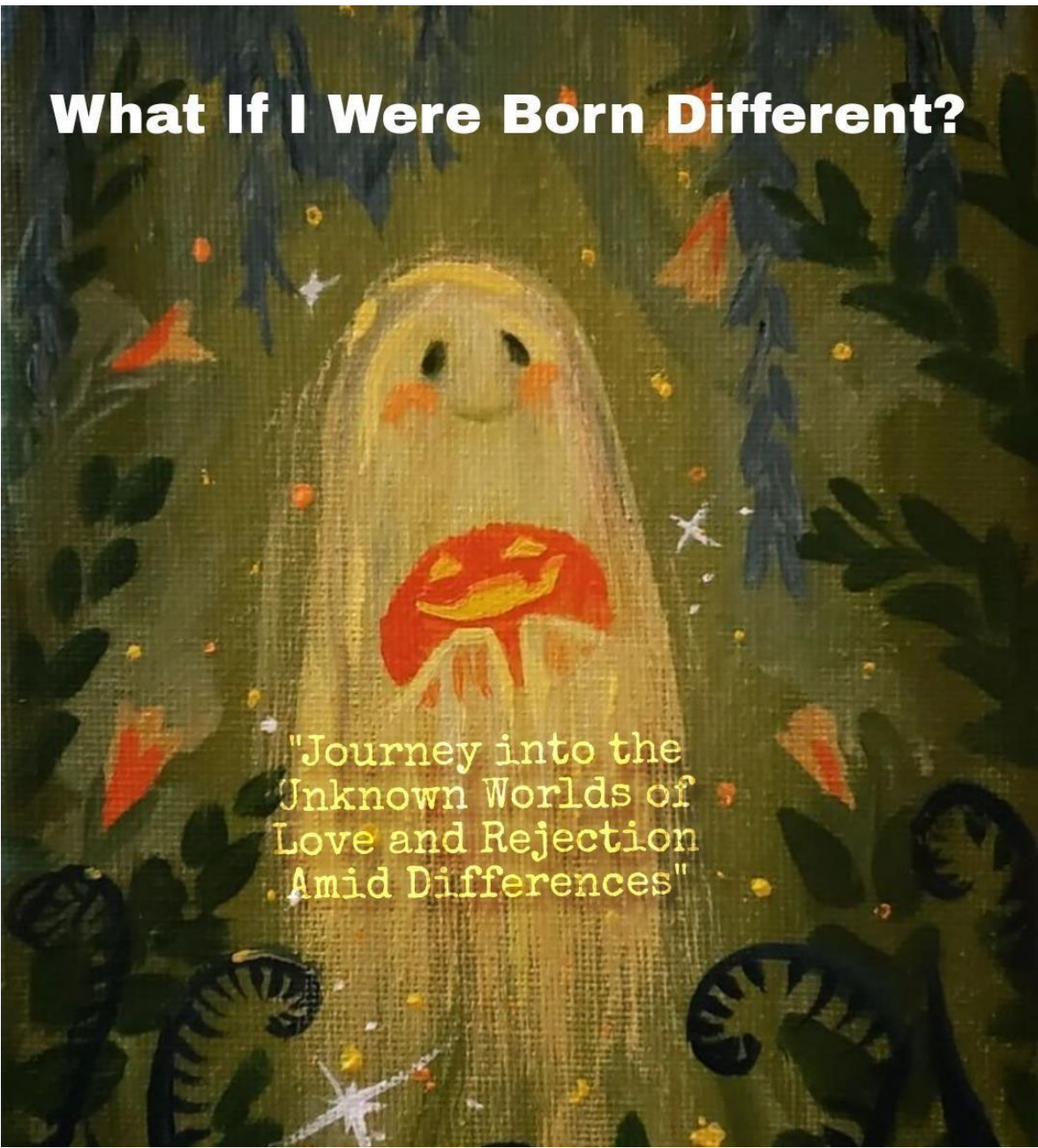


What If I Were Born Different?



"Journey into the
Unknown Worlds of
Love and Rejection
Amid Differences"



This book is dedicated to a world that sees through a different lens, to eliminate all forms of discrimination and negativity toward minorities, religions, cultures, genders, and even those whose life circumstances differ from yours, for the laws of the world are not equal.

"Preface :

In today's world, we are faced with numerous challenges and opportunities, each of which affects our lives in some way. This book tells the story of a girl who faces unique challenges, challenges that set her apart from others but also lead her to new paths of love and hope.

This book narrates the story of "Sophie," a girl with Down syndrome. Down syndrome is a genetic disorder that arises from an extra copy of chromosome 21. This condition can affect individuals' physical and cognitive development, leading to specific traits in their behavior and personality. However, it is important to understand that individuals with Down syndrome, like everyone else, possess their own capabilities and talents and can play active roles in society.

Our lives are filled with stories of love, suffering, and hope. In this book, we embark on a journey through a complex and beautiful world where characters and events remind us of how love and acceptance can triumph over the challenges and struggles of humanity. Our story is one of hope, resilience, and the quest for acceptance in a world that can sometimes be harsh toward differences.

This book is the result of the thoughts and feelings I have experienced throughout my life regarding the differences and inequalities present in the world. I have always believed that understanding and accepting differences is the key to achieving a kinder and more humane world. The story in this book is a narrative of the lives of individuals who may initially appear different or even disabled, but deep within, they carry stories of love, hope, and the struggle for survival.

My inspiration for writing this story comes from those individuals who, in the face of hardships and adversities, never lose their smiles and continue to seek the meaning of life. This book is dedicated to all those who have faced challenges in their life journey that seem

beyond their individual abilities. May we strive to create a world where differences are seen not as a cause for discrimination but as a source of human richness.

This book is not just a story; it is an invitation to see the world from a different perspective, to accept differences, and to put an end to any form of discrimination and prejudice. I hope that readers of this book, along with the characters in the story, gain a new understanding of the value of individuals and learn to celebrate differences rather than fear them.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all those who have supported me on this journey, and I am immensely thankful for their encouragement and kindness.

[Chapter 1]

Date: June 17, 1994, in Los Angeles: a city where every actor and singer can chase their dreams and quench their thirst for fame in Hollywood.

Fame can be compared to falling in love: when you achieve fame, you realize it is nothing but emptiness and a fabricated illusion, just like those who wait for their soulmate, hoping not to be alone. But the truth is, falling in love drags you deeper into loneliness, because you will constantly need infinite companionship and attention. You cannot change this eternal human need.

.One night, like any other night, in West Hollywood¹—a place where every neighborhood and street is illuminated by flashy local Chinese and Mexican restaurants, nightclubs for staying up all night, and bars where the noise of drunken fights, cheers, and laughter of people feeling the adrenaline surging through their veins could be heard—yes, this area was never quiet. Our story begins in one of the clubs in West Hollywood, located on Santa Monica Boulevard². The club was modest, but it often attracted wealthy clients or ruthless loan sharks who wouldn't hesitate to squeeze every last penny out of someone before letting them go. The club's theme was dim and filled with red lighting, providing comfort for the customers, while strippers spun and danced around poles on stage without shame or any particular emotion, like Barbie dolls dressed in nothing but shiny, revealing clothes—devoid of happiness or satisfaction, merely there for the entertainment of the customers. The song Vogue by Madonna heightened the club's mood.

While the other staff were busy serving customers, one of them—[Rebecca Aniston, a 23-year-old from Mexico]—was leaning against the wall in the dressing room, smoking anxiously, her hand resting on her four-month pregnant belly. She was wearing a black short frill sleeve mini smock dress, unlike the others, to hide her growing belly, but it didn't help much. Everyone knew about the swelling and redness of her face, along with the brown spots that came with pregnancy. She was lost in thoughts about her uncertain future with this unwanted baby, her hands trembling constantly from fear of her boss, whom the staff called “Crocodile” because he had a special fondness for throwing disobedient people to his wild dogs—it was his favorite pastime.

Someone entered the dressing room. She looked up and saw her friend

[Maria, who was also from Mexico, 35 years old, and had worked for Crocodile for nearly 10 years. Maria was the most experienced in the club and often took pity on and guided the young girls who were new to the club, which is why she was close to Rebecca as a mentor and friend.] Maria immediately snatched the cigarette from Rebecca's hand and scolded her with a frown: "For God's sake! You're pregnant. You shouldn't be smoking!"

Rebecca, with her hands clasped in shame, muttered in a low voice, her throat tight with emotion: "I swear, I went to see one of the local midwives you told me about today, but when that doctor saw my swollen belly, she said I was almost four months along and that it's impossible to perform an abortion now. She was too scared to operate, worried that her clinic might get shut down."

Hearing Rebecca's words, Maria sighed, gently taking Rebecca's hands in her own to offer some comfort and reassurance. Her tone was soft: "Come on, the boss wants to see you. You know he doesn't like wasting time, and he just wants to have a few words with you."

Fear returned to Rebecca's heart: "I know he wants to kill me because I broke his rules. Damn it! Damn it! I shouldn't have gotten drunk with that old loan shark in the VIP room that night. I know my job was just to dance for him, but he was offering more money to drink whiskey with him."

She paused for a second, her voice full of regret: "I left home, turned my back on my family to be independent and stand on my own, but look... look where life has taken me."

Maria gently stroked the right side of Rebecca's face with the back of her hand and said, "We all make choices in life because when we were kids, no one told us life was going to be this hard. Don't worry, I've already talked to the boss. You know how easily he gets convinced by my words. I know him like the back of my hand."

So Rebecca and Maria left the dressing room, with Maria holding Rebecca's hand firmly, showing her usual support. They entered the boss's office [Crocodile]. His office was on the upper floor of the club, a small space with a large window behind his desk that offered a view of the city, the reflection of the lights brightening his dark room. Crocodile was seated in his leather chair, a [Cohiba] cigar near his mouth, the smoke obscuring his fat, wrinkled face. On his desk lay a gun and a tray of cocaine, while two of his bodyguards, dressed entirely in black with serious expressions, stood at opposite corners of the room behind him. Crocodile, a cold-hearted man nearing 50, let out a mocking laugh and said in a stern tone: "You two-bit girl! You're so stupid to think you could trap that old man by getting pregnant and have that bastard kid of yours inherit his wealth. You're completely wrong because he couldn't care less. Now, you have no address, no idea who he is. You stupid girl, you're lucky it's because of Maria that I didn't throw you to my dogs, to have them tear you apart as a lesson to the others. From day one, I made the club's rules clear: your interaction with the customers is limited to dancing and serving drinks."

