

MHANI ALAOUI

Anna's House

BEITHE WAS A LOUD CITY. It had the loudness of a city not yet used to itself. Steel clicked against steel and stone echoed stone. There was no respite from its noise.

On a bend in the road in the center of Beithe, there stood a house. It was known to all the town-dwellers as Anna's House. Though no one knew why. For in fact, the house belonged to a young woman called Sarah and no Anna was ever seen or remembered to have lived in that house on a bend in the road in the center of town.

And in Sarah's house, there was silence. The loudness and noise never entered Sarah's house. Every day, she would wake up to its quietness and breathe in its lightness. Sarah had quickly taken for granted its quietness and lightness.

Sarah worked at the Foundation for the Preservation of Indigenous Culture, where she held a high position. The Foundation for the Preservation of Indigenous Culture was created by Beithe's most powerful construction company, known to all as The Conglomerate. The very one whose construction sites buzzed day and night outside Sarah's house.

Every morning, Sarah would shower, dress in an impeccable black suit, and drive her new car to work. She would turn on the radio, listen to the morning news, soft rock or to her two favorite commentators debate on how best to control and organize the unruly populations at the fringes of Beithe.

Sarah had not always been at the top of the food chain. Three months ago, she was still struggling to make ends meet, dragging her angst between seedy bars and dystopian cultural laboratories. Sarah had never been able to hold a steady job in her life. Trained in the arts and in high anxiety, she was restless and full of doubt. She longed for something she did not know. Sarah quivered constantly for she could not find her resting place. And then, three months ago, she received the deed to a house in Beithe and her life was transformed.

She inherited the house from a deceased great-aunt she had never met or heard of and who had the same name as she: Sarah Deid. Sarah locked the door to her cramped, unsanitary rental in a town on the

fringes of Beithe, gave the keys to the landlord, and moved out without ever looking back. It briefly caught her attention that, on the document she was about to sign, the property was referred to as “Anna’s House.” She brushed this detail aside. Anachronisms, traces, and inconsistencies were not things Sarah paid particular attention to. She signed and felt a calm she had never felt before. Pen on paper bristled with precision. The power of indelibility rose through her.

Sarah eased into the house with great pleasure. Things became simple, clear, filled with purpose. She enjoyed the property, her property, reveling in its deep garden and quiet walls. Her inner turbulence was muffled by the peacefulness of the house. Her past restlessness appeared to her as the immature fancies of a wandering soul. The house itself was nondescript, modern, convenient. A banal house, were it not for the rare, lush land it was built on.

The land tilted at an angle on the bend in the road. It was more a crossroad, she saw, than a bend in the road. The garden had a high wall at its edge. A stone-and-ivy wall that curved slightly at its center and stretched all around the property. Sarah rarely ventured too deep into the garden. She avoided the curly, messy ivy and stone wall at its edges. For Sarah was impatient with complicated, unruly things. She had finally managed to keep her own aimlessness at bay and now the hunt was over. She could enjoy the spoils. And the spoils were her peace and her new-found sense of control.

A week after she had settled in, Sarah received a letter from a foundation she had unsuccessfully contacted for employment over a year ago. There was an unexpected opening and it was hers for the taking. With barely a question as to the luck that was now hers, she the unhappy protagonist of her own failed stage, Sarah accepted the offer. That is how she came to work for the Foundation for the Preservation of Indigenous Culture. And how she came to see the essential value of the work the Conglomerate was doing in her city. All turbulence was now in the past and her sense of pleasure in her own accomplishments grew tenfold.

Sarah’s life had fallen into place. Swiftly, silently, and melodiously. It was not clear if it had fallen into “its” place, for everything still felt borrowed. Sarah did not fully understand this sense of transience. It was there, at the back of her mind, at the back of things, in the dust left behind, in the white-and-blue ceramic cup she found in a cupboard, in the wooden coffer gathering mold in the attic, and in the ancient clock that chimed in a language she did not know but which sounded like Greek. It was there and so she

began to see it as the residue of her lightning-quick passage from one way of life to another. It was stardust and, as was her way, she chose to ignore it.

As time passed, Sarah's satisfaction turned into pride and, finally, into arrogance. Her scant old friends barely recognized their elfish Sarah in the smooth, sophisticated woman she had become. Sarah knew there was no particular reason for her good fate but that made her even haughtier. Indeed, for some mysterious reason, she had been picked, singled out of the cracks of anonymity to occupy a privileged position in the city of Beithe, the most avant-garde city in the world.

