



1

Hooks

1.

Puri Dai the grandmother speaks.

A warning can be a shadow in a field, she says. A shadow waiting. It can be a kushti kauli ratti, a beautiful black night that holds all the loveliness and danger that could ever haunt you. It can be a black hole in the overturned bowl of the night, hidden behind a veil of stars. It can be a full moon. It can be a soft, defiled voice, a mokkadi voice: Come. It can be the mother voice: Watch out. Watch out for them gorjos. They'll get their hooks into you before you know it.

The warnings—her dark voice a ribbon unspooling in the air—the warnings are seeded all around us, just as a hundred thousand tobacco plants are seeded in the earth.

2.

When I was a girl, a little shey of ten, Buddy Watmore, an apple picker from north of Thorold, got out of jail for the third time and went home with *love* tattooed across the fingers of one hand and *hate* across the other.

Love and *hate* became my first road signs, the drom that led me from there to here. The second of my signs was *You are now entering Invisible*. Invisible is the transparent movable territory I carry with me as a snail carries its shell, moving with my family from town to town and farm to farm across the province. If I stood in front of trees, you'd see only trees. In a parking lot or a gas station or in a supermarket, you'd not know I was there.

I wonder what Buddy Watmore was trying to remind himself of with those tattoos of his. I keep asking myself, *What's with love and hate?* Sometimes I don't know who or what to love or hate. Can I love and hate at the same time?

And this life lived inside the shroud of Invisible: that would be thanks to my mother and the little I know of her early years

in England, which come from stories about people seeing her in the road and telling each other, *Look out, here comes a Gypsy*, so she'd make herself small as an acorn. Murri dai, my mother, my small dark Rhodie, invisible.



Shifting from one foot to the other on this hot morning in the hiring shed at the edge of Mister Tormentine's tobacco fields, I couldn't have known that answers to my questions about love and hate and Invisible would unfold in the coming weeks. Instead, in that moment, a cold lip of air kissing the back of my neck, I was visited by Puri Dai's most recent warning, a tired one she'd delivered a thousand times before, about the full moon devil-man who moves without human feet through the night forests. With each new telling, her story changed, and now, with us having ended up somewhere between Delhi and Tillsonburg, it had shifted from forests to the local tobacco fields. As I waited, though, Puri Dai's story dispersed in the simmering air.

It was dark in there. No windows. Only a door. The shed smelled of tobacco and the hidden parts of men's bodies. Musselwhite, the low, squat foreman, and Mister Tormentine, the owner, stood and studied me with their heads angled back, arms folded over their chests. The hair of their forearms was bleached from the sun, and the muscles lay hard and impatient under their skin. In the heat, their eyelids were heavy with an unreadable gaze. My mother noticed. Both my aunties noticed.

"Ready for picking" was all Musselwhite said.

Mister Tormentine's head went up and down in slow agreement.

"We're here for the work," said Mam. She kept her voice small and her eyes down, like she always did with the gorjos.

If they knew what kind of people we were, would they still take a chance on us? Would we be accused when a tobacco knife went missing, or leaves from the drying sheds? Since we spoke English, and already lived in Ontario and weren't coming from away, and because we'd arrived in our own truck with our own things, they couldn't treat us like the other migrants. We had a few more rights. Which wasn't saying much, according to my auntie Lilly.

We stood trapped and waiting in that moment of sizing up, judging, guessing. Not that we weren't doing our own sizing up—it was a survival thing. Musselwhite's smile was comfortably cruel. I couldn't read Mister Tormentine. Tall, with a dark, thin scar angled across his cheekbone. *How would that scar feel if I touched it?* My aunties would call him too handsome. Was I the only one who saw a quick flare behind his eyes?

"It's gonna be hot out there," he cautioned, not looking at me.

Still leaning against the door frame, arms still crossed, the men looked like they might be figuring out how to get rid of us. They might've heard, then. *Watch out for them Gypsies.* Word had a way of getting around. I thought it would be almost a relief, having our identities out in the open. At least then we could be ready for whatever might come.

"I lost twelve men in five days," Mister Tormentine said. "That's how hot it gets." He looked over at me. "Girl's not under fourteen, is she?"

"Eighteen," said my mother in her small voice.

Musselwhite lit a cigarette. "Looks younger," he said. He gave a cigarette to Mister Tormentine. "We gotta check." He held out the pack to Mam and my aunties. I could tell they

didn't like this invitation. It could be seen as a sly opening for something else.

"We don't smoke," said Lilly.

Mam stood and waited. We all did. That's the thing about our fowki, our people. We can wait. Mam frowned, and by the determined look of her I guessed that she was calculating possible tobacco wages. This calculation was meant to bring us closer to the flashing neon sign inside her head, the bright jittery lines that circled each picture in her dream of land, small house, garden, trees. I thought it was a disappointing dream. Mister Tormentine's house was probably big enough for five families. That was the house I'd be after.

"Okay," Mister Tormentine said. "I'll put you all out priming in the field because we're short, and the guys've been dropping like flies. Then, in a couple days, you two ladies," he nodded at Liza May and Mam, "are at the sewing table."

"You done the sewing before?" Musselwhite said. "Them tobacco leaves are no walk in the park."

"No kidding," said Lilly.

"I don't want no trouble in the field," said Mister Tormentine, drawing on his cigarette and sending a cloud of smoke out into the parking lot. "No monkey business."

"No," said Mam, "no trouble."

"The women aren't the problem," Lilly said between her teeth.

"Shhh," went Liza May, also between her teeth.

We kept on waiting in the hot wet dark of the shed, the air close and shimmering. I moved closer to the door, and when I looked across at the tobacco fields, the leaves bent and slid in the heat as if greased, and the asphalt of the parking lot pooled like water.

Musselwhite sat down behind the desk. He consulted a sheet of paper, then wrote in the margin. "I'm putting you girls in our executive suite," he said. The smile appeared again, mean as a sucker punch. My mother and my aunts and me, we all looked at each other. We knew we'd be going to a filthy room with mould in the corners and holes kicked in the wall and a shower that spat out brown water. "My guess is you're a family, 'cause you all look the same, except for young Green Eyes over here." He lifted his chin at me.

"Is there a key?" Mam dared to ask. The men gave her a look that said there was no key. This meant that during the day, while we were out in the fields, our family of puppets would lie inside unprotected. Lilly opened her big mouth to say something, but my mother stepped on her foot.

"So you got wheels," Musselwhite went on, looking out the door at our truck. "Good. You can get yourselves to work, then."

By this time, Mister Tormentine was looking restless. He went outside and lit another cigarette.

What happened next was like a dream billowing into a suspended moment: a sky-coloured car veered off the road and pulled up short in front of the hiring shed. The dream was a woman. She opened the car door and stepped out like a movie star, one slow leg at a time. Her hair was big and gold, a gold I knew from magazine hair. Skin white as the two o'clock summer sun, fingernails red, lips redder. Sunlight sparked off her jewellery.

"Hello, sailor," she called. "I was driving by." Her high heels picked their way across the asphalt to Mister Tormentine. "I just can't seem to keep away from you," she said to him.

"Trixie," said Mister Tormentine. There was an unsettled edge to his voice. "Trixie honey." He put his hands on her

shoulders as if to keep her at bay. She looked out of place—all that gold out here on a simmering day at the edge of a tobacco field. She didn't fit in, but it didn't matter, because she shone. She, too, looked us over as we watched her through the hiring shed's door, then she leaned into Mister Tormentine, one leg bent, and kissed him, like in the movies. Everything about her was like the movies.