Rebecca couldn't hold back her tears, and when Maria saw her crying, she turned to the boss and said: "That customer was yours, so you must know who he is, don't you?"

But the boss quickly replied: "No, I don't know! Some of my special customers don't like me knowing their names or anything about them. They prefer to keep their business and lives secret, so don't bother. I know nothing."

Finally, Crocodile raised his index finger as a threat toward Maria and delivered his final statement: "Now shut up and get out of here. Go cry somewhere else. That little pup you're carrying is your problem, not mine."

After Crocodile set the rules, Maria wrapped her arm around Rebecca's and guided her away from the tense and stressful atmosphere. Rebecca's steps were slow and heavy, clearly dazed and confused. Her tears had

ruined her eye makeup, and Maria led her to the backyard of the club, surrounded by nothing but empty boxes and overflowing bins filled with alcohol bottles. Rebecca's feelings toward the baby she was connected to were as empty as the discarded liquor bottles around her. After a short while, Maria returned with drinks in her hands.

Rebecca, impatient and angry, snapped at Maria when she saw that she had brought a non-alcoholic drink: "What the hell is this! First, you take away my cigarettes, and now you're cutting off my alcohol so nothing bad happens to this baby? I'm doing everything I can to get rid of this thing. It has no future—just another poor, miserable soul like me!"

Maria leaned her back against the wall. Rebecca's words took her back to the past, two years before she started working for Crocodile. Maria had once been a happy housewife, but because of her infertility, her sweet marriage ended in divorce. It was ironic—this unborn baby that Rebecca saw as a source of misery and torment was, for Maria, a dream, an unattainable desire. Whenever she saw children around her, Maria would entertain them and make them laugh as if they were her own.

Maria began giving Rebecca advice without looking directly at her, her brown eyes fixed on the ground: "Being a mother is a divine gift, because there are people out there who would give up everything in their lives just to have a child. And not everyone is lucky enough to receive that gift... At least when you're old, you'll have someone to take care of you. Never take this blessing for granted... never."

She ended her sentence with a lump in her throat, and Rebecca could feel that the regret tied to her married past was stuck there, making her voice tremble.

Rebecca ran her hand through Maria's hair, messing up her waves as a joke to lift her spirits: "Girl, you get emotional so easily! You know why you're so great? If you were in a crowd and instead of tears, money flowed out, you'd definitely be a billionaire because you sure know how to make others cry!"

Rebecca stuck two fingers in her mouth and dragged them down her cheeks: “Look, you’ve even made me cry!”

Maria laughed and waved her hand in mock disgust: “Gross! Anyway, forget that, let’s plan what we’re going to buy for the baby. And most importantly, we need to come up with a name list.”

Rebecca said: “You’re more excited than I am.”

She swayed her upper body playfully, and Rebecca laughed so hard that she choked on her juice. “Girl, don’t choke now. You need to be around to witness the next Elvis Presley³ that’s coming! I swear I’m going to name him Elvis. And if it’s a girl, we’ll call her Audrey Hepburn⁴, just as pure and beautiful.”

[Chapter 2]

Three months and thirteen days passed, and the situation remained unchanged, except for the life tree of the fetus, whose strong roots gradually embedded deeper within the mother. But the question is, will giving birth to a child make you a mother? Or will nurturing your child earn you the title of an angel named Mother? There is a world of difference between becoming a mother and being one, and all it takes is to remove the glasses of optimism and walk in the realm of reality—the same world cursed by Pandora⁵—to realize that justice is nothing more than a word, even in motherhood.

A mother who had lost against her own carelessness and weaknesses, and an unwanted fetus struggling to witness this cruel world...

The roots of this fetal tree were so strong that they didn't weaken against Rebecca's vulnerabilities, such as her constant smoking, alcohol consumption, and poor diet; however, they ultimately led to a premature birth.

No matter how hard Maria tried to encourage Rebecca to engage in activities like buying baby supplies, having check-ups, and ultrasounds for the fetus's health and gender identification, she only led Rebecca further into apathy and silence.

Throughout her pregnancy, Rebecca rarely bathed or cleaned her tiny rented apartment, perhaps due to the estrogen⁶ and thyroid hormones making her listless, or it was a sign of depression. Yet, the ruminations⁷, like nightmares, haunted her whenever she stared at something or closed her eyes. Fear, anxiety, and stress about her future and that of the baby were relentless. She had completely lost the support and connection of her family when she willingly left that warm family home forever to grasp the star of fame⁸ in her hands, severing all familial and blood ties in the city of Los Angeles.

Questions lingered unanswered in her mind:

1. What fate awaits me and this unwanted child?
2. Will the father ever find out about the child's existence?
3. Will my family accept me, regardless of having a child without a father?
4. Am I destined to work in the club for the rest of my life, giving up my dreams of acting and singing, or will I, like other mothers, be busy raising my child and abandon my job and dreams?

The weight of her desires and wishes felt heavier than the importance of the child, while the only one who cared about this unwanted baby was Maria, who had spent her own money to buy a wooden crib and a baby bag filled with essentials: clothes, a bottle, and a few other items... or perhaps she was seeking to compensate for her own unfulfilled desire to have children.

During the nights, Rebecca continued working at Crocodile Club, where, instead of being a stripper, she was now in charge of serving drinks and tending the bar. This was after the warning and threats from her boss, who, thanks to Maria's intervention, allowed Rebecca to keep her job.

On September 30, at 3:15 PM, Rebecca's labor pains began. She was lying on the hospital bed as the doctor and nurse firmly held her hands, guiding her to the delivery room. The pulling and pressure she felt in her lower abdomen and down her back were like having someone's hands and feet tied to a wheel and being dragged with full force. Her body was drenched in sweat, and her wet hair clung to her forehead. Her breathing was guided by the nurse's counting, directing her breaths. The only question running through her mind—one that every woman in labor, enduring unbearable pain and pressure, has asked—is: Will I survive?

Yes, this is the heavy price every mother must pay to witness the sweetest gift life has to offer. In life, you must pay a price for everything. If you want to become a doctor, you give up your time for fun and leisure,

and in return, you invest effort and hard work. If you want to be rich, you give your ideas and creativity, and in return, you gain the way to wealth.

And to become a mother, you give all the physical and mental tolls and, in return, gain the moments of life with your child.

The sound of the baby's cry filled the air, signaling that the child had been born healthy, even though the chances of survival were nearly zero due to the premature birth, which generally lowers the chances of a newborn's survival but still holds a glimmer of hope. The baby's cries were weak and barely audible, but the young doctor, whom the nurse called Dr. Jones, told Rebecca that her little girl needed to be placed quickly in an incubator⁹. This was necessary because the baby was still premature and required a controlled environment—temperature, oxygen, and humidity—to protect her from infection and environmental dangers and to promote her physical growth. Although Rebecca was exhausted, she managed to ask, almost in disbelief, “A girl?”

Dr. Jones nodded with a smile of approval, “Yes, a girl. Congratulations! I hope you experience joyful and beautiful moments with your daughter in the future.”

In her heart, Rebecca whispered that she wished she could respond to the doctor with the same positive outlook: “I wish I had a view like yours...”

Then she quickly closed her eyes and fell into a deep sleep, as if sleep was the only thing she needed. Meanwhile, Maria sat impatiently outside the delivery room on a waiting chair. When she saw the nurse carrying the newborn in a glass cradle, she rushed over to the nurse, her eyes filled with a mix of worry and joy at the sight of the newborn.

“Is the mother and baby okay? How is my friend? Is everything alright? Why is she in the incubator? Shouldn't she be in her mother's arms?”

Sensing the anxiety and confusion in Maria's voice, the nurse tried to calm her down.

“Don’t worry! Everything is fine. Both mother and baby are healthy, but this little one needs to stay in the incubator for a while. Your friend is sleeping and resting; you can stay with her as a companion.”

“Oh my God!” Maria exclaimed, her excitement evident as if she were cherishing this tiny, delicate being. “Can we really have such a cute and lovable baby?”

She turned to the nurse and asked, “Is it a girl or a boy?” “It’s a girl,” the nurse replied.

“Then welcome to this world, my dear Audrey.”

Four weeks had passed since Rebecca had stayed in the hospital, and her premature baby remained in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) due to issues like low weight and breathing difficulties. Rebecca had been admitted during this time, needing physical therapy and the opportunity to stay close to her baby. However, she was constantly either sleeping or asking the nurse for sedatives, which, of course, would not be given without a doctor’s prescription. Rebecca didn’t even get up to take a glance at her baby through the glass for the first time. Physically present, but like a corpse, she lay on the bed, her spirit hollow, wandering in a void filled with despair and coldness. A tiny part of herself was inside that incubator, surrounded by glass and hooked up to a thin tube in her mouth because she lacked the strength to suckle. Rebecca also couldn’t breastfeed due to dry milk.

Even though her coworkers and the people she worked with at Crocodile Club visited her with flowers and baby gift packs to congratulate her, none of this changed anything for Rebecca. The hospital’s psychologist even counseled her to reconnect with her strict family and gave her a few essential plans, like exercise and nutrition, and suggested joining a mothers’ group or attending small weekend gatherings or counseling sessions for new mothers. The psychologist had diagnosed Rebecca with postpartum depression, possibly dating back to her pregnancy. Despite Maria’s efforts, bringing in baby clothes and tiny toy-like bows to cheer Rebecca up, nothing seemed to wake that spark of joy. However, the tiny

smiles and playful jokes exchanged between the two friends showed that Maria's support still kept a sliver of hope alive in Rebecca's heart.

