



The Nölmyna

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: The star skeptic from a haunted house reality show finds herself in a jam when she discovers her cousin's nondescript Swedish superstore chair is anything but ordinary...

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As soon as she heard the cop's question Sadie Espinoza knew, in her heart of hearts, that her cousin was almost certainly gone forever.

"Yes,"

she answered, her blood thudding in her ears. "I knew Itzhak Espinoza-Dorfmann. He was my cousin. What's happened?"

The cop took so long to answer that she checked to make sure the call hadn't dropped. "We're not certain,"

he began, then explained that Itzie's neighbors had grown concerned when they noticed his mail piling up. They called the building manager. She came over with a passkey. The door had a security bar engaged. They called Cincinnati PD for a welfare check. The cops battered the door down. No Itzie, dead or alive. No sign of trouble. No unlocked windows. No other doors. Just a note.

Sadie's heart dropped. "A suicide note?"

She heard the cop perk up. "Did Mr. Espinoza-Dorfmann show signs he might harm himself or others?"

Sadie didn't know how to answer. Itzie wasn't precisely self-destructive. Certainly not maliciously so. But he was like a high-torque table saw with zero safety features: it'll get the job done, but might take your finger or destroy itself in the process.

"What's the note say?"

Sadie asked.

“Don’t know. It’s sealed. The old man mailed it to you, care of his own address. Wrote on the outside ‘If I’m found missing, call Sadie Espinoza’ and this phone number. We can’t open sealed and postmarked mail without a warrant. We don’t even know if getting a warrant is warranted. Old lady on the ground level said there was a young Black guy who used to come and go all the time, but she hasn’t seen him either. Right now, that guy is our main person of interest—”

Sadie rolled her eyes. “The ‘young Black guy’ is Itzhak Espinoza-Dorfmann.”

The cop might have heard, but did not listen. “Hopefully this Black kid can shed some light on what’s happened to Mr. Espinoza-Dorfmann. In the meantime...”

Unbidden, Sadie recalled a conversation she and Itzie had in their twenties, when he admitted that he hadn’t known he was Black until he was five. “I know that sounds insane,”

he’d said as she’d cackled with laughter. Itzie was absolutely, unambiguously Black; he looked like an extremely nerdy Wiz Khalifa. “But it’s true. I knew I was ‘dark,’ but it never occurred to me that I was ‘Black.’ My dads raised me as their own, raised me a Jew. I’d never met a Black Jew—or even heard of one. I didn’t think you could be both.”

The cop had kept talking while Sadie took her side quest down memory lane, but she snapped back when he asked for her to give him permission to open the note Itzie’d taken pains to be sure no one would open but her.

“Do I have your permission to open it?”

the cop reiterated.

“No. You don’t.”

This clearly annoyed the cop. “I’m on a roof, in the middle of a home inspection,”

Sadie added. “But I’m nearby. I’ll wrap this up and come there myself.”

It only took Sadie fifteen minutes to finish up and get to Itzie’s apartment, a converted brownstone stitched into Cincinnati’s patchwork of gentrification. Parking on his block—where \$2,000-per-month apartments surmounted trendy draft kombucha cafés—was impossible. Parking one block over—where an affable hobo peed on the ancient ashes of a fire-gutted chili parlor—was easy.

The cop was waiting on Itzie’s stoop.

“Ms. Espinoza?”

“Officer—”

She squinted at the name tag over the right breast of his Kevlar vest, then paused. The cop sighed.

“It’s pronounced how it looks,”

he said, heading into the building. “Like ‘Picket,’ with a g instead of the ck.”

“And you became a cop?”

she asked his back. He offered no answer, simply trooped across the tiny hex-tiled foyer and up the beautifully restored stairs, asking his own question:

“You’re from that stupid ghost real estate show?”

Sadie offered no answer either. Their questions were equally stupid: Officer Pigott obviously became a cop, despite his last name. She was clearly “that dumb bitch”

from Haunted House Home Inspectors. In fact, she’d recently returned to Us Weekly’s “top 10 most hated people on TV,”

even though HHHI had been off the air for nearly five years. She had Netflix to thank for that.

Itzie’s place was on the second floor. The battered door stood open, a single strip of police tape symbolically barring the entrance. Sadie ducked under the police tape. Officer Pigott followed, making no attempt to stop her.

