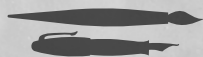




# HURRICANE CHILD

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Lyrics from BLACKBIRD

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# CHAPTER

# 1

My ma's voice is rough and low. When she speaks to strangers on the telephone, they call her "sir." I guess it must be surprising to some people, the way her voice sounds, because she's so beautiful—just about the prettiest woman you've ever seen—but I think it suits her just fine. I love the way her rough voice vibrates through the air like a beat on a drum. She sings around the house. Under her breath, since people say her voice is so ugly all the time.

*Why you wanna fly, Blackbird?*

That's the song that's stuck in my head now.

*You ain't ever gonna fly.*

\*

My dad's blue boat is flipped upside down in the backyard, which isn't really a yard but a grove of dead

trees and frogs that won't shut up at night, and the mangrove is just close enough to the water so when it's time to go, I can get out of here with a quickness that will surely inspire the speed of light. My dad hasn't so much as looked at that boat in exactly one year and three months, which is the time that our lives revolve around: one year and three months ago.

The boat's ready, and I'm ready—more ready than ever to get off this dumb rock—but I can't leave yet, because I don't know where to go. But once I do, I'll leave that second without even a good-bye. So I turn my back on my father's boat and walk through the dead mangrove, brown water smelling like something besides the trees died, mosquitoes so thick in the air they might as well be puffs of smoke, dead palms from coconut trees covering the ground like hairy carcasses. I get to the clearing, to the white road covered with dust and gravel and designs of tire marks, to my dad's house that's right there on the edge of the sea, waiting patiently for the day a wave will come and wash it away.

When I was really little—before I started going to school, when I could barely walk without holding my

ma's hand—my mom would leave Water Island whenever she needed to go to Saint Thomas for groceries and for church, and she always took me with her. The two of us went on a speedboat owned by Mister Lochana. There was a ferry on the other side of Water Island that could take us to Saint Thomas for ten dollars, but Mister Lochana only charged us five. He was an Indian man that'd come all the way from Tobago, though everyone thought he'd come from Trinidad and called him Mister Trini. I don't know how Mister Lochana felt about that, but I would've corrected each and every single one of them. When I told him so, he laughed.

“To be a child and to be passionate, eh?” he said to my mom.

I asked him, “Does that mean adults aren't passionate about anything?”

My ma told me to hush and sit quiet—I was too little to be running my mouth.

I liked that it was just the three of us, and I liked to look over the side of the speedboat too. I could see the striped yellow and red paint from the boat's side reflected in the clear water, could see the pink coral and stingray,

and one day, there was even a fish as big as me. Mister Lochana said it was a nurse shark, and my mom grabbed me and held me so tight I couldn't breathe, even though Mister Lochana promised us nurse sharks don't bite.

One Sunday morning, a wave bumped Mister Lochana's boat high into the air and when it landed again, I fell straight into the water. Since it was Sunday morning, I was wearing a church dress heavy with lace and fake pearls. I fell faster than an anchor, and after I was pulled out again and dragged onto Saint Thomas's concrete, I thought about the bubbles that were bigger than my mom's head, the smoky light that made it hard to see if another nurse shark was coming, the coral that scratched my knees, the woman that was standing on the ocean floor. She was black, blacker than black, blacker than even me. Rough hands yanked me out of the water and hit my chest over and over again until I could breathe.

"You were under there for over a minute, child," Mister Lochana said when I'd opened my eyes. "What was it like?"

All I told him was that the water was deeper than I thought it'd be, and he laughed, though my mom didn't

think it was funny. She told Mister Lochana that she wouldn't be using his services anymore, but we ended up on his speedboat again the next week because the ferry to Saint Thomas was too expensive.

\*

My dad and I stay in the same house by ourselves. Neither of us want to leave, in case my mom comes back to find the place empty. The outside of the house is painted blue, and the paint gets big bubbles whenever it rains so that I can pick and pick and pick at them until they burst and brown water splashes all down my arm, and there's a pretty little garden with yellow flowers that my mom used to love, but after she left, the flowers have been slowly dying, no matter how much I water them. The house is nice to look at from the ocean too. I used to look at it from my dad's little blue boat, same one I plan on stealing to find my mother. I don't like the ocean too much after I fell out of Mister Lochana's speedboat, but with my dad, I always feel safe. He'd take me in his boat so I could see the fishes swimming in the sea. We had to be careful in that boat, though, because sometimes bigger