**About the Author**

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**Laughter Among the Trees**

*BY*[*SUZAN PALUMBO*](https://www.thedarkmagazine.com/authors/suzan-palumbo/)

The highway to the campground cuts through the granite Laurentian Plateau like a desiccated wound. It’s been twenty five years since I’ve retraced this road and, though the comfort stops along the route have been expanded and streamlined, the forest and rock remain the same: Ancient, silent and unflinching.

I was fourteen when we retreated South West on this stretch to the suburbs of Toronto—me in the back of my parents’ station wagon, the emptiness of Sab’s seat corroding our ability to speak. I couldn’t look through the rear window as we sped away. I didn’t want to acknowledge we were abandoning the search—leaving Sab behind.

Now, as I pull into a rest stop a hundred kilometres before the park, the nauseating mix of hamburger and exhaust churning my stomach, I know going back for my sister is all I have left.

We’d landed in Toronto in the late seventies with a swell of West Indian immigrants. The sepia-washed prints from the time show me as a preschooler in my first snow suit or drowning in a too-large hockey jersey. Typical pictures of newcomers sporting the trappings of being Canadian.

We lived with my paternal Aunt Indra and her husband in their crowded Midtown duplex while saving to buy our own place.

“We get nothing for free,” was Mom’s mantra. Whether she was convincing herself we had a right to be here or that leaving home for this cold, strange place was worth the sacrifice, I couldn’t tell. Either way, it was the truth. She and Dad worked two jobs each, cleaning and trades respectively. They expected me to carry their work ethic to school with me when I turned four.

“You talk stupid,” a boy named Michael said my first day.

“No, I don’t,” I snapped, offended by what my mother would have called Michael’s rude mouth. A week later our teacher, Miss Matthews, called me to work with her in the hall.

“Ana, some words say “th” not “t”, like “three” and “tree.” ” She demonstrated by placing her tongue between her teeth and blowing. “Can you hear the difference?” Her smile made me ache. Miss Mathews was brown haired and pretty like the people on TV and I couldn’t talk right.

“Yes,” I lied.

We breathed lies, contorting our tongues; bending our bodies to suit the cold; feigning that we fit this place. We weren’t taken in by ourselves. No one was. We flailed perpetually, unanchored.

Then, my parents had Sabrina.

Sab came home from the hospital with a crown of black ringlets and the legitimacy of a Canadian birth certificate. Even as a mewling newborn it was as if the city had been fashioned for her, unlike my parents and I who’d been transplanted too late. She crawled early and seized everything with a tiny iron fist. Old women stopped to coo at her long lashes on our summer walks. Mothers at the community centre invited her over for play dates with their Gerber baby children. I tagged along, playing with the younger kids and their toys, always deferent to adorable Sab.

“Are there jumbies in this forest?” Sab had asked on the drive up to the park. I bit the inside of my bottom lip. Relatives had seasoned us in whispers of obeah women and devil spirits who lured you to your death. I’d had the same thought but when you’re fourteen, you didn’t admit such childish fears to your parents. With Sab, their baby, they were indulgent.

“Nah,” Dad said chuckling. “Here don’t have bad spirit like that. We have to lock up we food otherwise racoons and ting go come and eat we stuff. The rest, ghost and devil, dem ting is back home foolishness.”

A weighted quiet shifted into the car—one where the bumps of the station wagon’s wheels on the asphalt resonated in unison with my heartbeat.

“They’re real,” Mom said, cutting Dad off before he could continue laughing. She hadn’t wanted us to go camping; kept saying it was dangerous and dirty up until the moment we left. Her jaw flexed in the front seat. I couldn’t see from where I was sitting if she was angry or in one of her moods. She had them often. She’d gaze into the distance, as if she were transfixed on someone. There was never anyone there. All we could do was wait, speaking in hushed voices until she rejoined us.

My shoulders tensed in the car.

“What you mean, Elsie?” Dad glanced at her. She stared at the highway, mouth clamped. I shivered as if an icy set of hands had grabbed my forearms. Goose pimples prickled up my arms; I rubbed them, trying to keep warm.

“Look.” Sab pointed out her window. Holsteins grazing in a field slipped past us. The pressure in the car eased.

