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Raising Sasquatch

Aaliyah Salah couldn't interpret the look her son's toy Sasquatch was giving her. Ever since she adopted Tolik, she'd been probing the world for signs. Sasquatch's eyes were white ovals with two uneven gray lids traced above and below a black beady iris with silky lines reaching out towards the edges. His body sat half in the water and half out aside rubber ducks, submerged X-Men, and pink and yellow mermaids with ratty hair, which people from work thought she should discourage the use of since her son already had the "disadvantage" of being raised by a single female.

"He must look like his father," she had been told by a woman with wild hair and wire-rimmed glasses in the supermarket the night before while fingering a small mountain of unripe figs. The woman had then stretched her ring-laden fingers over Tolik's bald head before Aaliyah had a chance to stop her. The wild-haired woman closed her eyes as if she'd had a premonition and Aaliyah leaned in, held her breath, and waited. The woman blinked, the spell broken, and had said simply, "have a pleasant night."

Aaliyah had abandoned the display of figs and pushed her shopping cart in the direction of the woman. Tolik never woke from his perch in the front of the cart; not even after the woman had touched him. Aaliyah had found her in the magazine aisle studying a newspaper, while taming a silver ringlet with her free hand. Aaliyah had sighed. The woman couldn't be a mystic if she read the newspaper. No, that would be impossible. Aaliyah had sighed and laughed at herself for believing that this strange stranger knew something about her son's fate. No, Tolik would not die and yes Tolik would love her, she told herself. Aaliyah had studied the back of the woman's head as she strutted away and decided that the woman's hair wasn't as wild as it had seemed from the front.

Aaliyah stared at Sasquatch, his body wrapped in her wet hands, and thought

of her own father. The way he read the Qur'an over her bed at night in hopes that Allah would transform her into the right kind of woman, the way his thick, animal eyebrows bent just before he reprimanded her for acting too American, and the angry look on her mother's face after he died, as if he was too stubborn for this life and he was at fault for dying.

Tolik would never know his father. She didn't even have a photograph to give him and she couldn't pronounce the name of his hometown. She wondered which was worse, knowing that your parents were abysmal or not knowing them at all. Aaliyah let go of Sasquatch and picked up one of the pink mermaids and brushed her yellow hair back, while never able to unhinge the feeling that Sasquatch was still looking at her. His body floating above the water was brown, while the part below the water was pure white. He had that effect of changing colors, of disappearing into the background, but right now he was all that she could see.

Aaliyah took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She could still smell the light jasmine perfume she carried upstairs after hugging the fifteen-year-old babysitter she had just met, but had come highly recommended, for arriving three minutes early. She knew that the babysitter thought it was strange that she wasn't leaving the house while paying for a sitter, but she didn't care. The sitter couldn't know what it was like to never escape for even small moments; it was a knowing that couldn't be explained. Without further ado, she had escaped up into the high caverns of her own house where, lately, she had no time to explore. The upstairs bath with the baby monitor turned up on high was the farthest she could bring herself to go without Tolik. Soon she would have to return to work, so these small steps were difficult but necessary.

The water in the bath was sweltering, turning her olive skin an animated red, but she hated when she drew the water lukewarm and found her teeth chattering and goose bumps poking out their heads only minutes later. Tonight, she felt like a lobster in a pot, silently screaming, but knowing that all the energy she could muster would never allow her to reach the lip of the bath and scuttle out. Instead, she dipped her head beneath the water with her eyes still open.

The weight of Tolik's presence still lingered. From below the water she could see his portable baby monitor and its blinking green light atop the sink. Although the mirror behind the water basin now held a murky sheen of condensation, the green light shone through the fog and repeated the green blink, doubling her security that she was still connected to Tolik, but also haunting her with its echo. The white antenna from the monitor and the flashing made her think of the Three Sisters Lighthouse from her childhood home on the Cape. It was a place she loved and hated at the same time; it was a place she never let herself get called back to even though her father couldn't touch her anymore. She still despised that he was cremated and not just buried in one place where she could always be sure he'd be. She thought it was strange that he wanted to

be cremated; his entire family was buried near the mosque in Mashpee, or so she was told. Her father almost never let her or her mother leave the house, even to attend mosque prayer sessions. But, her mother had insisted that cremation was what he wanted and since he had no other living relatives, no one was there to object. When Aaliyah had refused to help her mother scatter his ashes in the harbor, her mother placed the half-filled urn into her hands.

“He’s half of you whether you like it or not,” she’d said. “Pay tribute.”