The place was still a cluttered mess: open books arrayed across sofa and floor, fast-food wrappers overfilling the kitchen trash, a scatter of half-disassembled chairs from IKEA, that ready-to-assemble wonderland of fast-fashion furniture and Swedish home decor. But Itzie’s place didn’t smell like anything, which was unnerving. Every house smells, and all those smells are signs: new paint and varnish (hiding water damage?), mildew (from a long-ignored leak?), fresh lumber (shoring up bad steps?), cats and cigarettes (ugh).

Last week Itzie’s apartment had smelled like unwashed Itzie and neglected kitchen trash. Today Itzie’s place smelled like nothing at all. It seemed absolutely and eternally vacant. That brought it home: Itzie was gone beyond gone. She bit the inside of her lower lip, using the pain to stifle a rising sob.

Sadie’s eyes immediately went to Itzie’s lovely oak Art Deco dining room table, which he’d restored himself, and the tacky-ass IKEA Nymna chair still sitting at its head. The genuine class of his prized table made the Nymna’s bullshit Scandinavian minimalism—with its cheesy bentwood birch arms and gray plastic mesh seat—really pop. An envelope lay squared up on the table in front of the chair, like a single place

setting. It was addressed to her. She snapped it up and tore it open.

The letter was short; she read it at a glance.

“What’s it say?”

Office Pigott asked.

“Itzie sends his warmest regards,”

she said, holding up the note for the officer to read, careful to do so in a manner that in no way implied she was handing it over. It read, in full:

Dear Sadie:

If you are reading this, then

. Fuck the police (who I assume called you)

2. I sat in the chair

3. The chair is yours now (sorry)

I am at this moment transferring the rights of the PROPERTY (chair) to you in all respects. I hereby certify the transfer of this PROPERTY in good condition in your name, and which can be used immediately.

The letter was then signed and dated. The date was five days ago.

“Do you mind if we take this letter as evidence?”

Officer Pigott asked. She pulled it back.

“Yeah, I mind. First off, Fourth Amendment. Second, this is my receipt for my chair.”

“You’re not taking any chairs,”

the cop said. She already knew she couldn’t take the chair—no one could—but this still made her blood boil. “Your mail is your mail,”

he added, “but you aren’t removing anything from an active crime scene.”

“Active crime scene!”

She was boiling over now. “What’s the crime?!”

The cop hooked his thumbs into the armpits of his Kevlar vest. “We don’t know. But a man is missing.”

“And you aren’t going to find him if you’re looking for a little old White man who doesn’t exist! This is so fucking typical!”

The cop sighed. “I knew you were going to make this a thing. I apologize for our misunderstanding on the phone. I was given incorrect information about Mr. Espinoza-Dorfmann’s identity based on a neighbor’s assumption and had not yet double checked it when I called you. The matter seemed urgent, so I proceeded quickly out of an abundance of caution.”

“Yeah, well now you know better,”

Sadie spat. “But riddle me this, crimefighter: if you still thought Itzhak Espinoza-

Dorfmann was an old White man, would you be calling this a ‘crime scene,’ or would you be calling hospitals to see if they had him in their ER?”

The cop’s jaw stiffened. “Listen, Ms. Espinoza, I intellectually understand that anyone could be anything—that you might be a ‘he’ or a ‘they,’ that women can rape men, that any kid can grow up to be president—but I do this every day, and I’m telling you: I’d love it if, just once, I got a call on a strong-arm robbery and it was the little old White lady who’d shaken Malik down. But the fact is it never is. I had bad information. I’ve got better information now. I’m here to help.”

“OK, Officer, that being the case, what’d they say when you called the ER at University of Cincinnati Medical Center looking for Itzie?”

Officer Pigott just looked at her. He hadn’t called any hospitals, because he didn’t think Itzie was in a hospital, because even though there was no elderly victim, Itzie was still a suspect.

Of course, Sadie knew perfectly well Itzie wasn’t in any hospital either. She knew exactly where he was. He’d sat in the chair.

But she wasn’t going to tell this cop any of that.

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Itzie and Sadie had grown up as siblings in all but name, saving each other from single-childhood. The Espinoza brothers had bought adjacent houses when they came to Cincinnati, houses their kids treated as a single household. Sadie and her “Itzie-bitsy lil brother”

grew up swapping Goosebumps and watching Paranormal Activity movies together under the same big quilt.