"Believe me, no medication or program will truly help unless you help yourself. The first step is to believe in yourself, something Rebecca was missing, and then follow through with treatments and support programs. And don't forget those around you—they can be better than medicine at times, without the side effects."

Finally, the time came for Rebecca and her baby to be discharged from the hospital. But before that, Dr. Jones requested a quick conversation with Rebecca. So, Rebecca and Maria sat across from Dr. Jones, who had her hands clasped in readiness to discuss something important. The only sound breaking the silence was Rebecca's foot tapping against the floor. Dr. Jones cleared her throat and began, "Well, I expected to discuss this with the baby's father, but..."

Rebecca cut her off sharply, "There is no father, so stop wasting time and say what you have to say!"

Maria quietly whispered in Spanish, "Calm down, let the doctor speak."

Dr. Jones nodded and continued, "Your friend is here with you, so it's fine. The reason your daughter has been in the incubator this long is because of her premature birth. And, from another perspective, she was born with Down syndrome, which is why we kept her in the incubator to prevent further lung and heart complications..."

When Rebecca heard the words "Down syndrome," she lifted her head, her face a mix of confusion and shock. The only part that stood out to her was the term itself. She repeated it questioningly, "Down syndrome?"

Dr. Jones replied, "Yes, Down syndrome. You see, Down syndrome is a genetic disorder caused by an error during cell division at conception. Normally, humans have 46 chromosomes, but in your daughter's case, there are three copies of chromosome 21 instead of the usual two. This can affect both physical and mental development. Often, Down syndrome occurs due to the age of the parents, but since you are young,

this may have come from her father. Other factors, like exposure to chemicals or infections, can also lead to this condition. Physically, your daughter could face lung and heart problems or hearing issues, now or in the future. Mentally, she may have learning disabilities or delayed cognitive development, which will impact her educational and social abilities.”

With every word coming out of Dr. Jones’s mouth, it felt like Rebecca’s world was collapsing. Although the maternal flame hadn’t yet ignited in her, the thought of having a disabled, unhealthy child was pushing her toward madness. She could barely contain her anger and shouted, “So, my child is retarded?!”

Maria, who had been calm and silent but deeply worried about little Audrey’s potential lung and heart issues, didn’t share Rebecca’s frustration or hopelessness. She was more concerned about the physical challenges than the cognitive ones associated with Down syndrome.

Dr. Jones responded calmly, “I prefer not to use the term ‘retarded’ because it’s hurtful. Many individuals with Down syndrome have special talents in areas like sports, art, and music. What they need most is the support of their families and friends. Don’t let a small difference deceive you.”

Dr. Jones pulled out a few small cards from her desk drawer and handed them to Rebecca. “These are contacts for organizations and associations that support children and individuals with your daughter’s condition. They offer special educational programs, learning support, and even social and financial resources. You only need to stay connected with these organizations.”

Maria frowned and said sharply, “What good is a charity or an organization to me? At least tell me they’ll raise her for us or not?” Maria whispered in Spanish, “Be quiet, what are you saying?” Rebecca, trying hard not to cry in front of the doctor, decided to vent her frustration instead, saying, “No, I won’t stay quiet! I hate myself and this sick baby.”

Dr. Jones remained composed and said, “You’ll need to stay in regular contact with a psychologist and keep taking your medications. Most importantly, follow the programs designed for your emotional wellbeing.”

After this meeting, they were discharged and headed home after four weeks. In the yellow taxi, silence filled the space. Maria gazed out of the window, then turned her head back, trying to avoid looking at her own baby, who she had internally labeled a curse, a curse she believed would haunt her for the rest of her life. Meanwhile, Maria held little Audrey gently in her arms, wrapped in a small white blanket with pink dots, her tiny hand nestled in Maria’s finger. She looked at Audrey’s olive-toned skin and her pearl-like, large eyes, along with her tiny tongue sticking out.

Breaking the silence, Rebecca said, “You told me that when I got old, this baby would take care of me. But now, it’s the opposite. I have to care for this cursed child for the rest of my life and give up my dreams of acting and my job at the club, all because of this curse.”

Maria replied, “What I meant was that you’d have someone in your life so you wouldn’t be alone, not something to use when you’re old. This is your daughter; she has a body and soul, so don’t treat her like some discarded object.”

Rebecca retorted with the same request she made to the doctor, “Then if you want, take her and raise her yourself.”

Maria responded firmly, “We’ll raise this little princess, Audrey, together.”

[Chapter 3]

I can guess what you're all thinking right now: that Rebecca is emotionally fine, and that after three years of giving birth to her daughter with Down syndrome, she's left the club and pursued her acting career. With the help of Audrey's second mother, Maria, they're raising her

happily, without any issues or conflicts, right? So, everything just falls into place this quickly, and every wish comes true? If that's how it worked, why is the world still tangled in so much conflict, war, poverty, and disease? Don't dreams lessen these problems? Why do they only seem to grow? ...So, don't expect me to tell you what you want to hear, because there's no news to give. I'm sorry to show you the bitter reality of the world. I hope you don't hold a grudge...

It's been 3 years, 6 months, and 28 days since September 30th, the day Rebecca gave birth to her daughter with Down syndrome. Rebecca returned to the Crocodile Club as a stripper, taking on the same risks and dangers again. But this time, it was different. It was something beyond fear and anxiety: a sense of carelessness and recklessness, as if it didn't matter whether she'd live to see tomorrow. Her depression had worsened, and her consumption of psychiatric pills increased to the point where she started buying morphine illegally and using it secretly, just to keep herself from lashing out at Audrey, yes, little Audrey, who had turned 3. Audrey is a very quiet and calm child, with an incredibly curious personality. You'd love to watch her walk anywhere and start exploring and discovering everything. She takes pleasure in engaging her childish mind in figuring out objects, even though her cognitive limitations make it difficult for her to speak or express words. However, she did manage to learn a few necessary words like food, water, and pee.

Rebecca, on the other hand, never called her with a loving voice, like: "My sweet Audrey, come here. Come to mommy!" She has never once, in her entire life, called her by name. Does she even care to call her? She behaves as if Audrey's physical presence doesn't exist. Often, when she looked directly at herself in the mirror, gazing at her body, she saw that it still bore the signs of a post-pregnancy "tree" that had left its roots in the form of stretch marks around her stomach, hips, and thighs. The sagging belly, with muscles that had torn and lost their cohesion after childbirth, caused her to lose confidence in herself. She was certain that the club's customers would no longer admire her as they used to, let alone considering modeling or acting. Initially, her feelings toward her child

were shock and disappointment, but over time, they turned into hatred. What can you even call this stage, when a mother intends to take her own child's life? I'm sorry to tarnish a sacred word like "mother" and apply it to someone like her.

A few times, she tried to push Audrey from behind "accidentally" so that she would fall down the stairs and die. Or she placed small toy balls and other tiny objects in front of her, exploiting the 3-year-old's cognitive limitations, hoping that Audrey would "accidentally" swallow them while playing, leading to suffocation. It's terrifying, isn't it? Yes, depression can reach a dangerous stage after childbirth when left untreated and without therapy. You can get so consumed by morphine and medication that you lose track of yourself and the consequences of your actions.

But something prevented this terrifying and bitter incident: Maria, who spent her early days either at the club or taking care of Audrey. Unfortunately, Maria became embroiled in uterine cancer, which required her to travel regularly to New York from Los Angeles and stay in the hospital there for long periods. However, she would return to Los Angeles about twice a month to check on her workplace and bring special souvenirs for Audrey. Although Rebecca feared losing or severing her friendship with Maria, she tried not to hurt her daughter because Audrey was very important and valuable to Maria. Yet Rebecca's indifference and bad temper were so extreme that she often imprisoned her daughter in the small apartment and in the tiny room, or at night, when she secretly took Audrey to the club, she would put her in the makeup room's closet and lock it. Some of Rebecca's colleagues or strippers were aware of Rebecca's behavior towards her daughter. When little Audrey cried out from behind the makeup room closet, needing a bit of attention, like food or water, or if she soiled her pants, they would take care of her out of sympathy, bringing her food and water. Meanwhile, Rebecca hid her lifeless face and the dark circles around her eyes with heavy makeup, and concealed her extra weight beneath tight, suffocating shapewear. She had even learned how to flirt with

customers, using sweet talk to sit among wealthy men without needing to dance.

One day, little Audrey woke up with a dry mouth and chapped lips. She could no longer ignore her hunger and thirst because she hadn't eaten anything since 1:10 PM the previous day. She walked toward her mother, who was slumped on the couch, her makeup smeared and untouched, her mouth agape, with an empty vodka bottle resting on her body while she was lost in sleep. Audrey gently tried to shake her mother's arm with her small, delicate hand, but when Rebecca finally woke up, she placed her hands on either side of her temples, massaging them, as if the throbbing in her head was unbearable. When her eyes fell on her daughter, who had placed her hands on her rumbling belly, staring at her with half-open eyelids like a clam, her pleading gaze fixed on her mother. Rebecca replied indifferently, "What is it? What do you want, cursed one?"

Audrey stammered her request: "Fo...fo...food...fo...food"

Rebecca said, "So you want food, huh?" She grabbed the back of her daughter's dress and dragged her toward the kitchen, which was only a few steps away in their rented 40-square-meter apartment. She took an apple from the fridge and held it in front of Audrey's eyes. But when Audrey reached up to take it from her mother's hand, Rebecca pulled the apple back with a malicious grin and said, "If you want food, first learn to say, 'Mommy, I'm hungry.' Come on, repeat it, cursed one."

Audrey, completely confused and not understanding her mother's actions or intentions, struggled to grab the apple, but Rebecca held her dress tightly. She raised her voice again and shouted, "Say, 'Mommy, I'm hungry. I want food!'"

Audrey, frightened by her mother's shouts, only grabbed the edge of her dress, remaining silent. Despite Rebecca's constant yelling and shaking, she insisted, "Stop acting so backward. Say, 'Mommy, I'm hungry. I want food!' Mommy, I'm hungry..."

