

## COBWEBS

Dad has been gone for three months, and Mom hasn't been the same.

It all started right before Jamila turned thirteen. That was when Mom stopped getting out of bed on her own, cocooning herself in her bed sheets, a shapeless figure in an abyssal mattress. Mom had been gaunt and pale for weeks, losing weight at a rollercoaster-pace, some deteriorative illness that left her cheeks hollowed-out and put fangs in her mouth. She stopped getting up in the mornings to help Jamila before school. She stopped sweeping every day, and the cobwebs have been building up ever since, jumbled in the corners with loose hair and dead skin cells.

“Your mom is struggling,” Dad had said, his eyes smudged with exhaustion, his smile phantom-like and brittle. “She’s just sick, Jamila, but she’ll get better. Have faith.”

Jamila tried to have faith, but Mom didn't get better, not really. It wasn't *abrupt*; it had taken weeks for Mom to rescind into this state. In April, she had begun to wake up in a cold sweat every night, trying to hide it. She would yell in her sleep, her father's gentle voice trying to soothe and calm Mom from her aggrieved panic. The walls are thin, or maybe Jamila's ears are too sensitive, so Jamila would dig her fingers into her favorite stuffie—a wolf—until the threads started to grieve and tear, her teeth gritted and shoulders tense throughout the night.

Mom's voice isn't loud by nature, but her nightmares made her loud—a wretched, wearied sound. Those first few days, Mom would still smile weakly in the mornings, not eating, and Dad would keep his big hand around her wrist, running his thumb over the thin skin over and over, like a compulsion. But the transition was exponential—Mom got worse and worse and worse. She changed shapes, her eyes wild and unseeing. She would shriek, animalistic and desperate, while Dad did his best to help.

When Jamila couldn't sleep, she would catch her Dad coming back inside from a smoke break—a 3am compulsion, his eyes bloodshot, his pyjamas reeking of naphthalene. He used to pretend he stopped smoking, but Mom's condition worsened to the point that he would sit in the garage for an hour every night, smoking through a pack of cigarettes. Jamila had seen the boxes—gruesome photos of mouth diseases, lesions, lung collapses in slow motion. She stopped telling him to stop.

The worst nights, Mom's shrieks kept them both up. Dad would come back inside and sigh when he saw Jamila sitting at the dinner table with her nose in a book. "Go back to bed, kid," he'd tell her raggedly, and she'd shrug. She wouldn't say anything; she would just get ready for school three hours before she needed to, and ignore the accumulating cobwebs in their house.

It's not that they *didn't* clean—it was just never pressing enough until it's all *there*. Jamila's mother, when she was healthy, would rub the dust out of her eyes and admit that the family needs to do some chores. Mom would get out the brooms and cleaning supplies; Mom and Dad would help Jamila with the highest corners that she used to be unable to reach (she shot up in height in the summer, so she can do it by herself now.) But Mom stopped doing that when she got sick, and Dad's gone, so no one cleans the house anymore, not properly. It's just too much for Jamila on her own—she *tries*, but the cobwebs keep accumulating, ever-expanding.

Jamila just can't keep up. But sometimes she still tries. She'll sigh, watch the cobwebs in the corner of the room, dust-bunnies fluttering through silk and insect corpses, and then she'll take the broom and start to sweep it away.

If she listens, there's skittering. It makes her shoulders tense, but she sweeps anyway. Even now, listening to Mom's agonistic hisses and clattering wails. Jamila tries to make a dent in the mess.

In May, Jamila turned thirteen.

Mom got sicker and sicker in increments; she was bedridden by that point. The last week of April, she was still on her feet, hollow-eyed and sullen. Jamila would find her staring into the fridge at the middle of the night, with her hands stuck deep inside the freezer, scratching into the icy hollows of meat from the butcher's. Jamila would find her laying outside in the garden, not touching the carrots or rhubarb but rather picking at a dragonfly's wings with her fingers. She wouldn't answer questions—she would look at Dad with a glassy expression, unable to speak for her mandibles splitting.

Dad's worry was terrible and tangible—he had started bringing home books in Arabic and Urdu, near-ancient, ritualistic materials that Jamila couldn't read. Pictures of beetles and cockroaches drawn with wasp gall ink, scrawled in shaky hands. He smoked throughout the day, and he stopped going to work, and he never slept. Just read, just tried new things to bring Mom back to herself. He'd cook and drive Jamila to school sometimes, but she'd often just walk by herself. Mom was sick, but Dad wasn't present either, not really, even when he tiredly muttered apologies to Jamila.

On her thirteenth birthday. Dad had stumbled home, his stubble having started to grow unevenly at his jaw.

“We can still celebrate something, can't we, kid?” he'd told her, and he hugged her tight. Jamila made a face at the acrid cigarette scent of his jacket. But Dad brought her a chocolate cupcake, smiled with a grieving desperation. They gathered around the dining table, ignoring the

cobwebs. Jamila's ankles felt wobbly—her body hurts whenever she gets anxious, but she'd followed her Dad around the kitchen as he fumbled for the big barbecue lighter, stuck a single red candle into the cupcake and lit it for her.

She didn't have the heart to remind him that she didn't really like chocolate, but she smiled anyway. Jamila was a good daughter—Dad had brought home the cupcake, but also numerous grocery bags of meat from the butcher's shop, the smell of slick fresh blood tingeing the cake with iron. She ignored it—Dad insisted that it was helping Mom. He swore by it.

The raw meat didn't help Mom act like herself, but she was eating again. And that's what mattered, right?

Dad brought more and more meat from the butcher's, and Jamila just got used to the smell of the house. The accumulation of webbing. Mom's fangs making clicky, clattering noises in the dead of night.

In June, Jamila woke up at noon, because her Dad didn't wake her up. She woke up late, the sweltering heat of the house leaving her slow and frazzled. Her feet padding against the sticky hardwood floor. The *smell*. The smell—sour, retchful. The trembling buzz of flies, the summer drawing them in.

In June, Jamila saw her mother crouched over the body of her father, deep red blood spilling out onto the hardwood. She doesn't like to think about it, the memory flinchingly soaked with grief. It makes her throat rasp, it makes her ears hurt from the skitter-clatter noise. There is still blood soaked into the floorboards, but Jamila had mopped it up the best she could.

Now Mom stays in the master bedroom, gnawing on old chicken marrow and treasuring Dad's bones.

School hasn't been kind about it—all of Jamila's classmates avoid her. The iron-slick scent that sticks to her clothes, the cobwebs that cling to her hair. Jamila knows that everyone thinks death follows her. She knows they question the disappearance of the class guinea pig when she was supposed to watch it; knows they see her deteriorating house whenever they walk home from school. Her classmates avoid her, if they know better. Some of them tease her, and Jamila can't stomach it. She's getting a bit too thin because it's getting harder to eat—groceries are expensive even with Dad's savings, and Mom eats all the meat all the time, and Jamila can't help her own nausea about it. She feels like she's haggard—like her bones are splintered and each step hurts to take. Maybe it's grief. Maybe, just like Mom, Jamila is turning into something else. She idly wonders if she could invite some classmates home from school, if only to give Mom something new.

Now, though, Jamila just brings as much meat as she can from the butcher's shop, and sometimes the dead animals she finds outside. She dumps all the carcasses in Mom's room, and she sweeps.