Despite graduating as valedictorian and attending the New England Conservatory of Music for violin and viola (at his dad’s insistence), Itzie had ended up in TV production, first as a boom operator and sound assistant, then doing Foley, ADR, mixing, and post. Eventually he clawed his way into showrunning, the first Black showrunner at House she’ll tell ’em how to fix ’em,”

Itzie had told the executives at HYTV, who were still gobsmacked by the fact that “Itzhak Espinoza-Dorfmann”

was a skinny Black kid. “We come back a week after the repairs are done and reinterview the occupants, see if they are still vexed.”

When one of the execs finally regained the power of speech, she pointed out that Haunted House Home Inspectors was a terrible name—overlong, hard to say, redundant, impossible to make into a good logo—and the format itself was guaranteed to enrage the viewers: people who watch ghost hunters on HYTV aren’t looking for intellectual rigor, she explained. They’re looking for ghosts.

“Yes,”

Itzie had said. “That’s the whole point: it’s a dumb name for a dumb show that will attract exactly the wrong viewers. Miss Tammy and Professor Hodge one hundred percent believe in ghosts and the spirit world. They don’t just find ghosts in a creaky old Victorians. They find ’em in never-occupied condos. Jeez, they’d find ancient, unsettled spirits haunting a brand new ?LEI store built on a brand new space station one week before ribbon cutting. They are True Believers. And Sadie is a legit licensed home inspector with a professional reputation to protect. Tammy and Hodge will set them up, and Sadie will knock them down. The viewers will hate it and kvetch up a storm on Facebook and Reddit—and then all their kookie friends, family, and followers will tune in to get just as pissed off, at which time they’ll head to Insta-Face-Reddit to piss and moan and rage. Wash, rinse, repeat. ‘Hate viewers’ are still eyeballs, and eyeballs sell ads.”

Of course HYTV was in—eyes are eyes, ads are ads, and money makes the world go ’round. And of course Sadie was in. A part of that was the money. A bigger part—one she wasn’t particularly proud to admit to—was that it was fun to troll the sorts of credulous Midwesterners who crowded her Facebook feed with “hopes and prayers”

and All Lives Matter.

But it wasn’t really about the money, or about the dark pleasures of tweaking the People of Walmart. Sadie wanted to believe. But she needed to be convinced. And inspecting every haunted house within a day’s drive of Cincinnati seemed like a good start.

As it turned out, while “haunted”

houses often had legitimate safety issues—failing light switches, ancient wiring, poor gas burner ventilation—it was rarely anything truly challenging. As a general rule, your average home owner could clear a domicile of all “unsettled spirits”

in under thirty minutes using standard hand tools. Sadie ended up saying, “It’s nothing you can’t fix!” so often that HYTV printed it on merch and tried making it go viral.

From a revenue standpoint—which was the only one that interested HYTV—Haunted House Home Inspectors was a smash hit. It cost next to nothing to make (the primary “talent,”

the property’s occupants, weren’t even paid a pittance) while advertisers—especially those hawking commemorative gold coins, dubious home health solutions, and “risk-free”

investment schemes—competed viciously to snap up every thirty-second ad spot they could.

It was Itzie’s genius running at full wattage. If anything, he’d underestimated the potential of every aspect of the show: the ad revenue, the free viral promotion, the viewership, and its rage.

Itzie’d gotten bullied a lot in high school. He got it on one side for being one of the few Black kids, on the other for being an “Oreo,”

and all around for having two elderly White gay dads. One day, out of the blue, he’d told Sadie that it wasn’t so bad, because no one ever got on him for being a Jew. “It sorta almost feels like they’re picking on the idea of me, not the real me,”

he said through a mouthful of Cheetos, watching her play Grand Theft Auto. “I’m like a gecko: predators get a thrashing stub of tail, and the rest of me gets away.”

Hearing that had, in a way, saved Sadie’s life. She was on the swim team. Try as she might, her thick hair never got fully dry after morning practice. A bunch of the swim

girls had taken to calling her “Wetback”—You know, because she’s so dedicated to swim team that the back of her shirt is always wet from her hair.

She would never tell anyone that she’d started thinking an awful lot about what her dad’s four-pound single-jack hammer could do to those girls’ faces.

Itzie’s observation flipped her perspective: Jewish Espinozas weren’t remotely “wetbacks.”

They weren’t even “immigrants”: they’d been in New Mexico—where her dad and his brother grew up—since before it was “New Mexico.”

The only thing calling her “wetback” did was make it clear how stupid those girls were, like a house cat strutting around thinking it caught a snake when all it had was a shitty old lizard tail.