Audrey finally stammered, "Ma...ma...mama...ma."

Rebecca, losing control, shoved the apple into her mouth, and the pressure it caused led one of her two tiny front teeth, which were already loose, to come out. This undoubtedly caused little Audrey great pain. As Audrey cried out in fear, blood mingling with her saliva running down her chin, Rebecca paused, finally realizing what she had done. She turned to the fridge to grab something necessary to make a sandwich, but even then, hidden tears streamed down her face, and her expression was barely visible. Yet, the sound of her sobs caught Audrey's attention. Though she couldn't express the words, she sensed her mother's pain and sadness.

Rebecca placed a sandwich with salami, a few slices of tomato, and pickles between two pieces of toast and set it directly in front of her daughter, who was still holding the tooth that had fallen out, covered in blood and tears. Without any feeling of guilt or remorse, she turned away from Audrey and said her last words before leaving, "Who ever felt sorry for me that I should feel sorry for you? Remember, you are nothing but a curse; you destroy everyone's life and dreams with your presence..."

What could a three-year-old possibly understand about curses and misfortune? Audrey, unaware of everything, held the small pieces of pickle first, closing her eyes as she tasted them. The salty flavor tickled her curiosity. She then tried the tomatoes, which weren't very pleasant to her, but in the end, the salami and toast were enough to alleviate her hunger, even if it was just a little. Yet, the sound of her mother's cries echoed in her mind, adding another question to her endless list of unanswered ones:

1. Why is she always crying and talking to herself?
2. Why doesn't she love me and is always angry?
3. Is she also the mother of other children, or is she just my mother?

Audrey had never been outside the house or the club; she had no idea how other mothers behaved towards their children in social settings. Because of this, she thought Rebecca was a unique and special mother,

the only person in her life. However, deep in her little heart, she forgave her and didn't hold a grudge.

When we ask about one of a child's basic needs, most people think of welfare, food, or water. But if your answer isn't love and affection, it means you didn't receive it enough in childhood. Every human, deep down in their heart, is searching for love, but many don't know how to express it due to fear—fear of being rejected if they show their affection or of making themselves vulnerable, only to be met with indifference.

Do you know why many chains of murder and horrific cases that robbed their victims of life occurred? It's because these individuals didn't have the chance to receive love and affection in their childhood. Don't let a child like little Audrey be a stranger to the concept of love, because in the future, she might fill that void through violence, assault, tears, or even deadly loneliness.

Think of the moments when Audrey gently caresses her mother's face in her sleep with her small, soft hands, their smooth and continuous lines reflecting innocence. Or consider when Rebecca, busy doing her makeup or curling her new blonde hair at the vanity, is watched by Audrey from behind the door—like a stranger—admiring how colorful and glittery items like eyeshadow and lipstick make her mother's face shine and become beautiful.

The house reeked of dampness and the stench of unemptied trash, making the air unbearable. Audrey, desperate for any warmth, tried to follow the enchanting scent of the perfumes Rebecca sprayed for her clients, hoping that one day, perhaps, she would catch the scent of a mother's embrace.

Maria, after a long journey back from New York to Los Angeles, returned after a month of intensive chemotherapy. She was weak, her hair severely thinned, but she still maintained her energy for her friends and coworkers at the club. Refusing to let the illness define her, she didn't even bother with wigs to hide her thinning hair. Everyone knew about her cancer, but since she was cherished and respected at the Crocodile, they had granted her extended time off for treatment. Ironically, her bald head made her even more striking, especially when paired with pink lipstick, eyeshadow, and the mole above her left lip. Her slim, tall figure was highlighted by the black jumpsuit cinched at the waist, but tonight, after so long, she arrived at the club at the wrong time. Everything was about to change, and this time, I leave the judgment to you. You be the judge—consider Rebecca and Maria as the culprits. Whose mistakes weigh heavier?

The club was so crowded that her colleagues and friends, who usually welcomed her with smiles and open arms, didn't notice her presence this time, as they were constantly moving from one spot to another to attend to customers. So she went downstairs to escape the noise and commotion.

Next to the restroom, the makeup room and the storage area, which were all lined up, Maria's eyes turned toward the makeup room when she saw one of her colleagues holding Audrey wrapped in a dress in her arms. The other colleague pinched her nose tightly, and their expressions twisted in disgust. Maria quickly approached them when she noticed Audrey was lethargic, with half-open eyes and flailing arms reaching out toward her in a pitiful manner.

The voices of her colleagues rose in complaint and dissatisfaction. Although they had helped Audrey out of compassion during Maria's absence, this time they had had enough of Rebecca's behavior toward her daughter.

Anna, the colleague holding Audrey, said, "Rebecca is so selfish and mean that she doesn't even check on her daughter. This child is burning up with fever, and her clothes and the floor of the wardrobe are a mess from diarrhea."

Marta added, "It's unclear how long her mother has imprisoned her in the wardrobe. It's her usual behavior to lock her daughter in the closet. We have to witness this woman's cruelty every day. Besides, our 'prostitute' lady has threatened that if we complain to Crocodile, she will expose our names because we've kept the secret of bringing her daughter to the club hidden, and we've concealed this from Crocodile all along."

In that moment, Maria picked Audrey up in her arms and took her to the restroom, unwrapping the dress that had been covering her. Audrey's skirt was soaked with diarrhea and feces. This diarrhea was likely caused by the cold and ready-made foods that Rebecca sometimes bought from the store or restaurant, and the fridge was filthy, containing nothing but moldy leftovers and spoiled food. Cleanliness and tidiness meant nothing to a depressed woman anymore; she just wanted to make it through each day.

Feelings of shame, guilt, and blame were the only words that could describe how Maria felt as she washed Audrey in the club's restroom. The rash lines around Audrey's lower body pained her even more when, during the washing, she touched the rash that caused burning and trembling in Audrey's body. All

she could manage to say with a trembling voice was, “I’m sorry... I’m so sorry.”

Maria blamed herself even though she hadn’t done anything wrong. She cursed herself for trusting Rebecca, believing that one day her friend would get better and stop this indifferent behavior. She regretted not doing anything to stop this irresponsible mother.

Maria wrapped a towel around Audrey, and in gratitude, Audrey stroked Maria’s cheeks with the back of her hand. But Maria could no longer hold back her tears and said in a broken voice, “You were just born into the wrong world... Forgive me for not being able to care for you as you deserve...”

Audrey touched her tears with her finger and then put it in her mouth, repeating the action. She enjoyed the salty taste more than anything else. Maria didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at the sight of Audrey strangely using her own tears for testing and exploration in such difficult, heavy moments.

Maria called Ana and Marta again to take care of Audrey for a little while. She emerged from the bathroom with a serious and determined demeanor, heading toward the main floor of the club, like an eagle searching for Rebecca—like a needle that needed to be found in a haystack. The red and purple lights from the backlight projectors made the target harder to see, especially while passing by drunk and merry patrons.

And finally, she found her. Yes, at this hour: in a corner, sitting at a table surrounded by three men—one on her left, one on her right, and the third across from her. Rebecca had her right leg crossed over her left, accentuating the curves of her thighs due

to the short, shiny red dress she wore. The man next to her had casually placed his hand on Rebecca's leg, clearly having been given permission to do so.

With heavy makeup hiding her lifeless face and the darkness around her eyes, and her mouth half-open, she laughed loudly at the men's lame jokes and flirtations. In that moment, Maria lost control; the anger and fury blinded her as she charged toward Rebecca, yanked her forcefully toward herself, and before Rebecca could react, slapped her hard across the face. Her long, thin fingers completely covered the right side of Rebecca's face, leaving her stunned and dazed. Rebecca placed her hand on the slap mark, blinking repeatedly. Her tongue felt tied; she didn't know what to say from the shock and the blow she had received, especially from Maria's unexpected presence, which surprised her.

Meanwhile, Maria's breaths quickened, and she shouted loudly for everyone to hear, "You are the most despicable and lowest person I have ever seen in my life... Have you even asked yourself what kind of person you are?"

The customers and men sitting around the table or standing nearby raised their eyebrows in surprise. Some of them even enjoyed the fight between the two women, as if they were watching a thrilling wrestling match, excitedly placing bets. The strippers and club staff started whispering and gossiping, pleased that Rebecca was finally being punished. They had no fondness for her due to her threats and indifference toward her daughter. They despised her.

The black-clad security team under Crocodile, whose job it was to prevent any kind of conflict or tension among the customers or staff—since Crocodile didn't want any disturbances that could ruin the customers' experience and harm the club's reputation—finally intervened. One of them stepped between Rebecca and Maria and, with a calm but firm voice, ordered, "Quickly, go upstairs to the boss's office."

Silence. Without protest, they both headed directly to Crocodile's office. This time, Maria didn't wrap her arms around Rebecca in solidarity or companionship. There was no longer any sign of their friendship or sworn bond. Rebecca, who had only stayed afloat with Maria's support and guidance, couldn't bear the heavy weight of the hatred and estrangement. On their way, she asked, "Why did you slap me? What did I do wrong to you?"

Maria didn't give her any answer. Her silence was worse than the slap itself. She didn't even look at Rebecca's face, so disappointed and ashamed of her.

Have you ever experienced such moments? Moments when you first meet someone, thinking that the bond of friendship wrapped around your wrists would last forever, making silly plans for each other's weddings or dreaming about growing old and traveling together. But then, something happens, and you realize it was nothing but a misconception, a wrong belief. That's when you recognize that the person is toxic, and with their actions, they're pulling you down. At that moment, you have no choice but to end the relationship to save yourself, even

though, deep down, you still want to keep going because, just once, you shared unforgettable moments with them.

Maria and Rebecca, along with the black-clad guard, entered Crocodile's office. Mr. Crocodile was busy playing with his toy—a money-counting machine—counting the vast amounts of cash he had laundered.