“I did cut grass for de cow and dem back home.” Dad chuckled cautiously. Ma’s jaw relaxed a fraction. I laughed over hard at Dad’s jokes for the rest of the drive, trying to dislodge the lingering cold that had branched into my collar bone and leaked into my ribs.

Mom didn’t speak until we reached the park.

The site Dad had booked wasn’t tranquil or a pristine wilderness like the brochures claimed. Hair metal wafted on the breeze, along with the thick scent of bacon and charred beef patties. Kids crashed through the woods, playing a violent iteration of tag or screaming Marco Polo. Still, the air was fresher than in the city and the trees were a lush green. Mom had over packed, as usual. While I helped her unload the car, Sab chased chipmunks. At ten she was still too small to help, according to everyone except me.

I sat on a lawn chair when we were finished with a copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* I’d borrowed from the library. Some kids had joined Sab’s chipmunk hunt. I watched them whispering at the base of a tree. They leaned towards each other already familiar, conspiratorial. Sab could do that—make people love her instantly. They all nodded then, approached Mom as a pack.

“Can we go to the playground up the road?” Sab gestured to the ragtag group behind her.

Mom looked down, ignoring their dirt-smeared faces. The creases in her forehead deepened. I smirked, bracing for Sab’s incoming tantrum. We weren’t allowed to roam the streets at home with school friends much less a group of complete strangers in the woods. “We don’t know their family,” Dad said whenever I’d asked to go to someone’s house.

“Okay—” Mom said. She looked up and stared at me. I bit the raw spot inside my lip. Blood diffused across my tongue.

“Yes!” Sab jumped.

“—but Anarika has to come with you.” I rolled my eyes. Mom sucked air in between her teeth.

“Don’t cut your eye at me, gyal,” she said. “Get some exercise.” She turned to Sab. “Not too long and mind your sister, you hear?” Sab raced down the road with her new crew without a glance back.

“Fine,” I said under my breath, bringing my book and stomping after them.

Set in a rectangular clearing across from the flush toilets and hot water showers was a steep metal slide, a seesaw and a set of swings. Sab and a smaller boy ran towards the swings. I settled on the park bench nearby and ignored their screeching. No one had acknowledged me on the short walk up. I didn’t have the allure of a cool older sibling. I wasn’t pretty or athletic. Then again, I wasn’t interested in playing with these dirty kids either. *The Count of Monte Cristo* was better company. I sunk into my book, glancing up only after Edmund Dantes had discovered the treasure-filled cave that would finance his revenge.

The park was silent.

“Sab?” Her name echoed, mocking me. The playground was empty. I left my book and searched the clearing. She wasn’t behind the rusted slide. I circled the washrooms, flinging each door open.

“Sab!” I called, my voice fraying like tattered cloth.

Every stall was vacant.

The stench of pee made my eyes water. No, that isn’t true. I was crying. My throat contracted around a sob. Could she have gone back without me? Did she remember I’d come along? Mom and Dad would kill me for letting their baby out of my sight. I slid my back down the washroom building’s wall and pulled my knees up to my chest, taking up as little space as possible. What if I walked into the forest and kept going until there was no light? Until I reached a place where no one could see the disappointment I was?

A twig bounced off my head and landed next to my foot. I picked it up between my thumb and index finger and looked up. Sab and her friends were perched in a massive tree. The smaller boy huddled next to her, giggling.

“Not funny,” I yelled. I stood, pitched the twig back at them and marched to the bench, drenched in the embarrassment that they’d witnessed me crying.

“Bye, Greg. Bye, Ashley, Chris,” Sab called. Seconds later, she was at my heels.

“It was a joke,” she said, panting. “It was Greg’s idea.” She flopped on the bench. I searched either side of her.

“Move,” I said, pushing her aside. “Where’s my book?”

“Ow! What book?” She massaged her wrist. “Maybe an animal took it.”

“You’re the animal, Sab.” I started walking back to camp. She was beside me, like a shadow, again.

“You better not say anything. I’ll tell Mom you were reading your stupid book and never even watched me.” I stopped, rage throbbing against the chill inside me, trembling with the effort of holding myself back from grabbing her throat and choking her until she shut up for good. She’d perfected the art of threatening to tell on me over the past year to get what she wanted. Her eyes sparkled; the trace of a smile rippled the surface of her lips.