Unfortunately, the most dedicated HHHI hate-viewers turned out to be a good deal more toxic than the Learned Council of Aryan Swim Girls of Central Ohio. Their emails were vile, calling her every sort of bitch—“White bitch,”

“Black bitch,”

“Mexican bitch,” “light-skinned bitch”—except for the one that actually mattered to her, because it hadn’t dawned on them that a Brown girl could be a “Jew bitch.” But even with all the murder-rape threats, the hate mail was fundamentally sort of a yawn, and really HYTV’s problem anyway, not hers.

The flooding of her business’s Yelp and Google pages with fake one-star reviews was more of a concern, as were the handful of fraudulent complaints lodged with the Better Business Bureau and Ohio Department of Commerce. The afternoon that a stone-faced middle-aged couple followed her around a Home Depot for an hour,

recording on their phones, she called it quits with HHHI, despite being three months into shooting the second season.

There'd been no bad blood with Itzie, who was good-natured to a fault. Besides, professionally speaking, he'd gotten everything he needed from Haunted House Home Inspectors after the first season: he'd proven that if you gave him a film crew, he could catch lightning in a bottle. The shows that followed—Ghost Van, Polterfight, Ley Line Hunters, Shinto Investigation, the one where Vanilla Ice spent a night in haunted castles in the Carpathian Mountains—had Itzie running just to stand still.

Which was why Sadie had been shocked when, five years after HHHI wrapped, Itzie called out of the blue on a Saturday morning and asked her to come over.

“You’re in Cincinnati?!”

she cried. “The dads said you got one of those absurd houses perched on the side of a bluff in the LA valley.”

“Pfshh,”

he dismissed. “I rent that disaster when I’m in LA. You know what insurance is like for a thing like that?”

Sadie, in fact, did. “My real place—my address-of-record—is here in the ’Nati. Home is where the absentee ballot goes.” He laughed jaggedly. “Why we even talking about mailing addresses, Sadie? You gotta come over here. I—it—” He laughed again, then blew his lips out in a flapping raspberry, something he’d done since they were kids to loosen up when he got tongue tied.

“You gotta come down here, cuz. You gotta see.”

Sadie was on the verge of asking more questions, but then Itzie added two words—“legit woo-woo”—and that was all it took. She’d be right over.

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“Woo-woo”

had been Sadie’s husband Ben’s affectionately derisive catchall for the supernatural phenomena Itzie and Sadie adored.

Ben had died the summer before Itzie pitched Haunted House Home Inspectors.

He’d died the stupidest possible death in the stupidest of all possible worlds: No one had been doing anything particularly wrong, but all the factors had meshed in exactly the wrong way.

It had been a slightly slick morning, the mom behind the wheel had been a little distracted by her fussy baby, her minivan’s tires had just barely started to go bald, Ben had been listening to a podcast on his big chunky Beats, and there was a thin spot in his skull from a childhood fall.

Any two or three of those would have still left him alive, perhaps even totally unscathed.

All five together put him in a casket.

Ben and Sadie had been married six months. Sadie was three weeks pregnant, but had not yet told Ben. She had been saving the news for his birthday. The morning of his funeral she miscarried.

Itzie knew all of this. He’d been at Ben’s burial and sat shiva with Sadie, staying with her through the entire first day and a half, during which she never slept. She’d been

struck dumb with grief, and he'd made no effort to cheer her up or get her to "let it all out."

He answered her phone, he received guests—and their countless kugels and casseroles and coffee cakes—he made her tea, he held her hair as she vomited.

It was that first sleepless night that Sadie told Itzie about the pregnancy and the loss—something she never told anyone else—weeping bitterly at the fact that she never got to share the joy of the possibility of a child with Ben, nor have his help bearing the burden of that loss.

"I never really believed in God until this shit,"

she told Itzie. "Random chance couldn't conceivably be this capricious and cruel."

She sniffled hard, sucking in her burgeoning tears and smearing snot with the heel of her hand. "But since there is a God, then there are indestructible souls and all the rest of that woo-woo, and so Ben is still somewhere out there."

In response Itzie quietly sang, "Beneath the pale moon light..."

It was the "Somewhere Out There"

duet from *An American Tail*—the one animated movie about Jews like them (albeit ones who were Russian mice). Itzie and Sadie had sung it for the talent show at Jewish sleep-away camp the first year Itzie went, when he was terrified and miserable. As a wedding present, he'd somehow surreptitiously prepped the entire crowd into serenading her and Ben with it when they entered the banquet hall.

