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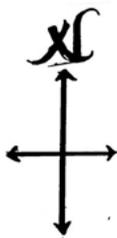
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For the ones who have seen their beast and realized that  
it can bleed.



KUKUYO  
POLICE  
STATION



FLAMBEAU  
PUB



DRIVE-IN



CRECHE COURT

KUKUYO  
PROPER

SQUATTER'S  
SETTLEMENT



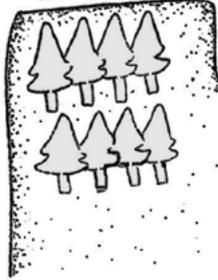
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MANGER STREET.

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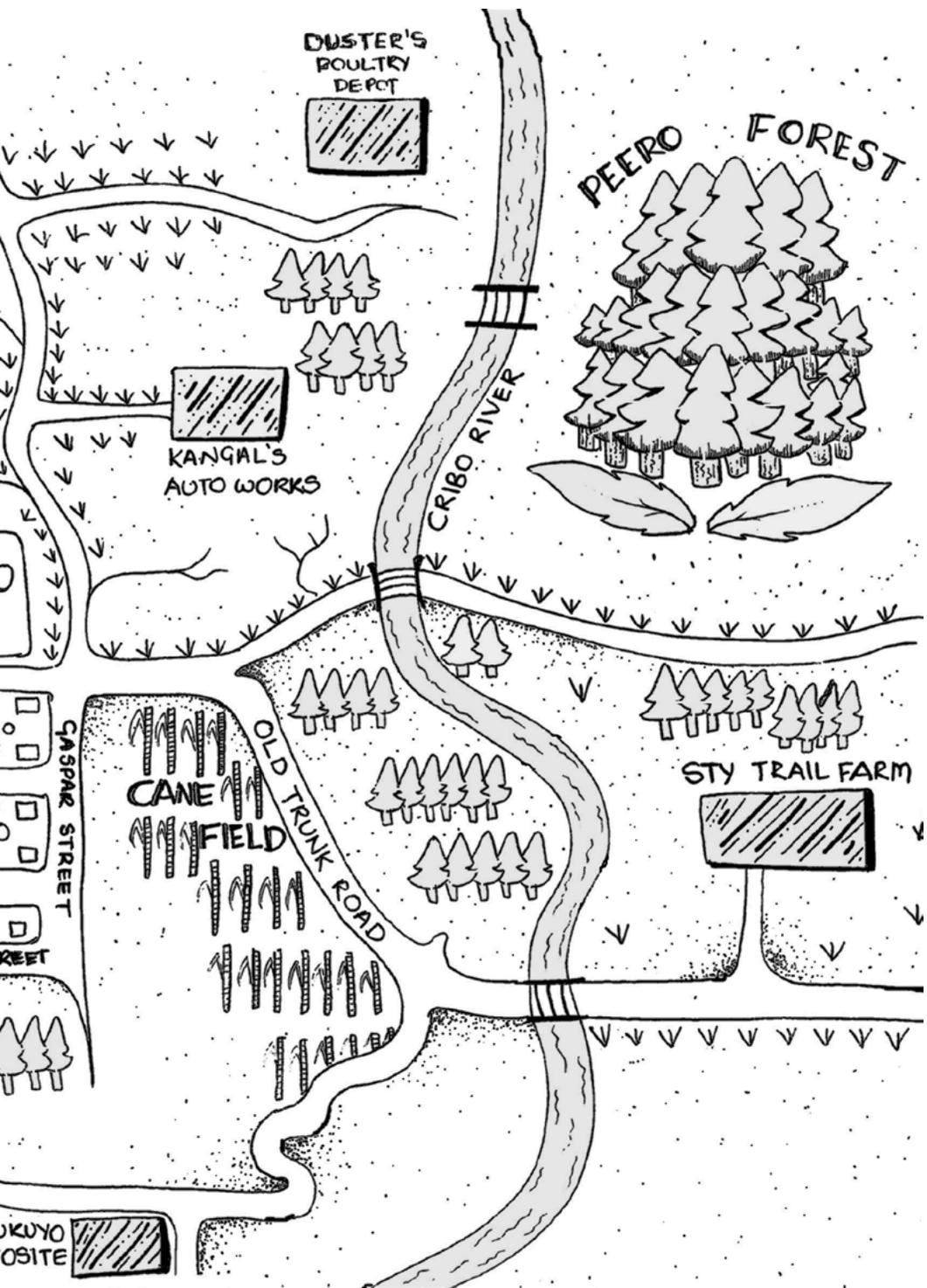