I exhaled and left her standing there.

Back at camp, I shut my mouth. Mom would say it served me right for bringing the book and then been mad that we had to pay a fine.

That night, Dad singed chicken dogs on the fire. I crammed them in my mouth, scalding my tongue and ignoring dumb Sab. Smoke ribboned around me, drawing me closer to the crackling heat.

“Move back, Ana,” Dad said. “I don’t want you to catch fire.”

I wanted the flames to swallow me. I wanted to burn up.

“Ana.” Sab nudged me in my sleeping bag that night. “I have to pee.”

“So go pee.”

“Come with me.”

I turned my back to her and covered my head.

“I’ll pee my pants and tell Mom you didn’t help me.”

“Urgh.” I shimmied out of my bag and unzipped the door. She was right, mom would be vexed if I didn’t help her. She crawled outside and moved to the left a few steps away. The night was as dark as molasses and awash in a tide of chirping insects. I couldn’t make out the station wagon or our parents’ tent next to ours. Even the stars were dim. I grabbed the flashlight behind me and flicked it on.

“Don’t shine the light on me,” Sab whispered.

“Who wants to see you pee? Come on, there’s mosquitoes.” But it wasn’t the bugs that made want to slip back inside. The darkness was heavy, as if the press of an unseen gaze draped my skin. We weren’t alone. As I waited for her trickling to stop, footsteps approached. Breathing, steady but shallow carried on the breeze. It curled round the flare of my left ear and froze my spine.

“What’s that?” Sab asked.

I peered towards the steps but it was if an opaque cloth been drawn around our tent.

“Hurry up,” I whispered. My heart smashed against my ribs. I bit fresh blood from my lip. I swung the light.

“Greg?” Sab asked. The smaller boy from the park stood there, shielding his eyes from the glare. My stomach dropped.

“What are you doing here?” I hissed.

“Ashley and Chris saw a moose by the river, wanna come see, Sab?” He spoke with a musical lilt similar to my parents but flatter, like he was mimicking them. None of the kids at the park had been West Indian, had they? In the light, Greg was sallow and thin. He wore a pair of canvass shorts and a short sleeved button up shirt with a crest on the pocket. It looked like a school uniform. Shadow shrouded his eyes, even with the light pointed at them. When I recall his face now, the image of a yellowed skull atop an emaciated body materializes and a shudder shakes my core.

“How’d they find a moose?” I puffed myself up, leaning on my age as a mark of authority.

“Let’s go see.” Sab was next to him.

“It’s behind the trees on our side. You can come, too.” He kept his boney head trained on Sab. There couldn’t be any moose. Maybe some stranger was using him to lure Sab away.

“No.” I planted my feet. “Sab can’t go either.”

“We’ll be back in five minutes.” He wasn’t asking. This emboldened Sab.

“Yeah. Five minutes. Give us the light.” She grabbed and yanked at the flashlight with the exact iron strength she’d had as a baby. I pulled back. “Come on, Ana. You’re jealous he wanted to show me and not you.”

I let go. Sab stumbled backwards with the flashlight in her hands. She stood up beside Greg and dusted herself off.

“Five,” Greg said. He turned without waiting for an answer. I grabbed Sab’s elbow before she could follow him.

“Don’t go.” My whisper was hoarse, pleading. She faced me, the light pointed down.

“Stop. I’ll tell Dad you wrote about wanting to kiss Mia from gym in your diary.”

The sick glee in her voice skewered me. My grip went slack. I watched her fade into the darkness with Greg.

I should have dragged her back or screamed and woken the entire campground. Instead, I stood outside the tent, shivering, every muscle in my body coiled with rage and shame like a spring. I crawled inside when my legs were numb.

“Why you let her go?” I imagined Mom yelling. “You supposed to protect her.” I slipped back into my sleeping bag and lay awake deep into the night, waiting for Greg’s footsteps; listening for Sab’s voice whispering, “Let me in.”

“ANA!” Mom was shaking me, bruising her fingers into my shoulders. “Where’s Sab?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled. She let go of me. I heard the zip door, then her yelling, “I can’t find she anywhere.”