* * *

The first thing Sadie noticed when Itzie opened his apartment door that Saturday was an ugly new ?LEI chair. She even knew the name of the design; it was a “N?lmyna.”

Ben had wanted one when they first moved in together. Sadie had thought it looked awful—on top of sounding like something that had crept from an eldritch tomb long lost beneath the deserts’ shifting sands. But she’d humored Ben. They’d driven all the way out to the ?LEI in West Chester, he’d sat in it for fifteen seconds, then grimaced. “Well,”

he’d admitted, “their website’s right: this chair does indeed ‘reimagine comfort’—in much the same way Jeffrey Dahmer reimaged charcuterie. You want some meatballs?”

Despite the unfortunate juxtaposition, she did. The meatballs had been all they bought at ?LEI that day, and it was still kind of one of her favorite memories of their extremely short marriage.

But, of course, none of that would explain why Itzie, of all people, had bought one. Itzie’s tastes in architecture and interior design stopped just shy of 190 and put the “anal”

in “artisanal.”

“Why in the world did you buy a N?lmyna?”

she asked as she walked in.

“I didn’t,”

Itzie said. “It’s an apport.”

“No,”

Sadie said, taking a closer look. “I’m positive that’s a N?lmyna.”

But Itzie’s sudden willingness to entertain the possible charms of cost-conscious Swedish design wasn’t what worried her. It was the state of his apartment as a whole. It wasn’t a disaster, but it wasn’t like Itzie: the trash was a few days overdue, the counters littered with Burger King bags and pizza boxes, the surface of his treasured oak dining room table gritty with crumbs and sticky with orange pop rings from the bottoms of forgotten Big Gulps. It was the apartment of a depressive slump, but Itzie himself was giddy, almost manic, and smelled of BO.

“Watch this,”

he said. “Do not take your eyes off the chair.”

She watched the chair intently. Just another N?lmyna. ?LEI’s Chinese suppliers must poop out ten thousand of them every day.

She watched Itzie pick it up, stride past her, then slip around the corner into the spare bedroom he used as his office.

“Am I supposed to follow you or—”

“No,”

he called from the little office. “Turn around.”

She turned around. Then froze.

The N?lmyna was still at the head of Itzie’s table.

Her heart was pounding fast and hard, cramming into her throat, making her want to vomit.

“Itzie-bitsy,”

she said, more a wheeze than a word. “What the fuck?”

“It’s an apport,”

he said in her ear. “Stay put. This time, when I pick up the chair, just keep watching the spot where the chair was.”

Sadie did as she was told. Itzie’s hands grabbed the chair, pulled it out of her frame of reference. She kept her eyes glued to the spot. No chair. She heard Itzie pace away, heard him set his chair down in the little stub of hall between the two bedroom doors. She kept her eyes on the open space at the head of the table, focusing on the little scuffs on the hardwood where the N?lmyna had stood.

Nothing happened.

She glanced up; Itzie was standing between the two bedroom doors, grinning, one hand resting on his chair’s back. She looked behind her, to the head of the dining room table. The N?lmyna had returned. She did a double take: there were now two chairs, one with Itzie, one at the table.

“The craziest part,”

he said, gesturing at the original N?lmyna. “I took out one of the bolts that holds the seat in place, carried it in my pocket all day, all over town. It didn’t reappear on the chair, or duplicate, or anything. It was just like any other ?LEI bolt in the universe. And the chair still couldn’t be moved. Crazy, right?”

Sadie stepped away from the dining room table, her legs moving with no real participation from her brain. She walked over to Itzie and his chair in the hall, touched it. Solid. She looked back. The N?lmyna was still where it had been at the table.

“This one is just a regular chair,”

Itzie said, indicating the chair in the hall with them. “Move it all you like.”

He picked it up and carried it to his little office. It stayed gone. The N?lmyna at the dining room table stayed put. She followed Itzie back.

His tiny home office was crammed with a jackstraw heap of N?lmyna chairs, at least twenty of them.

“They’re all regular. Every one but the one at the table. That one ain’t going nowhere.”

“I. Don’t. Understand.”