Sarah quickly rose to become the Vice President of the Foundation for the Preservation of Indigenous Culture. The indigenous culture of Beithe had long since disappeared. There remained the rare vestige and artifact which her company methodically gathered and which she then carefully placed behind glass and steel cases. There was, as she explained in her lectures, grace and even, yes, beauty in some of the broken remains. You see, she would point, here, where the exodus is depicted, here there was potential. Yes, but a potential lost in the primitive tools of a primitive mind. The stone-carver, for one cannot call him an artist, had begun to grasp at a knowledge of the subject but was unable to carry it through. There was the beginning of a civilization here, her voice would harden, but its end was already there, in its limitations. Sometimes, an emotion, a regret, would cause her voice to break. But that was a passing, unexplainable weakness which Sarah quickly overcame.

Her star was a powerful one. There was glee in effortless ascension and drunkenness in silver-spooned success. She began to understand the excitement thieves, cheaters and impostors must secretly feel when the borrowed treasure is made one's own.

Sarah shed her sensitivity and alertness to the offbeat darkness of the world around her like a snake sheds its old skin. Her past angst had become useless and, frankly, embarrassing. There was no time in her cool level-headed life for slow play in misery and melancholia. She began to despise other people for their lack of success. Sarah had become disgusted by failure in all its forms. She also developed a gushing respect for others who, like her, deservedly or not, succeeded and ranked high in the city. This warm sentiment quickly disappeared when its recipient showed any sign of weakness or hesitation. This change had taken place in eighty-two days, nine hours and twelve minutes, since she had signed the deed to her new life.

In Sarah's now staunchly black-and-white world, there remained one confusing element. Underneath the lush foliage curling itself on the

wall surrounding her property, where the gate stood high, was a plaque. At first, she had not noticed this plaque, for it was hidden beneath dark ivy and blood-red hibiscuses. It lay at the edge of her knowledge for days and even weeks. Until a day, a small day, a day like any other day, one submitted to her will and her newfound drive. She was drinking a glass of wine when she heard knocking at the door. The sun was about to set and she was not expecting visitors. The knocking became persistent. She walked to the gate, opened the door. No one was there. She stepped outside and looked around, more intrigued than alarmed. Still, she could not find its source. The sound became louder, more insistent. A stone rolled at her feet. She picked it up and looked at the stone wall guarding the house, curving around her garden. And that was when she noticed a corner of smooth marble hidden underneath the dark ivy and blood-red hibiscuses. She pushed past the ivy, hibiscuses, and sleepy caterpillars to reveal a pure white marble plaque. She leaned in and read: ANNA'S HOUSE.

"Anna again," she whispered to herself. "Anna of the deed. A ghost and nothing more," her whisper became hoarse and angry. There was no place for ghosts or forgotten histories or past encryptions in her new world. Sarah's heart beat and she clenched her fists. She tried to yank the plaque from the stone wall but it would not budge. She pulled and pulled but the plaque continued to shine in the falling light of day. Sarah hesitated, a strange, eerie sadness taking hold of her. She shook the feeling aside, for she knew it was but an echo of things past, and she walked back into the house. She opened the kitchen cabinet and found a hammer and screwdriver. She pushed the screwdriver inside the softness between the plaque and the wall and hit hard with the hammer until the plaque fell from the wall. The plaque fell to the ground and broke with the sound of thunder and steel but Sarah simply shrugged and pushed the broken pieces with her foot. The next day, she mounted her own plaque: SARAH'S HOUSE. She hammered in four nails square in the center of each side. She looked for the shattered plaque but it was nowhere to be found and she once again shrugged her shoulders and returned to the house.

A few nights later, nearing her hundredth day in her new home, the wind suddenly rose and hail hit the high windows surrounding the living room. Sarah vaguely recalled how she had once enjoyed wind and rain and how she had reveled in their lonesome insistence. Tonight, the wind and thunder and rain came to blur the film she was watching on TV and made her worry about the solidity of her glass windows. Was there someone

outside looking in? Or was it her tense reflection behind the rain? She heard the same insistent knocking she had heard a few nights past, and her first thought was: no, impossible. I nailed it perfectly, squarely, crushing the dark ivy, yellow caterpillars, and blood-red hibiscuses beneath for better framing. She covered her head and shoulders in a long black scarf and walked into the storm. One thing Sarah was not was a coward.