Aaliyah looked down at her father for the first time, examining the black and white specks of what he once was.

“No,” she’d said. “He doesn’t deserve this.”

“I told you to lock the door.”

Aaliyah had glanced back into the ashes and then up into her mother’s white eyes, finding nothing of herself in either.

“You’re a sad representation of a mother,” Aaliyah had said, pushing the urn into her mother’s arms. Her mother’s large, dark hands cupped the jar on both sides but she kept it there, outstretched from her body. When her mother hugged her, it was always with those same outstretched, rigid arms that never pulled her in. She turned and forced herself to walk away. Aaliyah knew she needed to find herself a new family, despite the fact that she didn’t even know what that was. She heard her mother’s voice trying to reach her, but the words were lost in the salt of the ocean air. All she could make out was, “Pay tribute. Pay tribute.”

When she had reached the edge of the dock, she turned and saw her mother letting the wind fondle the ashes as she held the jar upside down. Her father didn’t fall to the ground as she’d hoped; he danced through the air in a gray spiral, creating a miniature tornado. He looked beautiful and haunting as the sun’s beams bounced off of him, scattering light in all directions. For a short heart-stopping moment, her father was whole again and Aaliyah was seven, hiding in her closet, tucked inside her pink dollhouse, her right knee slipped inside the kitchen walls and her head bowed down into the attic, and no matter how many times her father yelled, “come out, come out, wherever you are,” she gripped her green baby blanket tighter and sat as still as she could. It angered her that she never fit. The dollhouse was always too small and she was always too big, and still growing bigger.

As the particles of her father had separated and shifted in the air, the image of her dollhouse exploding like a broken piñata inscribed itself in his place. She couldn’t remember how her father finally found her in the closet, inside the dollhouse, or what had happened afterwards; she just remembered the image of the dollhouse breaking when her father kicked it and told her she was too old for toys.

She had watched as her father’s ashes moved higher and higher, disappearing

into the air, becoming air. A few larger particles at the mercy of gravity seeped through the wooden planks of the dock and found their way to the sea. Now, she envisioned him wandering, invading the skies, swimming the cool water of the Atlantic until he made it to the Pacific, to the shore of Santa Monica Bay, where he could watch her through windows and touch her son's face in his sleep. The first few nights at home, Aaliyah slept next to the small new boy on the floor of the new nursery, cuddled in her old baby blanket that she couldn't bring herself to wrap him in because she felt she still needed it.

When Aaliyah opened her eyes, she found herself drawn again to the baby monitor. The babysitter should have sufficed, she knew that, but she still desired that link to him. Aaliyah thought that because she wasn't Tolik's biological mother, she missed some connection that melded mother and child. The mechanisms of the monitor had to do what her blood, breath, and brain could not. It was maddening. And Sasquatch wouldn't stop staring at her. That couldn't be a good sign. His elusive eyes were everywhere, probing beneath her skin. Where were the Big Foot enthusiasts when you needed one? Didn't they have their own conventions and camp-outs and Expos just for people who still believed he was out there haunting the forests? Maybe she would call their hotline later and tell them that she just had a sighting. Maybe they would put her picture in a Sasquatch convention pamphlet. Maybe she would call the adoption agency and demand to know why they had sent an HIV positive boy with a Sasquatch doll. Was Big Foot really that big in Russia too or were they trying to send a message? They told her that Sasquatch was Tolik's nickname because he was a relict, a survivor of a great phenomenon. But that's all they could say; the rest of his information would come in the mail later with a conglomeration of medications that came in more colors than all of Tolik's bath toys and some of which were as big.

Ever since the beginning, she hadn't liked the doll. It was always looking at her from corners and nooks of her house, in places where she wondered how it had gotten there. She didn't want to admit she thought it was judging her, as if it had eyes that sent video-feed back to the adoption agency, back to Russia, back to Tolik's biological parents. It was the monster's fault she was always asking herself if she was being a good enough mother. Her worst fear was that Tolik would grow up, move back to Russia to find his biological parents, and become invisible to her. Her greatest fear was that he wouldn't get a chance. But, these fears were all new to her. Old fears were that Sasquatches didn't exist and Tolik would never materialize.