“It’s an apport,”

Itzie enthused. “A material object transferred from an unknown source. Classic of séances and poltergeist investigations. Every single apportation ever investigated has been shown to be a fraud, Sadie. Every one but this one. This is fucking proof! Legit, verifiable woo-woo! I’ve been bouncing around haunted woods and paranormal strip mall kitchens for almost ten years looking for proof, and proof showed up on its own. What are the odds?”

Sadie stood in the home office, staring at the heap of chairs without seeing them, thinking about the N?lmyna in the living room. The same stupid, ugly chair Ben had

thought he wanted, before actually sitting in one of the uncomfortable bastards. What are the odds?

“Where’d you get this thing,”

Sadie asked, looking at Itzie’s new chair, thinking about the one crouched at the head of his table.

“I didn’t get it anywhere. I flew in three days ago, arrived hella late. No chair. Woke up the next morning, it’s sitting at my table. I couldn’t figure out where it came from, and was sorta freaked out that someone was getting into my place to mess with me. I moved it over by the windows to get a better look in the good light and see if there was anything weird about it. And then I had two chairs. And—”

He gestured at Mount St. N?lmyna crammed in his office. “And, well, you can guess how things went from there. Isn’t this amazing!?”

The front door buzzer brayed.

“My DoorDash!”

Itzie shouted. “Be back in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.”

Itzie was out the door and down the stairs.

Alone in the apartment, Sadie wandered back to his oak table and gingerly rested one hand on the primal N?lmyna’s seat back. It seemed normal at first. But as she held it, she realized that it was thrumming, and had been all along, like an airplane hull when you’re at cruising altitude. It dawned on her that she and Ben had never flown in a plane together. The pain of losing him was suddenly fresh and new.

And here she was, a widow quickly cruising toward spinsterhood, one hand resting on the ineffable.

Legit, verifiable woo-woo.

Sadie took a breath and sat down in the N?lmyna.

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As soon as her ass touched the mesh, she knew she'd made a tremendous mistake.

But by then, she was already through the chair, on the other side of that thinning of the fabric of the Universe.

She was in a garden, not so different from the garden of weeping cherry trees in Ault Park, east of downtown, where she'd spent plenty of afternoons ambling around with Ben.

But that was maybe only the case because it wasn't so different from anywhere, because it was somehow everywhere, and everything, all at once.

The grass was shorn perfectly even, like an Army recruiter's brush cut.

The sky was a pale bleached-out yellow somehow undergirded with a terrible, geometric webwork.

She didn't know what could possibly be terrible about a shape—something like a mesh, something like a honeycomb—but it was awful.

The sun was at the zenith of the sky, but it did not hang there.

It was dividing steadily, like time-lapse footage of a cell in a documentary about cancer or evolution.

And Ben was there, because Ben was everywhere, because everyone was everywhere there.

She was steeped in Ben, soaking in him and soaking him up.

She knew the reality of his delight in seeing her on their wedding day, and his final thought of her as he lay dying.

She knew a strange teen had touched him in a swimming pool when he was six.

She knew Ben had been addicted to online pornography.

It was a tremendous relief to be home with her husband again.

It was awful knowing everything.

She shot out of the chair, then bolted out of Itzie's apartment.

* * *

Itzie was bounding up the stairs as Sadie headed out the door.

“Gotta go,”

she said in a rush.

“But I got two-for-one Crispy Ch’King chicken sandwiches!”

He held up the bulging Burger King bag for proof.

Sadie pushed past and carried on down the stairs, loose limbed as a rag doll.

Itzie rushed after. “Sadie, c’mon, I need you. You’re the haunted house home inspector! You’re the only person who can bounce ideas around with me on this, help

me explore it. At the very least, we've got, like, two dozen chairs to take apart and figure out if they're for-real ?LEI crap, or some sort of paranormal mimics of ?LEI crap!"

She was already to the first landing, not slowing down. "This is a you thing, not a me thing,"

she told him.

"Of course, it's a you thing!"

Itzie said. "This is the thing you been looking for since Ben..."

She didn't slow.

"This is proof, Sadie. The chair is proof—not that there's a God or an afterlife or any of that—but it's proof that it's worth asking the questions we been asking since we were kids. Proof that there is somewhere out there."

She was at the front door.

"Hey! At least tell me you'll be my, like, trip-sitter when I try sitting in the chair?"

For that Sadie stopped. She turned back to look at Itzie—who really didn't look like he'd aged a bit since they'd been kids. And maybe, in the most important ways, he had not.

"You haven't sat in it yet?"

she asked, almost incredulous. After all, isn't sitting in a chair the first thing you do?