I sat up and hugged my knees, my eyes still glued with sleep. The cold had trickled down my ribs and formed a hard mass in the pit of my stomach.

Dad poked his head in the tent. “Anarika, get dressed. We can’t find yuh sister.”

I waited with Mom while Dad drove to the registration office to get help. She paced, wringing her hands. “No. No. Not again,” she mumbled to herself. When Dad returned with a park ranger, she went silent.

“Was Sabrina playing with anyone yesterday that she might have gone off with?” the ranger asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “A kid named Greg?” Mom flinched like the name had whipped her.

“Greg,” the ranger repeated. “Good.”

The four of us went to the other campsites to ask if Sab was there.

With each “No,” Mom grew more unstable, until she couldn’t walk without stumbling. At one point she covered her ears as if trying to shut a voice out. Ashley and Chris’ mom sat her down and offered her some water.

“Don’t worry,” their mother said. “We’re going to find Sabrina. Kids wander off like this all the time.” She was lying. I knew because a few minutes later she gave Ashley and Chris a sharp look and said, “You two stay here. No running off.”

Dad and the ranger returned an hour later without Sab. No one had come camping with a boy named Greg.

The police created checkpoints and organized a search party to comb the woods. By noon, Aunty Indra had driven up with a recent picture of Sab. Mom clung to her when they hugged, like she was about to collapse.

The picture was of Sab in a white frilly dress from her tenth birthday party. Her smile was angelic, dimpled, nothing like the bossy brat from the night before.

Officer Saunders introduced himself to us. He was tall and built like a stone wall.

“I’m your contact,” he said, “If you have any questions, call me.” He took us to a nearby motel. We weren’t permitted to bring our gear with us. Our tent, car, all of it was part of the scene—even the bags with our clothes were evidence. Amid the flurry of interviews and police, Mom kept leaning on me. She’d never been so soft with me, not since we left back home. I was supposed to be responsible and strong. In the car she put one arm around me and rocked.

Officer Saunders interviewed us, trying to get information about what had happened to Sab. They had no leads except for what I reported about Greg. I sat between Mom and Dad when he spoke with me at the little table in our motel room.

“Did you see this boy, Greg?” “What did he looked like?” “Why would Sabrina go off with him?” “What did she say about him?” “Did you hear anything last night? “Did you wake up at all? Not even to go to the bathroom?”

I answered, “No” or shook my head to all of his questions, not trusting myself to speak. Mom and Dad leaned towards me. I kept waiting for Sab to interrupt or Dad to crack a joke. But they were breathless, hanging on my every gesture and syllable. I savoured the lurid sweetness of it. You shouldn’t like this, I thought and then heaved. Mom crushed me into her chest. I sobbed. I didn’t deserve her sympathy. I should have been dead in the mud like Sab probably was.

“We’re doing our best to find your daughter.” Officer Saunders’s voice had softened. He shook Dad’s hand. Mom got up and went to sit on the bed.

As the door closed behind Officer Saunders, I heard him say, “These animals don’t watch their kids.”

We were updated each morning and afternoon for the next three days. On the fourth day, a detective wanted to talk to Mom and Dad privately. I went with Officer Saunders to an identical motel room. He placed a plastic bag in front of me at the table. Inside was my copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, muddied and torn.

“Is this yours?” he asked, concern masking his disgust for us.

“Yes,” I said, relieved I wouldn’t have to say it was missing.

“Did you lose it?”

“I left it on the bench at the playground on the first day. When I went back to get it with Sab, it was gone. Where was it?”

“We found it by the river.” His faded denim-colored eyes fastened on me like fish hooks. My stomach cramped. I forced myself to keep still.

“Can I have it back?” I said, stifling the wobble in my voice. “It’s from the library.”

“Sure.” His lips rose in a toothless smile. “You know, I have a kid sister. Was Sab annoying like mine?” He watched me shake my head. He didn’t believe me but didn’t press more. He took me back to my parents when the detective was done.

“I’m not leaving.” Mom was trembling. I sat next to her on the couch. She put her arm around me to steady herself.