SUNDEW



KUKUYO  
COMPOUND

KUKUYO  
COMPOUND



**THE BEAST  
OF KUKUYO**



*Jessica Fletcher: "You may end up being a character."*

*David Tolliver: "And what would I be? A victim, a suspect, a killer?"*

*Jessica Fletcher: "I don't know. I haven't made up my mind yet."*

**Murder, She Wrote**

(Season 1, Episode 5: 'Lovers and Other Killers')

1992, Kukuyo Village, Trinidad.

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**MOUTH OF THE BEAST**





CHAPTER 1

**IT COULD MAKE  
YOU FEEL LIKE  
A STAIN**



It come from the dark and take her. That's what they was saying. Dumpling Heera went missing during the power outage. The family didn't realize till the morning come. The bed was empty and the window was closed, glass still intact. They turned the whole house upside-down. She was gone.

Dumpling was her daddy's child and her daddy had money—so on that same day, Kukuyo was under martial law. Everything on lockdown. Everybody had to mind their manners. Uniforms swarming the streets. Flashlights peeping through the slats of every shed, the brambles of every bush. Children packed up their galvanize-sheet wickets and cleared the roads. Nobody got to play after sundown.

I remember watching all of it and thinking, *Nobody going to do all of this if Rune Mathura gone missing*. We was both fifteen-year-old girls, both in the same class, both from the same village. But she was rich and lightskin and live in a big house up in Creche Court. I know it was a bad thing to think, but I think everybody thinks about things like that sometimes. Might as well be honest here. If it was me or anybody who look like me, it wouldn't be no front-page news.

Things went on like that for four nights.

On the second night, they found a pair of denim shorts in one of the drains at the crossroads of Gaspar Street. The mother barely looked at it, told the police it ain't belong to Dumpling.

On the third night, there was another power outage. The blackouts was getting more and more frequent. There was some groundwire problem, the people said—they always take a million years to fix things like that in Kukuyo. The village was different in the moonlight. Dark blue. You could see the stars and the dust swirling from the roads like phantoms over the bushes. In the darkness, the coconut trees in the distance stretched like serpents. You coulda hear strange things in the darkness—things that wasn't

there. Groans from the slagheaps, pounding from the water tanks, pitter-pattering from beneath the road.

The night she disappear, I was supposed to be there at her house. Me and Dumpling never talk much before she had the misfortune of getting lumped in with me to do a project on the Spanish and Incans. We just had to do a part on the battle between Atahualpa the Inca ruler and Pizarro the conquistador, whose name always made me hungry for pizza. The project wasn't due for three weeks but Dumpling was the kinda person to get things done early. But she called at the last minute, telling me not to bother come. She ain't say why. I ain't going to lie—I wasn't bad at school but Dumpling was on a whole different level. I thought I was just holding things back.

Mr. and Mrs. Heera never make me feel welcome either. They never said it out loud but I know they didn't want me in the house. Me and Dumpling had to do our work on the porch. I suppose they thought I woulda be dragging grime across their carpet. Maybe I woulda lift my leg up and pee on the furniture. Even my best friend, Tiki—his father ain't never like me. Constantly warned Tiki about *darkskin coolie gals* like me. *See that Rune Mathura?* he used to say. *Gals like she does make man end up in hospital!*

You could be fair, fairer than fair, whiter than the clouds, paler than a corpse and you could get the royal treatment. But if you was dark, you might as well be dirt to some people. You might as well be a shadow. I knew not everybody think this way. But the few who do, it could mess you up. It could make you feel like a stain. Like you know you was out of place standing next to somebody lightskin. You ain't need someone to hold up a mirror to you or show you a photo of it—you just know deep down you was spoiling the scenery.

So it wouldn't have been no surprise to me if the Heeras felt the same way.

Dumpling was always nice to me, though. She was one of them girls you would hate almost immediately when you see them. The girl was pretty, smart and rich. What it had not to hate? Even the shadows under her neck had a glow. She had a little falling out with Mrs. Heera while we was doing our work. Her mother had come out and called her inside. I shifted a little so I could hear.