Itzie snorted in reply. “If I’d woke up one morning and there was an oven-fresh mystery pie on my counter, it ain’t like I’d just cut a slice and dig in.”

“Ok. Agreed. But knowing what you’ve seen so far, now you’re gonna dig in?”

“Not dig in, per se. Just taste it. Tasting this pie is the only thing that’s left to do, Sadie.”

She took a breath. “Itzie, definitely do not sit in that chair. Trust me.”

Then she was out the front door, putting much-needed distance between herself and the edge of the Eternal.

These were her final words to her cousin.

A week later she got the call from Officer Pigott.

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Sadie didn't drive straight home after meeting Pigott at Itzie's now vacant apartment. Instead, she drove to Ault Park, where she ambled around the gardens and beneath the weeping cherry trees until sundown, alone, wondering why she hadn't checked in on Itzie sooner herself, and knowing it was because of that chair, the N?lmyna.

She'd only spent a few seconds in the N?lmyna, but the weight of having known everything, for even that fraction of a moment, lingered. It felt like she'd swallowed something radioactive.

And she'd only sat down in the N?lmyna for an instant. Itzie'd been in that all-place for days. It was inconceivably awful.

Once the sun was below the horizon—good old sun, still traversing the sky as it always had and would—Sadie drove home. Her house was at the end of a block that dead-ended into a trashy little nature preserve choked with invasive buckthorn and hogweed.

She was far from shocked to unlock the door of her little brick bungalow and find the N?lmyna already waiting in her entryway, squared up under the coat hooks, the sorta chair you sit in to pull on your galoshes.

After all, Itzie had written her a receipt.

* * *

Officer Pigott was on Sadie's porch the next morning. She was about to leave for work, coffee mug in one hand, car keys in the other. The cop began to speak, but then

he saw the chair in her entryway. His face hardened. He rested his hand on the butt of the Taser at his hip.

“Please step aside, Ms. Espinoza. I’m coming inside.”

Sadie opened her mouth, but Pigott gave her no chance to speak. “You’re being detained. That chair was removed from an active crime scene.”

“You can take it,”

she stammered, knowing that was impossible, knowing he didn’t know that. “I don’t even—”

“Please slowly set down your coffee and keys. Keep your hands where I can see.”

Pigott stepped in. Sadie backed away, stopping just past the entryway.

“I haven’t done anything—”

“Yesterday, when I called to ask you about Mr.

Espinoza-Dorfmann, you said you knew him, past tense.

I hadn’t even told you there was concern he’d gone missing.

But you already knew he was long gone.

I have no clue what anyone is up to here, but we passed into probable cause territory a while ago.

We’ll figure it out at the station.

Please turn around.”

Sadie did as she was told, presenting her wrists for cuffing, knowing that as soon as those cuffs went on, it was unlikely she’d walk free anytime soon: a man who’d practically ruined her life had gone missing and she’d been acting suspicious as hell, including appearing to have stolen a seemingly worthless chair from his sealed apartment.

Pigott took hold of Sadie’s left hand to cuff her.

She let her knees buckle, collapsing back into Pigott, dumping them both into the N?lmyna.

As soon as they landed, Sadie immediately rolled off, terrified of passing through the thin place in the chair again.

She glanced back, expecting to see an empty chair.

Instead she saw what passing through the N?lmyna entailed, something she’d dwell on for a long time to come.

The cop in the chair appeared to be frozen in time, and yet also dissolving: skull peeked through eye peered through eyelid; chair back was visible through ribcage seen through shirt and Kevlar vest gone gauzy.

The best she’d ultimately come up with to describe it was “digestion,”

in some awful way distinct from “decomposition.”

In an instant the process was complete and nothing remained—not a tooth or nail or bullet or thread. It was as though the cop had never existed. All that remained was her

stunned realization that she'd killed him.

Sadie looked outside. The empty cop car was idling across the street from her place, pulled off onto the grass, blocking the trailhead. She didn't know what to do, so she went to work.

The cop car was gone when she got home, but there was a detective in a dark sedan in her driveway. He had questions. Sadie was cooperative, but was afraid she couldn't help:

Yes, she'd seen the cop car when she left for work.

No, she hadn't seen any officer. She'd assumed he was on the trails; kids got up to creepy shit back there.

Yes, she'd spoken to Officer Pigott about her missing cousin yesterday.

No, she had neither seen nor heard from either since.