“What about Ana?” Dad’s laughter had withered. He pointed at me with his open palm. “She can’t stay here de whole time, we can’t send she back to stay with my sister alone.”

Mom shrunk next to me. She stared at her feet.

“Okay,” she said quietly. “For Ana.” Heat rose in my cheeks. I buried my face in her shoulder.

A week later, we packed our belongings that had been released and drove back to the city. Officer Saunders remained our contact. He called every week to update us on the search. As the summer wore on, his calls became less frequent. They dwindled into the winter becoming a drip that eventually dried up.

Sab’s case was stone cold.

My parents went back to work a month after we returned.

“Bills don’t stop even when yuh child lost,” Dad mumbled the morning of his first day back.

I spent the oven hot days reading or watching TV. On Thursdays, I stayed at Aunt Indra’s for company at Aunt Indra’s insistence. But where I was invisible before, now, the family tiptoed around me like a thin teacup. I’d walk in to a room and my cousins would clam up. “Aunties” I’d never met would sip tea in the kitchen, clucking about how sorry they were for my mama. Their pity, so viscous I gagged on it.

Mom would call me when she was home from work and I’d walk over. When Dad returned, we’d eat in tomb silence before he left to drink himself unconscious in the garage. Mom had all the time in the world for me now. In between her bouts of unresponsiveness her words were blunt and sweet. She made my favourite curries. She hugged me every night even though my longing to be tucked in had faded years ago.

Sab remained between us. Her absence slicked over my skin, like a membrane. I glimpsed her, as she was, bounding up the stairs; breathed her scent as I walked by her locked room; heard her whisper, “shut up, loser” before I drifted to sleep. I never saw Greg again. He’d gotten what he’d wanted.

One night, while looking at myself in the mirror, Sab’s voice clawed up my throat reflexively. “You’re ugly. Everyone hates you.”

“You’re a bitch, Sab,” I snapped back.

A smile cracked my lips. From then on, whenever I was alone, I spoke for Sab.

There were no school hikes for me. No week-long grade ten wilderness trip or renting a cabin at Wasaga Beach with my friends when I turned seventeen. Mom kept me home from everything “wild.” I was free, as long as I was caged within the steel and concrete confines of the city.

When she walked in on me and Marit, a university “friend” I’d brought home, kissing on my bed, she closed the door without a word. We went downstairs, braced for a fight. Mom was sitting at the kitchen table, waiting.

“All yuh want some cake?” she asked, as if this were a cherished routine.

“Yes, thank you,” Marit said. She slid into the chair across from my mother and quirked her lips into a smile. I raised my eyebrows as Mom stiffened and passed Marit a plate of coconut cake. I remember stilted small talk and Marit asking my mother about her job while being utterly charming. Mom looked back and forth between us. When Marit had licked her fork clean, we walked her to the door.

“Come back anytime.” Mom was distant but sincere.

“Thank you, Mrs. Dindiyal. I will.” Marit winked at me before she turned and left. I closed the door and leaned my back against it.

“So?” I asked breaking the prickly silence. “Do you like her?”

“Ana.” She grimaced, like she’d tasted rancid milk. “She looks like an older Sab.”

“Fuck that.” I left her at the bottom of the stairs. I locked myself in my bathroom and steadied myself against the vanity. A voice bubbled up my throat. It was grittier than my earlier versions of Sab’s voice.

“She looks exactly like me,” I whispered. I wretched bile into the sink until the acid scorched my throat.

I moved out after graduation and survived by feeding off my memories of Sab like a maggot. I blended her voice with mine, usurped her unquestioning confidence to land a job at a prestigious law firm; transposed her charm into adulthood and used it to fuck the women I wanted. I locked pathetic Ana inside me, trotting her out for family and the occasional drinks with Marit. I flooded the space left by Sab while it ate Dad’s liver and stole Mom’s connection to the present.

I constructed the life I dreamed Sab would have had and lived it. Sab owned a waterfront condo and sipped champagne with top tier clients. Sab was profiled in the Saturday paper as the quintessential immigrant success story. Sab comforted relatives and said, “Thank you for coming,” at Dad’s funeral. Sab organized mom’s move into a nursing home when she could no longer live alone.