Our lives, personalities, social classes, comforts, and decisions are all tied to a piece of paper. The value of that material piece of paper far exceeds the value of a human's spiritual life. That's what we've passed down to future generations for years. Isn't every murder, looting, and war tied to that single piece of paper? We're fighting over something that, from the beginning, belonged to no one. Only some people, through brute force, claimed it without any effort.

Rebecca and Maria stood like criminals, their heads down and hands clenched together, while the black-clad guard gave Crocodile a full report of the incident at the club, without adding or omitting a single detail.

Crocodile leaned his elbow on his work desk, resting the entire weight of his face on his bent fists. His expression was a mix of surprise and excitement, as if he were being told a childish story rather than receiving a report about a fight. The corner of his mouth curled into a smirk, signaling that he was about to unleash his sarcastic words: "Well, well... my dear Maria, who, after all this time without checking in on me or bringing me a souvenir, goes straight to perform a big show in front of the customers... Weren't you best friends?"

Maria's frown deepened; she could no longer tolerate Rebecca's presence, so she revealed everything: "This woman brings her daughter here every day secretly through the little back door of the club and keeps her locked in the dressing room for hours... Please, fire her."

Crocodile's expression shifted from sarcasm and narcissism to serious and questioning, as if it was a new revelation that someone had successfully torn off the strings of his puppet and escaped from his protective shadow. One of his eyebrows shot up in surprise as he stared directly into Rebecca's eyes, which held no remorse or guilt. Crocodile said, "I have to commend your courage for having the guts to hide your pup here under my shadow. First, you come here to do your dirty work and get pregnant, and then, the second time, you bring your pup here!"

He raised his right hand, showcasing a tiny golden ring around his pinky finger, gesturing around the room: "Take a moment to look around; do you see this place resembling a factory for breeding and raising children? If you were a model mother, you'd definitely hire a babysitter..."

Rebecca shot back, "I can't afford a babysitter!"

Crocodile let out a small laugh. "So, you mean the salary I pay you isn't enough to cover your pup's expenses?"

Maria, sickened by Rebecca's denial and lies, turned her face toward Rebecca and launched an attack: "Why don't you say that you spend everything on yourself for drinks, drugs, and your clothes instead of your daughter?"

Unable to endure the humiliation and insults any longer, as if the whole world was condemning her for her treatment of her

daughter—especially since the bridge of friendship between her and Maria had crumbled—Rebecca snapped back, “You knew this... You knew I didn’t want her. You said that with treatment and medication, I’d be like before, but I’m feeling worse because of the frustration and regret of not having a child. You let this curse come into the world, or maybe you had already coordinated with that local midwife to come up with an excuse and not have the baby aborted? Why don’t you lift this curse and raise her?”

At that moment, Maria was speechless, as she didn’t know what to say. The words Rebecca had thrown about her frustrations and regrets regarding not being able to have children struck a chord, but she couldn’t admit that because of cancer, she had lost hope of raising Audrey. “I’ve been behind you this whole time, supporting you. Sick? Depressed? Fine. But did you even try to get treatment so I could support you? Thousands of women have faced similar circumstances and coped with them, but unfortunately, you’re so weak and selfish that you can’t see anything but yourself... So don’t bring up that nonsense about plotting with the local doctor because that’s just your own lie.”

In the end, the two expressed their hearts without considering their boss Crocodile and the dark-clad subordinates. This was the last exchange of words between them. Crocodile issued the final verdict: “Look, Rebecca, no matter how good of a dancer you are or how much you entertain the customers, I cannot refuse my dear Maria’s request. The value of her request is so high for me that if it weren’t for Maria’s investment and trust, I wouldn’t have been able to start such a business ten years ago.

So since you've made two mistakes and to prevent your third, I'm firing you permanently."

This was when Rebecca lost her pride and her job forever. A crushing blow struck her spirit because that little bit of self-esteem she gained from her looks was no longer there; she wouldn't hear the compliments and flattery again. The thought of the hardships she would face without a job and salary made tears silently flow down her cheeks. Crocodile slipped half of her 20-day salary from a full month's pay into an envelope and handed it to Rebecca. Before leaving, Rebecca glanced at the cash in the envelope, which amounted to nothing but \$1,000, while her full monthly salary was \$2,500. Without a goodbye or a glance at Maria, she rushed out of Crocodile's office. Her steps were weak and slow; nothing could describe the state Rebecca was in as Maria's venomous words echoed in her mind.

When she reached the main floor of the club from the upper level, she paid no attention; she just went downstairs to collect her bag and belongings for good. She entered the dressing room and encountered her daughter Audrey along with two of her colleagues whom Maria had entrusted to look after her. On the other side, the cleaner was busy mopping the floor of the dressing room that little Audrey had accidentally dirtied. She picked up her bag, ignoring her colleagues and her daughter. Anna deliberately bumped her shoulder into Rebecca's and harshly said, "Aren't you going to take your daughter? Your kid is sick and lethargic, and she's made a mess here!"

With narrowed eyes, Rebecca shoved Anna back; she had no patience for a fight and just wanted to get the hell out of there.

There was an old white t-shirt in the box, and she picked it up and put it on Audrey, who was already wrapped in a towel. The large shirt covered little, skinny Audrey's body, but Rebecca tightly grabbed her daughter's wrist and walked briskly to leave the club. Before exiting, she grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the bar and walked out. The command center of her brain sent a message that the only thing Rebecca needed was a drink and a few grams of morphine.

2:45 AM: Rebecca was walking aimlessly along the curb, taking swigs from the bottle in her hand and refusing to stop. Audrey, exhausted and in need of rest, was being dragged along with her. Some local drunks or hooligans on Santa Monica Boulevard crudely admired Rebecca's beauty, whistling or throwing catcalls. One of them shouted from behind, "Hey, Marilyn Monroe, how about giving me your number?"

Audrey, feeling very uncomfortable, struggled with her weak bones—a result of her Down syndrome. She desperately needed to sit down and, in a soft, pleading voice, said, "Mama... Mama." She repeated the word many times, but it fell on deaf ears. In her drunken and cruel state, Rebecca ignored her daughter and mercilessly continued her unsteady steps. Growing more aggressive in her intoxication, she snapped, "Shut up and keep moving, damn it! Stop saying 'Mama!'"

Hours passed like this until 6:15 AM. Rebecca had walked about 5 or 6 kilometers without stopping, heading south to Venice, a neighborhood 3 or 4 miles from Santa Monica. She dragged Audrey into a deserted alley filled with piles of garbage, finally letting go of the fragile wrist she had been gripping so tightly that it had turned red. Stumbling and weak, Rebecca was ready

to abandon her daughter—not for a brief errand or shopping trip, but permanently. This was the kind of abandonment where you leave your child in some corner of the world, never to see them again, like the thousands of children who face this bitter fate for reasons they never understand.

One question lingers: Why didn't Rebecca change her ways with the support of her former friend, Maria? Isn't it possible for people to truly change their nature? I can guess that some of you, when confronted with overwhelming problems, lose faith in yourselves. Just like Rebecca, who once had a strong drive to pursue her dream of becoming an actress. But her family, especially her father, believed acting was nothing but a foolish fantasy and pushed her toward a more respectable career, like teaching. This led to a series of decisions and events that made her believe she would never achieve anything with a child like Audrey. To Rebecca, Audrey was nothing but a curse.

Without guilt or regret, Rebecca spoke her last words: "Stay here! I can't do this anymore, or you'll destroy my life. I'm leaving you here to save myself, curse you!" She turned to walk away, but Audrey quickly grabbed her mother's dress, pleading again, "Mama..." Rebecca pushed her back hard, causing Audrey to fall to the ground. As she saw her mother quicken her pace, disappearing around the corner of the alley, Audrey was truly left alone for the first time.

Rebecca had abandoned a piece of herself, just like a father leaving behind a part of his heart when he sends his son to fight in a war, or a woman who dedicates her life to building a home, only to leave it behind for her children and future generations, bidding a final farewell in her old age.

[Chapter 4]

After Rebecca's cruel abandonment, little Audrey remained unmotivated and motionless, still reeling from the painful fall inflicted upon her by her mother. She waited for help from someone—or her mother—on a narrow, desolate street, a starting point for survival and the loneliness of fighting like in *The Hunger Games*, but in a version where the player was a three-year-old child facing thousands of city dwellers. The scorching sunlight beat down directly on her, and tears streamed down Audrey's cheeks, visible only as a white, blurred spot. Yet, the sound of scratching and the rustling of plastic bags as a stray cat dragged its sharp claws across them revived a sense of curiosity that coursed through Audrey's veins. She slowly lifted her upper body and witnessed this unexpected visitor: a slender, gray cat with delicate green eyes that could deceive any vulnerable creature. Although cats are inherently distrustful and fickle, Audrey moved towards this strange creature with open arms, but stray cats, unlike humans, are not accustomed to such approaches. So, the cat preferred to flee swiftly, and once again, that feeling of being struck returned to Audrey, whispering in her heart, "Even you have left me alone, just like my mom..."

Driven by instinct and the overwhelming stench of decay and suffocation emanating from the piled-up garbage, which made it unbearable for her lungs to breathe in this poisoned air, she decided to escape this grim alley. As she passed by the walls, not a single spot remained on these walls, devoid of graffiti or drawings. Although there were obscene drawings and heartfelt notes from heartbroken players in the competition of love, among them was a bird resembling a snowy egret, standing majestically, its white wings spread wide, creating a comforting and protective embrace for its tiny, helpless chicks. Its long, flowing feathers swayed like a silken crown in the gentle breeze. With sharp eyes and a long black beak, its upright and dignified presence resembled a maternal figure, protecting its vulnerable offspring from any external danger. In that moment, not just Audrey, but any passerby would be

captivated at first glance by such a striking scene, which seemed to showcase a neighborhood with a talent for unearthing every undiscovered artist who leaves their creativity and art scattered in various corners. Though the neighborhood's reputation had been marred by crime, addiction, and wrongdoing, this very art and creativity could cover up a tiny fraction of this ugliness.

