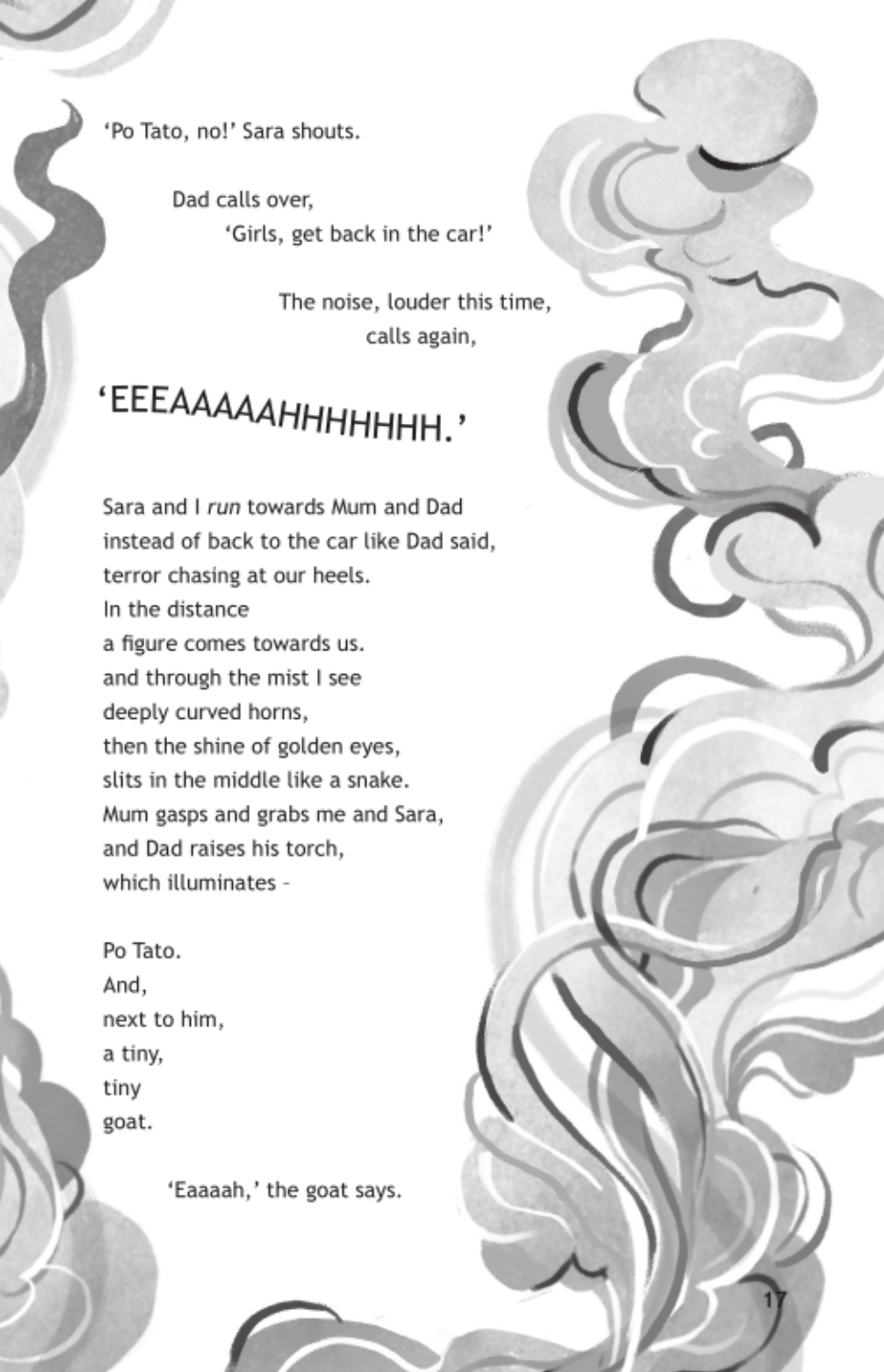
'Eeeeeaaaaahhhhhh,' a noise calls.

Mum and Dad's figures freeze in place,
Mum's torch swivelling,
searching for the source.

Sara catches up with me and
doesn't push me off when I grab her hand.
The sound comes again:

'EEEAAAAAHHHHHHH.'

'Woof!' Tato's bark
fills the night like a reply,
as his small white form
dashes out of the car
and into the trees.



‘Po Tato, no!’ Sara shouts.

Dad calls over,
‘Girls, get back in the car!’

The noise, louder this time,
calls again,

‘EEEAAAAAHHHHHHH.’

Sara and I *run* towards Mum and Dad
instead of back to the car like Dad said,
terror chasing at our heels.
In the distance
a figure comes towards us.
and through the mist I see
deeply curved horns,
then the shine of golden eyes,
slits in the middle like a snake.
Mum gasps and grabs me and Sara,
and Dad raises his torch,
which illuminates –

Po Tato.
And,
next to him,
a tiny,
tiny
goat.

‘Eaaaah,’ the goat says.

Mum lets out a loud,
relieved laugh.
'It's just a goat,'
she says, and then repeats herself,
as if to reassure us all.
'Just a goat.'

The goat turns
and licks Tato once,
then bounces off
back into the distance.

The wind shifts
with a loud *whoosh!*
And, as if the goat
has grabbed the edge of a tablecloth
and pulled, the mist follows the wind,
revealing what stands in front of us.

'Well,' Aunt Muriel says,
walking our way.
'That is what I call a house.'