She opened the door and looked around her. The night stood still. A stone rolled at her feet and she closed her fist around it. It was warm and vibrant, like a fallen heart. She threw it far from her house. The plaque she had nailed so meticulously to the stone wall now lay at her feet, broken in two. She brushed the white dust from the broken halves and tried to piece them together. But they refused to fit. She dropped them scornfully, impatiently. The foliage and flowers swayed in the night and Sarah stared at the place where the plaque she had nailed had once been. In its place, was a new plaque: **HERE LIES ANNA'S HOUSE TAKEN FROM HER.** Who had placed and nailed it there? Sarah was no longer used to noise, or interruptions, or mysterious questionings. They made her deeply angry and uncomfortable. An unruly child, a jealous neighbor, or a spiteful coworker (there were many envious people around her now, she thought with a certain degree of pride) must be playing with her, she thought. But she was no longer the fragile, delicate Sarah of old who would pine and wonder, think through the stars and smoke through the clouds. Once, if ever, there may have been an Anna. That was of no concern to her. She knew what had to be done. Actions now came to her naturally. Mechanically, over and over again if she must, she would plow on, imposing her presence. She yanked the plaque from the wall, breaking the dark-green ivy, crushing the soft cocoons, and letting the red hibiscuses bleed. Sarah threw it to the ground, shattering it to bits, then she disposed of the shattered pieces in the trash bin by the garage. The same strange, eerie sadness took hold of her once more but Sarah pushed and pushed until the feeling lingered no more.

At the break of dawn, Sarah went back to the stone wall and nailed a new plaque, larger and stronger than the first: **SARAH'S HOUSE.** She then put on her running shoes, tied her hair in a ponytail, and went for her morning jog. She breathed in the cool morning air, watched the sun rise purple and golden over the cityscape, and a deep satisfaction filled her lungs. Her legs were strong, her arms were tough, and her stomach was hard. She was lean and brave like a warrior-queen. She was of the race of conquerors, no one could bring her down. One of her fingers

trembled with the refuted desire for something soft, gentle, and fleeting but she clenched her fist firmly, silencing the tenderness.

That very night, as she was about to prepare her evening tea, Sarah heard a noise coming from the living room. She took a knife from the cabinet and went into the living room. It was empty and everything was in its place. Then Sarah noticed a package on the glass table near the fireplace. It was covered in a cloth that looked and felt like papyrus. She picked up the package and found it was hard and heavy. She set it on her lap and opened it. Her eyes glazed and her heart bled. There, in front of her, was the stone image of a woman whose hair and body were entwined around an olive tree. Olive trees were banned in Beithe. Sarah did not dare touch it. She looked at the sheer detail, the beauty, the high mastery. She recognized the red stone of Beithe and the rare white granite of its quarries. It was of Beithe. But that was impossible. The indigenes of Beithe were rough, nomadic tribes who chiseled bluntly and drew primitively. And yet, here was the artifact, wonder among wonders. And it might be ancient, more ancient than anyone could have dreamed of.

Sarah felt she was on the verge of a great discovery—a discovery that would position her firmly as an irreplaceable asset to her president, the CEO of the Conglomerate that ruled her city. The CEO was the most powerful man in the city. He had all of Sarah's respect and admiration. It was well deserved. He came from a war-torn nation as a refugee to the city of Beithe and transformed a desert into a flourishing metropolis. And he was a good, strong man. He insisted on saving the ancient artifacts and creating a foundation for the preservation of Beithe's indigenous civilization. The CEO knew Beithe's original culture was a weak, nomadic one, yet he insisted on saving it from oblivion. He was a great man, and Sarah wished he would think as highly of her as she did of him.

As soon as the sun rose the next day, Sarah called a world-famous expert on ancient civilizations and flew him to Beithe. If, as she suspected, the artifact of the woman and the olive tree were ancient, then everything they knew about Beithe and its lost indigenous culture would be challenged. The CEO would be pleased, and he might even start looking at her like an equal rather than a mere employee. The expert confirmed her hunch and told the CEO that the artifact was over one thousand years old and was of a rare beauty and precision. Only masters of a flourishing civilization could have created such a piece. The CEO smiled, nodded, and promised he would consider a more extensive archaeological search, before asking the expert to kindly leave the room. When the

expert left the room, he turned to Sarah and she saw a hardness in his eyes that made her take a step back. He was shaking. He expressed his anger between clenched fists and quick intakes of breath. "This is an abomination. You must take it away, hide it, never speak of it to anyone. Forget the expert, Sarah. Put him on the next plane out of Beithe and pray he forgets about us and our city. It is all strange, Sarah. I trusted you with the foundation for you are one of *us*. *You are ours*. This artifact, this woman, look at her. She cannot be from here. This was a desert before we came. There was nothing beautiful before us. They are a primitive, nomadic people. Tents, no agriculture, no houses, no culture, nothing. Beithe was not even theirs, it was no one's. Ours for the taking. See, see the way the woman's hair and the tree's branches intertwine. This image distresses me." The hardness in his eyes gave way to a deep, dark softness: "it is . . . witchcraft, tainted, dangerous. Take it away. And if you have any love for me and our city, destroy it."