Audrey's little hands could not reach out to caress the painting of the mother bird, but imagining that this bird cared for its chicks as much as it could gave Audrey a glimmer of hope, alleviating the feeling of abandonment and loneliness. But the real terror arrived when Audrey took her first step onto the street. The surge of the crowd and the cacophony of noise—a blend of heavy traffic and the chatter of people—scraped against her ears and psyche, causing her to cover her ears with her hands as she had never experienced being in a community outside before. The sidewalks were filled with people moving in a single line, and this overwhelming bustle paralyzed Audrey with fear as she stood frozen, being jostled by the crowd, which forced her to keep moving forward into the uncertain path ahead. They were like triggers, compelling her not to remain still for even a second. She felt like a mouse scurrying beneath the feet of giants, her face flushed and sweaty from the summer heat, resembling a freshly washed cherry. All she needed was a peaceful home, a refuge away from everything.

The fear and confusion had seeped so deeply into her heart that she felt engulfed in a state of utter despair and disorientation, where all negative emotions and energy pooled together, giving birth to a monster larger than all those negative feelings: that had now manifested as the same gray cat she had encountered in the alley, which had been lurking behind her neck all this time, connecting her to the ground in a way that twisted and bound her thoughts and psyche in its grasp, having the power to control and manipulate her. The gray color represented black: stress, fear, anxiety, hopelessness, anger, sadness, resentment, impulsivity. And with white: wisdom, prudence, logic, reality... It was made from these two colors, yet Audrey lacked the ability to see, hear, or feel the physical

presence of this cat that clung to her like a parasite. However, every single word that emerged from this cat's malicious mouth affected Audrey deeply, its tone mocking and serious, yet sounding like a wise old man who believes he is right in every situation. So, it expressed its first venomous words with a smirk: "Oh, poor child, it's this very fear and terror that gives me power."

Audrey's body shook due to the wave of negative energy, and with each passing moment, a greater sense of confusion and turmoil enveloped her, leading to the mistaken belief that her mother, Rebecca, was still present beside her. Over and over again... Behind her, women with long blonde hair, dressed in flowing garments, passed by, and when she faced them, realizing they were not her mother, that wicked cat laughed mockingly and taunted her: "Why can't you accept reality? No matter how hopeless and dejected I make you feel, your mind keeps retreating to the woman who abandoned you. Of course, this works in my favor, as I somehow feed off your existence..."

"I know you've experienced this countless times, where worry and pressure manifest as cold sweat and panic without anyone noticing or understanding you. But in that moment, your unconscious mind reaches out for help and reveals its hidden, deeper part.

Let me explain: imagine your unconscious mind as a person who could be a friend or even a partner, but possesses a hypocritical, insincere, and even conservative personality. You trust this person without knowing the reason for your misplaced trust. Yet they carry all the secrets of your thoughts, fantasies, painful secrets, and weaknesses in a suitcase with endless storage capacity.

Here is where you are deceived, because they constantly disappear and vanish, only to reappear during difficult times, guiding you like a hero and repeating, 'It's nothing; everything will end after this... just be patient.'

You realize that not only does the unconscious mind keep secrets, but it also aids you with defensive mechanisms without your awareness. Just

as Audrey knows her mother has abandoned her, her unconscious mind seeks to reduce tension and turmoil by employing defense mechanisms such as denial and repression. This enables her to imagine and deny the truth that Rebecca has inflicted emotional pain on her, thereby alleviating the bitter pain for a three-year-old child.

Although the wicked cat tries to pour its poison into Audrey's unconscious reservoir."

"Eventually, she managed to separate herself from the noisy crowd and moved toward the quieter side of the sidewalk. Along the way, Audrey's stomach felt as empty as a hollow cave, as though it was collapsing inward, with a knot tightening in the middle of her abdomen. Every breath she took felt heavy, like a weight pressing harder and harder on her stomach, and her mind couldn't focus on anything except the last meal she had eaten—a slice of toast with peanut butter from the day before. Her mouth was dry, dehydrated from last night's diarrhea, and her tongue, like a piece of dried leather, stuck to the roof of her mouth. Every time she tried to moisten her mouth, she could only taste the bitter residue of her saliva.

She stopped in front of a small grocery store. She cupped her hands around her eyes like binoculars to peer through the large, slightly smudged windows. The wooden frames of the windows were cracked and rotting, their color faded over time. The store's rusty, faded sign barely revealed its name. When her eyes caught sight of the neatly stacked baguettes and the rows of shelves lined with cans, rice, jam, and pickles, a spark of hope and excitement blossomed in her heart.

Before she could push open the wooden door, the snowy egret that Audrey's conscious mind had briefly captured in a mental snapshot from a wall painting now appeared as a bird of salvation. With its talons, it lifted the cat from Audrey's shoulders, flying toward the sky, its wings fluttering between the clouds. Its crest feathers transitioned from light blue to dark, symbolizing imagination, delusion, dreams, and unreality. The bird's colorless body, reflecting its innocent and emotional nature,

radiated positive energy, hope, excitement, joy, calmness, mercy, and forgiveness, created in pure snowy white. However, the chain around its long neck revealed that it had been exiled or punished by its kind for deceit, trickery, or cunning.

The bird finally decided to take a chance at talking to the trapped cat, with a sweet and confident, yet youthful voice, sounding more like a young boy: 'Well, I think you've tried hard enough to turn her into something like yourself, but I won't let you go any further. Forgive me!'

The cat, unfazed, puffed and replied, 'I just wanted her to accept the reality that her mother threw her away like trash, but unfortunately, she's as gullible as you are.'

Just as creatures with negative energy like the cat are born, the opposite is true for those with positive energy, like the legendary twin forces of Yin and Yang. It's a common misconception that people think they're opposites, when in reality, they complete each other. If Yin is the dark cat, then Yang is the luminous bird. One cannot exist without the other, and without both, they lose their meaning. Now, imagine a world without men or women. What do you think would happen? I bet humanity wouldn't last ten years before falling into ruin, much like the extinction of the dinosaurs."

Audrey pushed the door forward, shattering the silence with the sound of a bell hanging above it. An old shopkeeper, dozing off on his chair behind the counter, jumped at the sound of the bell, as if the mythical Thor had struck him with an electric shock to wake him. The shopkeeper hastily adjusted his glasses to see the unexpected customer, but he didn't even notice Audrey's presence. Her tiny frame, standing at just 75 centimeters, often made her invisible behind the 1.1-meter counter. The old man thought that the door had swung open due to a gust of wind and returned to his nap. However, I wonder if, like this old man, we also close our eyes to the world outside. When a storm or flood suddenly guides us toward death without warning, there will be no time for regret or painful suffering left.

Audrey drifted like a wandering ghost among the two shelves in the middle of the shop. The first thing that caught her attention was a row of chips arranged in a triangular pattern resembling the Eiffel Tower. All it would take was for Audrey to grab one of these chips from the center, and suddenly, like a landslide, all the chips would topple over. This would once again disrupt the old man's nap, causing him to jump up in irritation, cursing his worker: "I've told that dim-witted boy a thousand times to place these chips on the shelf! Is this an art exhibition?"

The young worker, lounging behind the counter and absorbed in reading One Piece manga, nonchalantly responded, "What do you know about art? I'll fix it later."

Audrey stuffed everything she could into her arms, from chips to noodles to chocolate biscuits. Interestingly, whatever she couldn't reach, she effortlessly grabbed with the goods picker. She felt so at ease, as if she had conquered the shop. Her mouth watered at the sight of jars of pickles—ah, that sour, vinegary taste that would cause saliva to flow involuntarily at the mere mention of its name. That sensation coursed through Audrey's veins. Unfortunately, the jars were on the top shelves, and when she tried to grab one with the goods picker, it fell and shattered on the ground. This time, greater fear gripped the young worker and the old shopkeeper. There was no wind, no customers; so who was it?

The old man called to the young worker, "I think it's that same mouse we've been looking for weeks. Get up! Catch it before the customers find out about this disaster!"

Reluctantly, the worker put down the manga, adjusted his black cap on his head, and, with complete confidence (thanks to reading One Piece), imagined himself as Monkey D. Luffy with a straw hat instead. A grin spread across his face: "Ha! When I conquer the ocean, old man, you can tie yourself to the sails and manage our geographical route. At least I'll save your wife from your snoring!"

In response to such a proposal from a potential Luffy, the old man kicked the boy's backside: "First, manage your pants before they fall off, kid!"

The young worker rubbed the spot where he had been kicked and, like a game of hide-and-seek, began searching for the invisible mouse—or rather, Audrey. A black cotton fiber was attached to the goods picker in Audrey's hand, and with each step she took, the fiber moved like a string. The worker only saw the strange black fiber moving but still couldn't spot Audrey as she moved from one shelf to the next. He yelled, "I found the mouse!"

The worker picked up a bucket to throw at the mistakenly identified mouse, and little Audrey quickened her pace with every step he took, even passing in front of the old shopkeeper. However, since the old man's glasses were perched above his head, he had no clear view, leading to yet another misunderstanding: "I've found the mouse too!"

Emerging from behind the counter, he sharpened the tip of his matchstick apple with his finger. His footsteps sounded slow due to his extra weight. Audrey was completely bewildered by the sound of two approaching footsteps and, in search of an escape route while clutching her snacks tightly, she dropped the goods picker. Just then, a customer entered, and the bell rang again, diverting the attention of both the shopkeeper and the worker toward the door. The two collided accidentally while walking and fell to the ground in a heap.

As the customer opened the door, the snowy egret swooped in and guided Audrey outside: "Run! Run! Escape!"

Audrey began to run out of the shop. An unknown force surged through her legs, and the joy and triumph she felt were indescribable. Although she was unaware of the consequences of her actions, was such a theft comparable to the embezzlement and billion-dollar thefts from the pockets of ordinary people?