When Aaliyah first met Tolik, she had wanted to love him, feel what every mother should feel when she first sees her child. She may not have given birth, but the pains to arrive at that moment were great and her expectations were high. She had applied to hundreds of agencies across the world, traveled thou-

sands of miles, and agreed to sign her heart over to a boy who had a good chance of dying before her. When her case worker handed over the child, Aaliyah grew goose bumps under her clothes. She reached out her arms, but didn't know where to grab him. Should she support the head, or was he old enough? Should she grab him under his armpits, or would that look un-motherly? Should she kiss him, or would that make him feel smothered? Was this what love felt like, or was she just nervous and cold and premenstrual?

Tolik had examined her face as the case worker placed him at her side, in the nook of her right arm, saving Aaliyah from having to make a decision about how to hold the toddler. His legs tightened around her waist, and Aaliyah marveled at the warmth of his body as the boy studied her eyes and her ears and the way he felt in her arms. She stared at his long, spidery eyelashes, anticipating, and scared to learn the boy's verdict until his miniature hand reached out and touched her face. Aaliyah let out the air she held in her stomach and smiled, thankful that the boy hadn't decided to cry. The feeling of instant rejection would have been too much. She reached up with her left hand and touched the boy's silky cheek, knowing at that moment that the boy's web had captured her, and she dared to look back.

His whitish blonde eyebrows gave hope for his stark bald head. A light smattering of freckles gathered on his cheeks. He was all smiles and dimples. Really, he didn't look like a sick child at all, but she knew it wasn't something that you could see like the fear that people would have of him if they knew. Tolik's right ear was a little bigger than his left, but the adoption agency assured her they would even out as if he was a product that they sold in bulk and already knew the possible malfunctions and growth projections. She didn't notice the small Sasquatch toy until it was thrown at her head during their first car ride home. Tolik giggled as the toy bounced beneath her feet. When the toy didn't immediately reappear, Tolik opened and closed his hands, finding them empty, and cried.

"Shhh, baby," she had said. "It's okay."

As she spoke, Tolik inhaled a deep breath and made his voice soar. He sounded like a trumpet climbing a scale. She glanced at Tolik, trying not to lose control of the car. His tiny body thrashed against the seat, while he kicked his legs in the air. Already, a shoe was missing and it was only then that she realized Tolik hadn't been wearing any socks. She scanned the floor next to her, but couldn't find the doll. Sasquatch was lost and had to be found.

Aaliyah stopped the car on the edge of a busy highway and put on her hazard lights. Cars honked at her as she opened the front door and got out to search the floor for the toy, forcing traffic to stop and wait to get into the inside lane in order to progress forward. She felt beneath the gas pedal and breaks, reeling in nothing but muffin crumbs and beads from a necklace she broke fiddling with the string while driving almost two years ago. She lifted up the lever under the

seat and pushed back the chair. Tolik screamed louder, cars honked with annoyance, and she could find no Sasquatch doll. When she turned to comfort Tolik, she saw the red and blue lights through her back window. An officer was already halfway to her car, trying to see what was going on inside the vehicle.

“Is there a problem, Ma’am?” The officer had asked when he reached the driver’s side door. Tolik screamed louder, his face blotchy and wet.

“No, Sir,” Aaliyah had said.

“This is a no stopping zone. Is there something wrong with the vehicle?”

“No, I’ll be moving in just a second.”

The officer bent down and moved his eyes over Tolik and back at Aaliyah. “What’s wrong with the boy?”

“My...my son’s toy is missing and I was trying to find it.”

“This is your child, Ma’am?”

“Yes.”

“He doesn’t look like he’s too happy. Is he sick?”

The word ‘sick’ resounded in her mind. Was this a sign? Could the officer see something that she, his mother of only a few hours, couldn’t see? Finally, she responded, “He lost his toy.”

The officer’s eyes roved over her hair and then to her linen shirt wrinkled with travel. She felt like she did right after 9/11 when she didn’t even feel safe going into the local grocery store. Her blackish-purple hair, even after she chopped it short, made people question her American-ness. She began wearing colorful animal-themed scrubs shopping even if she wasn’t scheduled to work. It had been a few years since she thought to do this, but she looked down at her beige shirt and wished she had elephants dancing across her breasts with her stethoscope draped around her neck like a scarf.

“We can’t be too careful these days.” He smiled and opened his gray eyes wider. His eyes almost looked pink and, for some reason, Aaliyah thought of a carnival, of cotton-candy. She knew this was the bribe, the inducement before something terrible.

“He’s my baby. I have the adoption papers here.” Aaliyah found the papers in her purse and when she looked back at the officer, she flinched. She thought she saw her father through the glassless window. She looked away and when she looked back, the officer’s candy eyes were arched up in question.