Sab, Sab, Sab. I glutted myself on the potential of her unfinished life. Yet, the frost that had blossomed in me so long ago had fractalized, coating my intestines and invading my lungs. Sometimes, I’d take a knife to the inside of my upper arm and slide the blade beneath my skin to check if I was completely numb. The face reflected in the blade was always my own.

Soon, I only allowed Anna to crawl out of the morgue inside me to visit Mom at the retirement home.

The lights in mom’s apartment were dim. She let me in, kissed me on the cheek and sat on her couch, staring at the empty park across the street.

“How are you?” I tried to catch her eye. The bouts of disassociation had lengthened. “Did you take your meds today?” I put my hand on her lap, hoping to get her attention. She didn’t move.

“Do you see him?” she asked, never taking her eyes from the park.

“Mom?”

“The boy in de uniform.” The tremor in her voice matched the chill that surged within me. My heart battered my ribcage like it did that night in the dark. “I was eleven.” She stood and went to rifle through her dresser drawer. My stomach turned in the interval. *Don’t tell me, don’t tell me,*I thought. *Let it burn with you in the crematorium when you die.*My palms slicked with sweat.

She came back with an envelope. Inside were black and white photos of her as a child standing next to a boy three or four years younger than her. She flipped one of the tarnished pictures over. The words: Cousins Elsie and Greg, 1962 were written in block letters on the back.

I snatched the photo from her, my hands shaking. Greg was well fed and sturdy, nothing like the skeletal boy we’d encountered in the woods.

“How?”

“We went to play by de river.” She talked as I studied the other pictures. “It had heavy rain but I didn’t want to go straight home from school and tie up the goats.” She paused, allowing space for me to speak. I was frozen, my jaw locked around the truth about Sab and that night too awful to speak. “Greg’s face was all bruised up like he get beat with a stick when they pulled him out de water.” She swallowed. “Papa made me see him. ‘Look,’ he said. ‘Look what your carelessness did.’ ” Her eyes shifted, tracking movement from the swings to the slide. She quivered, her eyes never leaving the park.

I put my arm around her. Exhaustion had eroded her strength. She was brittle, a shred of the mother I’d known. She’d snap if I squeezed too hard.

“I couldn’t let you go to de woods after what happened to Sab. I heard him laughing, that day, after that ranger man came.”

I swallowed.

Mama pushed me to leave. Said, “ ‘dis go haunt you here.’ You can’t outrun the past, Ana, even if it’s dead and drowned in another country.” She fell silent. We sat in the dark, mom barely moving. I left after she’d readied for bed.

Ma passed away soon after. I cremated the photos with her. Not long after, I pushed a full cart down the aisles of the local camping outfitter. I bought the gear I needed, then texted Marit.

I stood on Marit’s porch. We hadn’t seen each other in nine months.

“Hey, Ana.” She flashed her knee-weakening smile, taking me in. “I’ll help unload the car.”

“No,” I held my palm up. “I have to do this alone.” She put her hands in the air and then crossed them over her stomach when I didn’t laugh.

I crashed around with poles and spikes for the next hour in her backyard while she watched from the window. I was drenched in sweat but the tent went up. At six, she dragged me inside and plied me with pizza and beer. Her curly hair was up and her face still dimpled when she smiled. This is what Sab would have looked like, beautiful; nothing like the fraud I had become. I strained against the repulsive attraction to Marit welling inside me.

At eight, I left her in the kitchen and went out to the tent. I lay on my back, listening to the crickets in her yard. A moment later Marit unzipped the door.

“Sleepover?” Mischief shone in her eyes.

“No.” I looked up at the ceiling.

“Ana, we both have a lot of practice sleeping alone. You’ve got this portion down.” I relented and she settled in next to me.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“Can’t say.”

“Then why?”

“To find someone,” I answered. She pursed her lips. I grabbed her hand and laced my fingers in hers—it was the only explanation I could offer her.

“You’re always cold.” She let go of my hand and reached over to stroke my left arm. The warm weight of her on top of me cracked the shell of ice inside me. I cupped her face and kissed her cinnamon mouth so hard it took both of our breaths away. She pulled away first. Sorrow flooded her face, making the tiny muscles in her chin twitch. I bit my lip. She knew what I wanted.