“Go change your clothes right now, young lady,” the mother said.

Dumpling was wearing a coral-pink crop top with denim cutoffs. I wasn’t wearing much more than that—a white vest with some old cargo pants rolled up above my knees. I mean, this is Trinidad. We wasn’t going to see the Queen of England or nothing.

Dumpling just shook her head. “Mom, we’re in the tropics—”  
“It looks dreadful.”

“Mom, nobody is here. Nobody is watching—”

Then I hear—*whap!* And Dumpling shriek out. I jumped, gritting my teeth. I didn’t want to turn around, pretended I didn’t hear nothing. My gaze was on old smelly Salaman, who was there to paint the front gate. The slap had catch his attention too. The mother then hiss out, “Cover up your puppies! God is watching!”

Dumpling went in and changed. When she came back, I saw the handprint on her cheek, but she went on like nothing had happen. I didn’t expect nothing else. I suppose she was afraid I would tell people. It must be tiring to keep up appearances. Always a snake in every Garden of Eden, I guess.

She was even nice to Salaman, who was still looking our way. He went back to painting once she took her seat. Salaman live over in this big brokedown house on Gaspar Street. People used to call it the madhouse. He had no family. People mostly left Salaman alone. Never ask him for nothing, never invited him to nothing, never offered him prasad for Divali. He had the appearance of a hobo, with long, tousled grey hair that looked like it coulda been

washed with muddy river water. His beard was matted, peppered with dank yellow, long enough to shade the muck on his neck. He knew who had money because he used to sweep up the front of every rich family's house. Some of the storefronts as well. If he was lucky, he woulda get to mow a lawn or slap some paint around like he was doing now.

He had an MGA Roadster, which they say he inherited. People was always telling him that he coulda sell it for a small fortune and wouldn't have to be sweeping and scrunting. He barely drove it anyway. He always smiled and shook his head at people who suggested it though. There was plenty stories about him but they was so strange that it was hard to believe them. I mean, we didn't know the man's real name or nothing—I don't think anybody did.

Dumpling brought the man cream soda and a radio to listen to while he worked. It make me think about myself a little. I wasn't nice to much people back then. Looking back, I feel like people hardly ever gave me a chance to be nice.

She fixed her gaze on an illustration of the Incans, how they was all dressed in feathers and fancy patterns as they was dancing and carrying their leader up the road to Cajamarca. "You know what this remind me of?" she said, biting her fingernail. "When you all were little, every Carnival Monday morning, you and the other children used to put on these monster masks and go around house to house. But you used to skip ours."

She was talking about *jab-jab*, where we used to dress up in old clothes and pound broomsticks against the road. We went house to house doing this and the people would pay us to go away. Not much. Maybe ten cents. Twenty-five if you was lucky and early. That was the thing. We stayed out of Creche Court and the squatter settlement. "Want me to be honest?" I tell her. "Didn't make sense expecting money from people who was too rich or too poor."

"I understand." She bowed her head, giving a tiny, embarrassed smile. "I used to wish I could join in."

I shook my head. "The whole thing was kinda stupid. At the end of the day you only had like five dollars in your pocket."

"The money don't matter." As she said that, it come to mind that only a rich girl would say something like that. I know it was bad to think that. Then she asked, "Which one were you?"

"What you mean?"

"Which mask?"

"I was a pirate woman," I replied.

"Alma Reese used to be with you all, right?"

"Just once."

"And your boyfriend was the werewolf, right?"

I began to laugh—more out of nervousness than anything. "Boyfriend? You mean Tiki?" I was shocked that she woulda even notice something like that. Before this project, she never even say a word to me, but I try to keep it straight. "It ain't like that," I tell her. "It ain't have no name for what we have."

"What does that mean?"

"We just have the habit of spending time together. We could get by the night talking shit, playing rummy and speed, trying to record the latest songs on old cassettes. Some nights we carry the radio down to the drive-in and sit on the hill and take in a movie. Tiki knows the FM code to get the audio. When the batteries run out, we have to guess what the people are saying. Last week we catch *Beauty and the Beast*."

I was spilling out more details than I shoulda, but I didn't feel like I shouldn't be. Something felt right about talking to her. I can't say me and Dumpling was friends. But I know right then I wanted to be. I felt like being round her woulda be good for me. Make me a better person.