Audrey, running without anyone chasing her, unintentionally kicked a beggar's bowl on the ground like a soccer ball. The bowl flew through the air and hit the hand of a teenage boy who had just bought a pack of

cigarettes, eager to try smoking after school. Audrey's "heaven-sent" kick sent the pack of cigarettes, along with the boy's chance to smoke, straight into the street drain. Another small victory for Audrey, adding to her life's scoreboard—after all, smoking is often the first step toward addiction. Though there was no money in the bowl, Audrey returned it to an old woman sitting against the wall, staring blankly ahead, repeating, "God bless you, a little help can bring joy to this old lady's soul."

Audrey squatted in front of her, nodding her head from side to side, trying to get a reaction from the woman, who seemed blind, her eyes fixed and unblinking. Her weathered, date-colored skin and her hair, twisted like a chrysanthemum sprinkled with snowy crystals, framed her face. Her cherry-like cheeks sagged with wrinkles, signs of years passing from season to season, yet none of this diminished her beauty. It was a testament to a life of labor, etched into the hands of a silent generation. The old beggar spoke to Audrey: "Kid, if you've got money, put it in the bowl!"

Audrey laughed loudly, enchanted by the woman's unique African-American accent and the way she lazily dropped the ending syllables. The rhythm of her speech was musical, something Audrey could listen to repeatedly without getting tired. Audrey opened a bag of salty chips, spilling half into the woman's bowl and stuffing the other half into her own mouth, crunching noisily. The woman's voice rose, "What did you throw in, kid? Put money in!"

Audrey laughed again, mouth full, and tossed more chips into the bowl. The beggar, like a talking doll, responded every time Audrey pressed her button: "I swear I'll get up and beat you with my cane!"

Audrey, wanting to share the chips, shoved one into the woman's mouth, enjoying the idea of not eating them alone—sharing made everything taste better. Every time the old woman tried to speak, Audrey would pop another chip in her mouth, preventing her from finishing her scolding. Then the beggar had an idea to boost her business. She gently took Audrey's hands and sat her down on her lap, a green fabric decorated

with autumn leaves. The old woman stroked Audrey's face, especially circling her hand around Audrey's ever-present smile, hiding her crooked baby teeth beneath her fingers. Audrey, like a sunflower blooming more with every moment under the old woman's warmth, had never felt so happy and alive.

The beggar, adopting a grandmotherly role, began calling out to passing strangers in a loud, desperate tone: "Don't cry, my dear grandchild, let me collect enough money to buy you proper clothes."

"Come, throw in a dollar and make my granddaughter's heart happy."

"The happiness of my grandchild is your happiness too, so fill the bowl. God will bless you!"

The more the beggar spoke, the more passersby were moved, tossing coins and bills into the bowl. Audrey had unknowingly become part of the beggar's performance, adding her own charm to the show, and together they drew even more pity and donations from the crowd.

Four or five hours passed with the grandmother playfully bantering with the mischievous Audrey until a calm afternoon settled over the deserted area. It was time for the old woman to remove her blindfold of helplessness and reveal herself to the world. She stood up, tucking her cane under her arm—something she hadn't needed for quite some time—and carefully placed the \$70.35 she had collected into her bundle. Though her back was hunched, she leaned closer to Audrey to interrogate her.

This time, her tone softened, reminiscent of a lazy sloth: "Where's your mom? Why have you been alone for so long? Shouldn't you be with your mom or dad?"

Audrey, still unable to establish communication—let alone speak like a parrot—had no intentions of giving up her mischief. Instead, she raised her hand in an exaggerated gesture, mimicking a traffic officer signaling to drivers. She spun around, pointing to the empty street behind her. The old woman, now confused, replied, "There's no one here..."

Once again, Audrey turned left at a 90-degree angle and pointed directly at a closed bookstore.

"Are you making fun of me, kid?" the old woman asked, narrowing her eyes.

In one last attempt to communicate, Audrey turned, but this time her finger accidentally poked the old woman's eye. She quickly recoiled to avoid further "attacks." The calm demeanor the old woman had maintained evaporated, replaced by the explosive frustration of a ticking bomb: "Ouch! Before I hit you, I should give your mom and dad a good beating for raising such a rude child!"

Audrey erupted in laughter, further astonishing the old woman, who pressed her hand against her wounded eye. "What a strange kid! I'm sure you're an alien that fell from another planet just to make my life worse..."

The old woman looked Audrey up and down, taking in her black rubber slippers, oversized t-shirt, wild hair, and the dark grime that clung to her neck and body, a testament to her rough life. The only thing she could do was ask, "What's your name?"

Names... Audrey's ears were so unfamiliar with the sound of her own name that she couldn't say, "I'm Audrey." Instead, names like "cursed" or "Rebecca's child" seemed to echo more in her existence. However, she didn't want the grandmother's question to go unanswered. So, in her own way, she stuck her tongue out and began to blow raspberries.

The old woman decided to give this nameless child a name of her own. She lightly tapped Audrey's forehead: "Connecting with you is really hard, pumpkin head. I hope you don't mind me calling you that, because your head reminds me of a pumpkin!"

With that, the grandmother extended her hand, inviting Audrey to join her in an adventure. Without hesitation, Audrey accepted the invitation with enthusiasm. Together, they stepped forward into the unexpected events awaiting them.

When they finally reached the taxi station after a short walk, one of the drivers, who seemed to recognize the old woman, raised his hand and called out, “Hey, Auntie Judy! Let me take you wherever you want to go.”

Granny Judy and Audrey walked over to him, and Judy greeted the driver warmly. He quickly opened the car door for them, though it was unclear if he did so out of respect—or perhaps a bit of fear.

As they settled in, Granny Judy gave the driver the address: “Please, take us to Westwood, Wilkins Avenue, near the Glendon intersection.”

Throughout the ride, Audrey pressed her face against the car window. If it weren’t for the glass between her and the world outside, she might have flung herself right into the bustling scene. Her eyes danced over the elegant shops, each with its own unique décor, the quaint and cozy cafes holding countless untold stories, the parks, and trees... All these vibrant city lights reflected in Audrey’s gaze.

As the sun began to set, it felt as though Audrey’s old life was fading with it, retreating into the shadows. Meanwhile, the moon appeared, selfassured and bright, like Audrey’s new life and identity as a curious “pumpkin-headed” child stepping boldly onto center stage.

[Chapter 5]

They arrived at their destination. The houses in this affluent neighborhood resembled miniature models, as if someone had taken colored paper and scissors to create tidy, imaginary shelters on a paper landscape. In America, those who live with care and order understand the meaning of such neighborhoods—like the simple, no-competition houses we drew on notebook pages in childhood. But somewhere along the way, we started believing that happiness lies in bigger houses or owning acres of land.

Grandma Jodi pulled some money from her bundle and asked the driver, “How much is it?”

The driver hesitated, caught in a dilemma. “No, no, please. I don’t want Gonzalo giving me trouble for taking money from his mother.”

Grandma Jodi, unfazed, firmly pressed the extra fare into his hand, saying, “Fear and worry won’t feed your wife and child. Take it and say nothing.”

She might seem like a harsh and frightening old woman, but there’s still kindness in her heart that she tries to keep hidden, perhaps to avoid showing vulnerability.

Grandma and Pumpkin, formerly known as Audrey got out of the car. Pumpkin felt uneasy, as if each step of her muddy slippers was polluting the soft, lush green grass. On the windowsills of the house, cup-like flowerpots were planted in neat rows, and above the entrance, a Persian calligraphic inscription read:

"اگر به خانه من آمدی برای من ای مهربان چراغ بیاور و یک دریچه که از آن به ازدحام کوچه
خوشبخت بنگرم"

(in Persian)

Translated: "If you come to my home, bring me, dear one, a light,
and a window from which I can gaze upon the bustle of the street of
happiness."

This verse is a line by Forough Farrokhzad, a beloved Iranian poet.

Grandma Judy knocked on the door and softly warned Pumpkin, "Don’t say anything about today; I don’t want to feel embarrassed in front of them."

The door opened, and a warm smile appeared on the face of the lady of the house—a southern Iranian woman with fawn-colored skin, whose doe-like eyes, accentuated with kohl, contrasted with her vibrant, multicolored maxi dress. Her simple, ponytailed hair and lack of makeup highlighted her natural beauty, while a small gem on her nose piercing caught the light. She welcomed them warmly, saying, “Aunt Judy! I was

just wondering when you'd come back home, and it's even better now that you've brought a new guest."

Pumpkin was introduced to a new dimension of Iranian culture and art, as each corner of the walls was adorned with a continuous painting inspired by Attar of Nishapur's Conference of the Birds. The artwork illustrated the journey of a group of wandering birds heeding the wise Hoopoe as their guide, invited on a spiritual quest to find the Simurgh, the true king and essence. Each corner displayed a stage in this journey:

Stage 1: Quest (طلب) – The painting began with a dark, narrow path illuminated by dim light, symbolizing hope and the beginning of the journey.

Stage 2: Love (عشق) – A scene of fire painted with warm reds and oranges, symbolizing the passion and fervor as the birds, driven by faith, lose themselves in love.

Stage 3: Knowledge (معرفت) – The birds move from the fire of love into lush, green forests, seeking deeper understanding of themselves and the world, yearning for a truth that was once unknown to them.

Stage 4: Detachment (استغنا) – This stage shows a vast, endless blue sky, signifying freedom and detachment. Here, the birds no longer care for worldly matters like fame or fortune.

Stage 5: Unity (توحيد) – A circular sun in the center symbolizes unity and harmony, its brightness representing the world's center and the oneness in diversity.

Stage 6: Bewilderment (حیرت) – The birds drift in a space of light and darkness, confused, as some have lost their lives or abandoned the path. They realize that the more they understand, the less they comprehend.

Stage 7: Poverty and Self-Realization (فقر و غنا) – A simple, bright scene shows the thirty birds in the shape of the Simurgh, realizing they themselves are the Simurgh. They achieve liberation, no longer seeing themselves as separate beings. Here, poverty signifies complete

dependence on God, and annihilation means dissolving the self to unite with truth.

Pumpkin watched in awe, her mouth wide open at the magnificence of this artwork. The heavy, sweet smell of handmade incense filled the air, enticing anyone who entered. Grandma Judy, still holding Audrey's hand, didn't let go until Audrey was seated on the couch and said, "It's that scent again! Hana, what did you say was in it?"