Could the detective come in and look around? Sadie scowled, then grudgingly acquiesced.

He found nothing. He didn't even notice the N?lmyna.

Later a pair of cops in a cruiser arrived and parked where Officer Pigott had. They sat there all night, and were relieved by a new pair who sat there all day. Rinse. Repeat.

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In the middle of the next night Sadie got up from tossing and turning in her wide and empty bed. She wanted to think of nothing at all, but mostly she thought about Itzie and Ben and a universe that seemed hellbent on carving you down to a sliver.

“It’s nothing you can’t fix,”

she reminded herself.

Then went out to the N?lmyna, sat down, and fell through the hole in the Universe.

It was nice to be in and with Ben again.

And it was awful.

It was awfully nice.

He screamed and sang and spoke to her, as did everything and everyone else, ever. It was noisy, in the way that a silent room can somehow be deafeningly loud.

Itzie and Pigott were there, but not in the way Ben was—not everywhere all at once. They were present bodily. They sat on the perfectly shorn grass beneath the weeping cherries and the kaleidoscopically propagating suns.

They sat cross-legged, kneecaps nearly touching, holding hands. They were skeletal with hunger, eyes closed, bodies blurry with dissolution.

Itzie’s eyes jigged beneath the eyelids, dreaming. It was like seeing a corpse in its

casket slowly crack a grin. Sadie wanted to scream and run.

Yes, Itzie'd done this to himself. But the cop? It would be hard to argue that his state was not her fault.

"Sadie,"

Pigott and Itzie said, exultant, eyes closed. Both their lips moved as they spoke, but the words themselves came through the suns steadily consuming the sky. "We're glad you're here."

Their skin bled out into the air, like ink applied to wet paper, forming tendrils that grasped and consumed the drifting petals of sunlight.

"We've learned an awful lot in our years here. For example—" And then, instead of explaining, they put a notion in her head that she would never be able to fully articulate.

The closest her mind could come was to imagine something like an immense whale sucking in water and straining out brine shrimp.

But the shrimp were stars, and each star was orbited by planets, and each planet was populated by billions, and each of those billions clung to their kin in terror as they found themselves shorn from existence and devoured.

"We think we're ready to return now,"

they sighed. "As god. Help things along. Clean up the clutter. But we aren't sure of the way any longer. You'll lead us back through the thin spot in the N?lmyna, yes? And then join us all in the Godfold?"

Sadie abruptly flashed on a joke Itzie had told her when they were kids:

Hey, cuz, what did the Buddha ask the hotdog vendor?

“Can you make me one with everything?”

Sadie was acutely aware of time passing, so fast that it seemed like it wasn't moving at all. She recalled what happened to the cop when she dumped him into the N?lmyna, and knew it was happening to her body back in her entryway.

“Sure,”

Sadie answered, nearly mad with her inundation in all of everything. “Sure, I can help.”

Then she stood up from the chair, leaving them behind.

Over the ensuing years she'd often debate with herself as to why it was she could come and go through the N?lmyna while others could not.

She hoped that it was because some essential element of Ben, pulsing through the annihilating Godfold, buffered her from absorption.

But she suspected it was simply because she kept her visits so short, leaving before her dissolution could start in earnest.

Sadie found herself in her entryway, gasping, skin burning, eyes buzzing, ears ringing with the imminent immanence of the New God Thing's voice.

She had inspected the Universe and found an extremely dangerous structural deficiency.

Once her heart calmed she went down to her workroom, returning with hex wrenches, two sets of pliers, a long flathead screwdriver, and a utility knife.

Over the next several hours Sadie patiently and completely unmade the N?lmyna. She started by pulling all the bolts.

Bending the first into an irredeemable curl, she was struck by a tremendous flash of bitter agony, knowing that Ben was really and truly gone from her forever.

Her choice had been between eternal union collapsing into her best beloved, or saving this ugly, petty world; she'd picked her poison.

The rest was easy, if tedious: Sadie carefully cut the seams of the N?lmyna's seat cover, then unwove it strand by strand.

She worked the screwdriver between the layers of laminated birch and peeled them apart.

She stacked the pieces along the wall under her coat hooks as she worked, just where the chair had stood, patching that thin spot between worlds.

The next day the police came with a warrant and a wrecking crew. They tore out drywall and dug up the basement, searching for bodies or evidence or clues.

Yes, it was a mess. But nothing Sadie couldn't fix.