“I hate you.” The words were molten. I pulled her down and we melted into each other.

On my way out of the city, a few weeks after, I mailed her my will.

The girl in the camp office is blue-eyed and rose-cheeked. Her sun-kissed blonde hair pulled into a messy pony tail. She’s the perfect poster girl for the health benefits of the Canadian outdoors.

“Keep the blue on your dash. The white you can clip to the post at your campsite,” she explains as she hands me my permits. Her smile is river-rock smooth. She gives me a few park programming schedules with my receipt for firewood. It’s prohibited to bring your own wood in case you blight the forest with a foreign disease.

“Thanks, I’ll check these out.” Another lie to add to the ledger of falsehoods I’ve told. The exchange reminds me of Miss Matthews. I’m fifteen years older than she was back then and the memory of her still makes me quake.

I put the firewood in the truck and rumble down the gravel roads to my lot. It’s a different site, radio free and silent, on the complete opposite side of the park. But it’s right.

I fall asleep exhausted after pitching the tent and wake up starving. I hike the next day. The quiet of the woods is distinct from the deathly silence of a house. It’s full and I submerge myself in it.

The second night is cooler. The darkness is so damp, it sluices against my skin. I sit by the fire wrapped in a blanket late into the night, reading a copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* I’ve brought with me.

“Anarika.” The crisp whisper in my ear makes the hair on my neck stand. My eyes adjust. Smoldering embers are all that’s left of the fire. “Come on, loser,” the words, breathed on my lips this time taste of ash. “Come down to the river.”

Sab’s standing across from me, an emaciated girl shrouded in grey smoke. Her eye sockets are stuffed with writhing worms; a rictus grin is plastered across her face. I recoil. No, I don’t want to go with her. I want to go back to the city. But this is a debt I must pay. I toss *The Count of Monte Cristo* into the fire. The flames rekindle, and consume it. I grab my flashlight.

Sab holds a gaunt hand up.

“No light,” she hisses. I slip the flashlight in my pocket and follow her into the trees.

She walks ahead of me, smoke trailing from her skeletal frame. I struggle to keep up, tripping over rocks and twigs. The forest closes in. The air is humid, hard to breathe. Branches entangle me, ripping at my skin. They claw at my face, penetrating my mouth. I’m a bloodied mess when we reach a low cliff above a moonlit river. Sab’s below me on the rocky bank.

“Come on, stupid,” she says in my ear. She shoves my back. I stumble down the mossy rocks and land on my hands and knees. She doesn’t wait, doesn’t care about my lacerated shins. She leads on, the rocky cliff face to our left and the sparkling river to our right. I stagger after her. How long have we walked? Where is she taking me? I have no breath to ask. She stops at a crevasse in the cliff and slips inside. I linger at the mouth, not wanting to trespass this space, carved by glacial ice eons ago.

“Hurry up. I’ll tell the police you killed me.” Her voice ricochets in the cavern and pierces my chest. I step inside. It’s cold. The chatter of my teeth fills my skull. I put my right hand on the wall to brace myself. It’s tacky and wet. The darkness is as black as that molasses night long ago. The space narrows as I follow Sab’s voice deeper into the cave, away from the river.

“Stop,” she says when I can touch either side of the fissure with my arms outstretched. “Light.”

I reach for it and flick it on.

In the circular glow is a skeleton along with the smashed remains of the yellow flashlight Sab took with her when she left with Greg. I kneel next to her, unable to look away. I caress her femur, her tibia, her detached jaw. They’re frigid; colder than I’ve ever been. I rub her ribs, trying to warm them. She’d been here all this time, her flesh and blood rotting away while I masqueraded who I’d imagined she’d become; when all she’d been was a dead girl in a hole.

“There’s room for you, Ana,” she says. “I’ll tell mom if you leave.”

I kiss her cheek before I lie next to her and switch the flashlight off. The cave is silent. I close my eyes and relive the lingering touch of grass on my calves from the morning before. A dense cold creeps up my body, pressing the air out of my lungs. It slithers up my neck and freezes my chin. I put my hand on Sab’s chest as an icy grip clutches my throat and squeezes.