Hana placed a tray of fruit before them, and Pumpkin once again took an apple and an orange, tucking them under her arms until Grandma Judy took them and began peeling and slicing them for Pumpkin.

Hana explained, "It's a natural, handmade incense blend I learned from my mother. It combines sandalwood, frankincense, and tuberose."

Hana couldn't help her curiosity about Pumpkin. "Aunt Judy, aren't you going to introduce your companion?"

Grandma Judy, not wanting to say anything in front of Pumpkin, moved closer to Hana, who was preparing dinner, and spoke softly so Pumpkin wouldn't hear, "Honestly, I found her all alone on the side of the street.

From her appearance, she seems homeless or abandoned by her parents. I couldn't leave her alone."

Hana's expression shifted to one of seriousness and compassion. She understood that such situations were common in today's society. "Ah, poverty and hardship... What do you plan to do? Shouldn't you take her to the police? Maybe they can help."

Grandma Judy replied, "I'll do that tomorrow when I leave here. I might take her directly there, but I doubt it'll change much. If they put her in an orphanage, there's no telling how much she could be hurt in the future."

Hana, disturbed by the thought of her leaving, held Grandma Judy's hand and said, "Please, Auntie, don't say that. Stay here as long as you'd like. My husband works night shifts, and I'm alone here at night. You know

how much we owe you and your late husband; without you, my husband wouldn't have a decent job."

Guilt and regret sparked in Grandma Judy's heart as she had to keep lying and hiding things. "Sweetheart! I met with my son Gonzalo today. Our relationship has finally improved, and he's insisted that I return to him tomorrow."

One of Hana's daughters, Leili, who was three years older than Pumpkin, came out of her room, politely greeted Grandma Judy, then extended her hand to Pumpkin. After a slight hesitation, Pumpkin returned the handshake.

Curious about the new guest, Leili asked her, "What's your name?"

Pumpkin twisted her mouth but stayed silent. Leili repeated her simple question, "What's your name? Can't you say your own name?"

Irritated by her guest's silence, Leili yelled, "Mom! Mom! Why won't this girl talk?"

Pumpkin frowned with jealousy as Leili called for her mom. To avoid any childish rivalry, Grandma Judy made something up on the spot. "She doesn't talk at all because a mouse stole her tongue! Now, could you get a bath ready for Pumpkin, with the lady of the house's permission?"

Hana replied warmly, "Of course, no need for permission. Make yourself at home. I'll grab some clothes for her too."

Time passed as Pumpkin, unlike other children, covered herself in suds and soap in the tub, attempting to fashion a bubbly hat. Grandma Judy washed her gently, reminiscing about her son Gonzalo's childhood with a smile.

When Hana brought a towel, Grandma Judy reluctantly informed her, "Her hair is completely tangled and full of lice. There's no choice but to shave it all off."

Unaware of what awaited, Pumpkin wrapped herself in the towel. Hana, standing over her like a cheerful version of Edward Scissorhands, turned

on the clippers, and Pumpkin's scream filled the air. She was genuinely terrified of the buzzing device aimed at her hair. Grandma Judy held her by the shoulders to keep her still as Hana worked quickly to end the "torture," though Pumpkin continued to cry.

Finally, after a brief moment, Pumpkin's bare head made her look curiously bigger. When Grandma Judy wrapped a strawberry-patterned scarf Hana had given her around Pumpkin's head, it not only covered her bald head but also masked the painful feeling of being different. With chubby cheeks, she now looked so adorably sweet that Pumpkin even stopped crying, transfixed by her new transformation.

Among the regular clothes Hana had brought was a traditional garment—a handmade masterpiece of blue silk with intricate embroidery, adorned with golden threads and sequins along the neckline, belt, hem, and puffed sleeves. Pumpkin pointed directly at the traditional outfit, but Grandma Judy, holding up a simpler shirt and pants, objected, "You can't wear that heavy dress all day. Let's try this outfit instead."

Pumpkin stomped her foot and crossed her arms defiantly, signaling her stubborn refusal. But Grandma Judy was just as stubborn. "Oh, so that's how it's going to be, is it? Listen, little chick, every child in the family and neighborhood has been disciplined by me. Now, put this outfit on, or else..."

Guess who won this battle? I like that guess and prediction to remain unanswered.

Dinner time arrived, and everyone was seated around the table, even one of Hana's daughters, Laleh, who is 10 years old. She rarely shows herself because she is more attached to books than people. However, with such a special dinner—roasted stuffed fish combined with aromatic herbs and barberry, and saffron rice like sunlit grains in beautifully painted clay dishes with a white background and deep blue lapis lazuli adorned with intricate designs of intertwined chickens and flowers—Judy couldn't help but praise and admire this traditional Iranian art as she filled Pumpkin's plate. "I feel like I need a necessary trip to Iran to revive my spirit; how can I take my eyes off these dishes and decorations now?"

Hana nodded in agreement and let out a small laugh. “Well, having an Isfahani husband has its benefits; all this painting and craftsmanship is a gift from having such a partner.”

Judy tried to express a word that was stuck on her tongue. “You said you’re from Ben...” She snapped her fingers to remember the word.

Hana replied, “Bandar Lengeh, an ancient port city in southern Iran on the shores of the Persian Gulf.”

Pumpkin, dressed in the same local coastal attire, held the spoon like a shovel, spilling rice grains and fish skewers all over the table and her clothes. She stood on a chair, reaching out with her small hands to grab the water pitcher from the middle of the table to take a sip, while Leili quickly filled her turquoise goblet. Leili held the spoon correctly in her hand to teach Pumpkin the simplest principles of how to hold it properly, but unfortunately, her attention was drawn to a large photo hung on the wall depicting the Faravahar, the ancient symbol of Iran and Zoroastrian culture, representing the guardian spirit and rooted in Zoroastrian philosophy. Here, the Faravahar, with its wings open and arms raised upward, signifies the connection of the human spirit with truth and God. Each of the three layers of the Faravahar’s wings represents one of the three moral principles of Zoroastrianism: Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds.

A ring surrounding it symbolizes the cycle of life, the immortality of the soul, and adherence to ethical principles. Below the Faravahar, two opposing strands represent the eternal struggle between good and evil. It seems intentionally and appropriately installed so that alongside fulfilling our physical needs, we do not neglect our spiritual and moral needs.

A heavy silence fell after the dinner gathering. In addition to providing the guest room, Judy and Pumpkin were on the heavy double mattress. Pumpkin, like a lazy creature, had fallen asleep in a fetal position, while Judy stared at the ceiling, her thoughts and worries taking over her mind. When you're older, there's nothing left to think about the future, but rather about past decisions, especially the past between herself and her son, and why she chose to play the role of a two-faced, mysterious old woman.

The Yin cat and the Yang egret appeared beside Pumpkin once again. Only in this pitch-black darkness, the glowing green eyes of the terrifying cat shone, no

longer filled with sarcastic devilishness, but rather in a more conservative manner, as it raised its hoarse voice: "Stop the deceit!"

But this didn't change anything for the Yang egret. It believed the actions it was taking were right: "She can't bear the reality of the world."

It wrapped its wings around Pumpkin and allowed her to be engulfed in a dream, an illusionary world, through the power of its imaginative feathers. Pumpkin was having the most beautiful dream, in which her mother, Rebecca, was holding her tightly and singing lullabies in her ear. Without saying a word or interfering, she didn't break the loving embrace of her mother's affection. What an unreachable calm!

Have you ever realized that, unlike real life, where time, character, and status only hold meaning in sleep? Because in the imagined world that Pumpkin's mind created, there was no trace of her being a Down syndrome child or outcast. In that world, she was a child, bathed in the attention and love of her mother. Suddenly, a tension from Judy disrupted her sleep, guiding Pumpkin to the bathroom, splashing water on her face and eyes to wake her up from the grogginess. But for a mind still trapped in a dream, could it be awakened?

Judy gathered her things and belongings to leave the house without disturbing anyone. At that moment, they were met by the tired father, who had spent the entire night on shift, with his daughters, Leili and Laleh, in his arms. Pumpkin fixed her gaze on this scene, as if it were something strange to her, for she hadn't been aware of the father's presence until then. Once again, she felt that jealousy and lack, especially when Judy, standing by the half-open door, bid them farewell with respect and warmth. Pumpkin pulled her hand and stormed out of the house, and Judy quickly followed her like a duck, grabbing her arm: "Got you, little one!"

A small token of Iranian cultural acquaintance came with Pumpkin's inner growth and awareness: the Yang symbol, which had initially taken the form of the snowy egret, had now transformed into a hoopoe perched on her shoulder, speaking to her opposite twin: "What the heck is wrong with you that every time I have to see your cursed self?"

And with its beak, it began pecking at the Yin cat, which had stuck to the top of Pumpkin's head like a cap, while it tried to swipe at the blows of the hoopoe. "It's

not luck that you ended up in the beehive, but like an ungrateful fool, you're complaining. Damn you and your past!"

Along the way, Judy sang a song and recited poetry to try to lift Pumpkin's frown:

Rain on the house,

Rain on the tree,

Rain on the little bird,

But don't rain on Pumpkin.

Even Judy's voice, which used to bring a sense of joy when her laughter filled her face, no longer had the same effect. A new idea crossed Judy's mind; she knew that food was the solution to the problems of all the children. So, she grabbed some cake and milk for Pumpkin. Although Pumpkin didn't seem to react coldly or indifferently to the food at first, while eating breakfast, she still turned her lip down and stomped her feet on the ground, blocking Judy's path. "You're really grumpy today!"

Judy borrowed a shopping cart from the store and struggled to lift Pumpkin into it. "Don't let the sadness of people who have left you affect you. Your smile is worth more than their existence."

As they passed through the streets, Judy continued reciting her poetry:

Rain on the boot,

Rain on the sea,

Rain on the little fish,

But don't rain on Pumpkin.