"You two sound like a couple," she said, letting a smile break

through.

I shrugged. "I suppose I can't stop you from thinking that."

Dumpling started playing with her toes. Then she said, "You know, I never had anything like that. I feel like there's nothing for me here."

"Nothing?"

She pull her knees up to her belly, then looked me right in the eye. "I feel like if I run away, I could start over."

My first instinct was to laugh but I held back. I knew where she was coming from. But it make me nervous that she was trying to connect. She had to be desperate, how unashamed she was to be making this confession. Maybe I just catch her at some rare, vulnerable time. I dunno. All I know is that I felt strangely flattered. It's hard to talk to people, to be real with them. You never know who they gonna tell. Still, I had no words for her. I just sat there, fixing my gaze on her. Finally I said, "Running don't solve anything."

I could tell she was disappointed by my response. Perhaps she thought I woulda understand. I mean, she was right. I did. At least I think I did. She had money, she was pretty, she could probably be with anybody or be anything she want to be in the future. Nobody bully her in school—didn't have to deal with no nicknames like Rat. Then some people would just laugh and ask what the hell a fifteen-year-old rich girl have to run from, that life is still good and you should wait till you have a mortgage and bills to pay. Truth is, you could be all of that and still feel alone and empty and fed up. You can't tell anyone because they would just make you feel guilty.

But I wasn't brave enough to say anything else. Couldn't find the right words, though I feel now that the words didn't have to be right. I just stayed quiet, my bottom firm against my seat—like I was waiting for airplane turbulence to stop. I just remember for the rest of that day I had it on my mind how much impact you can have when someone put themself in front of you like that—especially

when you ain't even realize.

My brother, Nick, came home with the story on the fourth night. He was stale-drunk and stammering all over the place so I didn't know if to take him serious at first. He hear the story from Raja, who hear it from somebody working in the car yard, who hear it from somebody up at the police station.

So I'm just telling you like how he tell me.

Up on a hill not too far from Kukuyo was a poultry farm. It was run by old man Duster and his son, Lambi. It was just them and a Doberman named Mangeshkar. People called the dog Mangeshkar the Castrator because she was train to bite people's balls. Had a bandit from Penal who make the mistake of trespassing once—I don't think he coulda have children after what Mangeshkar do to him. Duster was in the papers for that. The journalist quote him as saying, *It feel good to do some good in this world.*

Duster had a daughter a long time ago but she get the salmonella and he claim *black people* up at the hospital kill the girl. My grampa Sam went to the wake. He say the mother went mad and started shoving dirt in her mouth. She died not too long after. Children used to say Duster kill her but that was bogus, I think. Sam said she gave herself a heart attack.

But Sam never deny that they used to treat the chickens better than that woman.

Lambi ain't never finish primary school—say the teacher used to beat him too much because he coulda barely read. But I remember the story going round was that they kick him out because he used to sneak into the girls' toilet to watch them pee. He been working on the farm ever since.

Nick didn't say if the boy was hunting or anything, just that he was out. This was in the early morning, in a glade right past the bridge at Cribo River at the foot of the colossal, unruly Peero Forest. The river was only a five-minute walk from the car yard.

“So Mangeshkar chasing after this agouti and Lambi chasing Mangeshkar,” Nick said. “And the agouti dig he way into this hole, scattering the leaves outta the way. This was when Lambi see what he see ...”

My heart was busting out of my chest by then and a part of me wanted to cuff Nick right in the face for how he was prattling off the details. Like it was entertainment. Like it was barstool talk. And I was sure when Raja tell it to him, he did it this exact way like he had the story of the century or something. From how excited he was, I knew the end already.

When Lambi got closer, he coulda see the outline of a foot. A tiny foot sticking up from the ground.

Then the ring of beetles lining it like a thin black anklet.

Take him a while to accept that the foot was human.

He wanted to bolt straight home, but he couldn't. He say it was like a jumbie take hold of him—like he step outside his own body. The dog rush over to the foot, wedging its snout between the toes. Its hind legs scraping against the grass in a tug-o-war as it bite down on the ankle, dragging, dragging.

Lambi didn't have the stomach to pull the girl out.

When the police arrive, they had to bring a backhoe.

It was so twisted, Nick say, it was like it get wedge into the hole with a giant screwdriver.

Big men cry when they see the body.

Dumpling had been found.