“Are you all right, Ma’am?”

“Here,” she’d said. The papers shook in her hands. “He’s my baby.”

She found it amazing that she hadn’t even arrived home yet and she’d already had to claim Tolik as her own. The officer moved his eyes over the adoption papers and took a step backwards.

“No, Ma’am. That’s not necessary. I simply stopped to make sure you didn’t need to be towed.”

While he spoke, Aaliyah imagined the Sasquatch doll getting away, crawl-

ing deeper and deeper beneath her seat. The officer started to walk away, but then turned and pointed to Tolik. "Are you sure the boy is okay?"

Aaliyah scowled at him as she turned on the car. "If he wants to cry, he can cry."

She put the car in drive and adjusted her mirror so that she could see Tolik. The officer waited for her to pull out onto the highway, and Aaliyah's fawn-colored car quickly grew lost in traffic. She couldn't believe that she had escaped, that the officer had driven away and left her on her own. She thought about Sasquatch skulking around in the dark nooks of her car and, for once, she understood the advantages the creature had. She had always thought of him as a lonely creature, but Aaliyah had stood out her entire life and dreamed of what it would be like to be skilled in hiding, to blend in. And even though Tolik screamed and screamed, she forced herself to look forward and follow the yellow line to the outskirts of town towards home. The Sasquatch toy and his enthusiast would have to wait.

She pulled into her driveway in El Segundo, just south of the Los Angeles International Airport. The California air was moist and seemed to melt in her mouth like a chocolate candy. Aaliyah grabbed her small travel bag from the front seat, dropped it in her lap, and rested her head on the back of the seat. As she turned her head to the right, she saw Tolik in the rearview mirror. His face was still mottled with white spots; the areas surrounding the blotches were red. Tolik looked like a miniature giraffe with his spots, bald head, and big ears. His head was tilted to the side, at an angle Aaliyah thought should have been very uncomfortable, but Tolik was asleep, deep in the forest of sleep where he and Sasquatch could be reunited.

She dropped her luggage on the side of the driveway, and went to unhook Tolik from his seat. The gray seatbelt's teeth clung to one another, neither wanting to let go. It made her think of bird-ox, of the sticky balls that refused to let go of her clothing when she played on her small lawn with the green iron fence behind her house as a child in Massachusetts. There was only a small patch of tall grass in the corner and that's where Aaliyah liked to hide and pretend she was a lioness, hunting squirrels and voles for her cubs.

"How do you get so dirty playing in such a small space?" her mother would say when she was called inside.

"She doesn't know how to act like a lady," her father would say, shaking his head over the newspaper.

"Mother lions hunt for their babies and I want to be like a lion," she would say.

"Well you aren't a lion and this isn't Africa," he always responded, as if she didn't know.

The last time she informed her parents of her dreams of becoming a lioness, her father held her hand and brought her outside to the very back of the lawn.

Before leaving the kitchen she looked back at her mother in her black robes and tight hijab and the brown oval patch of skin on her face that was uncovered. Her mother didn't look up from the cutting board, but Aaliyah could hear the clicks from her mother's knife grow louder. The ginger was already cut up and in a neat pile; her mother was slicing air.

When they reached the back of the lawn, her father pointed to the wrought iron fence with triangle ornamental spikes at the very top.

"You see the fence, girl?"

Aaliyah nodded.

"You can be a lion for the rest of your life for all I care. But don't forget your place."

It was the first time she was aware of the bars. Before there were trees and vines and rivers in the distance. Now, she felt her children would go hungry.

When they had finally reached home, Tolik had reached out his hands for Aaliyah, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't remove him from his seat. No matter how hard she tried to ignore it, this had to be a sign. Feeling engulfed with anger, and true fear that she would never get Tolik inside, she lifted up the entire car seat and moved him towards the door. As she lifted the seat together with the boy, Sasquatch appeared from below, smiling a mocking smile, and she couldn't help but wonder if Sasquatch was smiling before. And how had he gotten here? Hadn't the toy hit her and bounced to the floor of the front? Maybe she just imagined the doll being thrown. Picking Sasquatch up between two fingers, Aaliyah placed him next to Tolik in his seat. She sighed and put the boy's car seat back in its place and struggled, once more, to get the belt loose. Unrelenting, she knew that she would need grander help in setting the boy free.

She turned the car back on and drove towards the Islamic Center on Hawthorne Street. It was a building she drove by everyday on her way to work and always gazed at it, wondering what her father did inside, even though the mosque he attended was hundreds of miles away. Today, she knew that she would have to go in, and someone would have to help her. Aaliyah had only once been inside a mosque, even though her father taught her to read from the Qur'an and taught her the five pillars. As soon as she ran away, she took off her hijab because she hadn't understood it was part of the religion, her religion; she thought it was part of her father's imprisonment and she had no interest in learning about something that was important to him. She was indomitable in her hate for everything that he loved. The mosque was always a place where he would go, and she and her mother would not. In those brief moments together, Aaliyah thought she knew what love felt like.

She carried Tolik and Sasquatch inside the mosque, leaving her shoes in tight cubbyholes against the wall outside the prayer room but she didn't go beyond the entrance.

"May I help you?" a tall woman, with green eyes that looked like emerald

moons, said. "Are you a member here?"

"I...don't really know why I'm here."

"Would you like a membership application? That's where most people start." She smiled.

"I don't quite think I'm at that stage yet. You see, my son is stuck in his car seat and I can't get him out."

The woman looked down at Tolik and bent over him. She pushed the button and tried to separate the belt's teeth by moving the clutch in different directions. The woman wasn't wearing robes, only a bright blue hijab over her hair. Moving to her knees, the woman tried to set Tolik free. And then she stopped and walked to a large desk at the entrance, disappearing behind a large file cabinet to its right. She popped her head up from the cabinet drawers, held up a silver pair of scissors with thick black handles and walked towards the entrapped Tolik. Her moon-eyes were full and rising as she moved over the boy. Aaliyah's muscles tensed, thinking harm was about to come to Tolik. Her son's reflection was projected into the woman's corneas and Aaliyah watched him from there; the little man inside the moon. Looking closer, looking at him outside the green moons was impossible.

"The mechanism is broken. Sometimes, you just have to cut them loose," the woman said, laughing at herself as she snipped through the gray straps. "That's what my husband keeps telling me. I have twin boys that just went to college in Rhode Island. Could they have picked a place farther from me?"

The woman lifted Tolik into her lanky arms and handed him to Aaliyah. "There you go. And don't worry; I have a car seat you can have. I don't know why I've held onto it so long."

Aaliyah stared at Tolik's bald head, unsure of what to say so she said, "No, thank you, money isn't a problem."

Nevertheless, she was angry that the woman had felt comfortable enough with her to destroy her property. Then again, the woman had been able to do what she could not. Set Tolik free. Another sign. She imagined the woman had the wild hair of a lion queen beneath her hijab, and with that image, she decided to trust her.

"You know, you don't have to follow our religion to come here. We can just talk."

"My father was Muslim," she said but didn't know why.

"What about you?" The woman smiled. Her voice was calm and quiet, but clear. Her voice sounded like a lullaby.

"I didn't like my father."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"He was poisoning the Atlantic."

"Poisoning?"

"My mother had him cremated."

“Are you sure your father was Muslim? Muslims shouldn’t be cremated. It is haram.”

“Forbidden?”

She nodded. “Did your mother get along with your father?”

“She always obeyed him and she didn’t, she didn’t...” Aaliyah hesitated. “My mother said...”

“Shh...” hissed the woman. “There are things we cannot know.”

The woman cupped her hands over Aaliyah’s and Aaliyah knew it was okay to stop and just sit there with the boy at her chin, the doll between his fingers, and a woman that she had just met cradling her hands. Together, the silence held signs and when she looked down she saw Sasquatch. He was still smiling.

Aaliyah sat up in the bubble-less bath and let the water flow down her naked body. She reached out and raised the floating Sasquatch from the water. Her finger traced the uneven line across his belly that marked the transition from white to brown. Every plastic crevice that the water had touched was white. As she moved the monster creature from her left hand to her right, her fingers left white marks on his chest from the water. He was changing, disappearing, in front of her.

This could be a sign, but she refused to let it be so. There were signs everywhere and nowhere. Nevertheless, she was losing her faith in her ability to interpret them correctly. Maybe the boy would disappear. Maybe she’d never be a good mother. She put both hands around the monster and squeezed. She imagined his eyes popping out and his stomach turning to a thin string, but nothing happened. Loosening her hands around the doll did nothing to release the tension in her stomach. Suddenly, a cry reverberated against the tile walls of the tub, making her flinch and drop Sasquatch into the water. She looked around before she realized the sound was coming from the baby monitor and as she ran to Tolik with a green towel coating her body, Sasquatch turned white beneath the water.