Sarah took the artifact and placed it in her living room, by the hearth, where the fire would run warm in winter and the wood smelled like the wild, free forests she once played in as a child. She stood still in front of the fire, she gazed at the woman and her long, long hair. She looked at the olive tree and felt its lush, moist greenness. She saw the fruit falling from the tree and the woman sheltering it in the hollow of her palm. She sensed the artist's tenderness and love when he carved the woman and the olive tree. Instinctively, her hand reached forward and touched the entwined curvatures of woman and forbidden tree. Her fingers lingered on the hair and leaves. The hair shone and the leaves rustled. She felt the rush of history, of loss and mourning, of paradises buried and forests kneeling. Her hand dropped and her eyes lowered. The CEO had ordered her to destroy it. "Later, tomorrow," Sarah thought. She needed time to forget the softness of the embrace, the grace of the lines and the mastery of the technique. Her body trembled like a leaf in the wilderness and she hardened her back against the mysteries blowing in her path. Sarah did not like confusions, questions, and inadequacies. She always pushed grayness and doubt away from her. But tonight, she just needed time to strengthen her resolve.

A few nights later, Sarah heard the loud, insistent knocking for the third time. She rose, her courage like steel and lightning in a warring sky. She opened the door and stepped into the dark. No one there and again she felt that strange, eerie sadness as a stone rolled at her feet. The plaque she had nailed so brutally to the wall lay at her feet, shattered to dust. She

pushed aside the dark green ivy, the few trembling butterflies, and the blood-red hibiscuses. And there, this time etched directly into the wall of red stone and rare white granite of the Beithe quarries, was the following inscription: **HERE LIES ANNA'S HOUSE TAKEN FROM HER DURING THE GREAT DEMOLITION AND HOME TO HER EVERLASTING SORROW.**

Sarah stood very still. Lies were tumbling out of the abyss. Behind the lies was a will to hurt and manipulate her. An invisible will that revealed itself as a fantasy repressed or a memory deprived. That deployed itself through brief incursions into her home and her hearth like a thin needle distilling poison. She took a long knife from the house and scratched at the inscription until her hands bled. The dark ivy, trembling butterflies, and blood-red hibiscuses fell at her feet. She raised her voice against the surrounding emptiness: "Tomorrow morning I will have a large steel plaque made and welded to a steel post in front of my gate, in the shade of the destroyed stones." Tomorrow morning, yes, tomorrow morning, she thought. A weariness submerged her. From beneath the bravado and newfound pride came the realization that she was absolutely alone in the world. Tonight, after more than one hundred days and nights of satisfaction, she felt solitude and sadness once again.

She was about to enter her house when she heard her name being called: "Sarah Deid, Sarah Deid." She looked around, turned around and around like a twirling dervish in an Anatolian lodge but she already knew there would be no one there to claim the voice, as there had been no one to claim the broken plaque, the inscription, the artifact. Sarah then closed her eyes and let her feet guide her toward that low, low voice resounding in the leaves of the trees and the beam of the moon. Her steps took her deeper and deeper through the high, wet grass of her garden until she reached the far edge of the stone, ivy, and hibiscus wall that circled her property. From the very first day, she had chosen to ignore this part of her property. She had pushed its existence to the edge of her consciousness with all the other gray, messy, indistinct aspects of her world she refused to deal with.

It seemed to Sarah that her name was spoken by the wall itself. She placed her hands on the dark, curly ivy and felt its echo vibrate through the stone wall. She also felt a warmth, a breath, a minor tremor that all mirrored her own. The stone was softer there. She began to push against the wall until it gave way. It slid gently aside and formed a hole large enough for Sarah to slip through. She stood up on the other side of the wall.

Sarah stood in an olive grove. Olive trees were banned in Beithe. Generations past, when people like the CEO and the elder Sarah Deid came to Beithe, there were olive groves. But the trees had a sickness that killed all those who ate from their fruit, sat underneath their shade, or built with their bark. And the story went that the settlers of Beithe were forced to burn all the olive trees. The settlers almost all perished during the harsh winter that followed. But, for they were of the race of conquerors and warlords, they survived. One of their first acts as a community was to forbid the planting of olive trees. Sarah stood in the midst of the olive grove, forced into its unfamiliarity, unable to repress its presence or the questionings it imposed upon her. She saw a light at the end of the grove. She walked toward it and saw a small white house with faded blue windows. As much as her house was large, modern and nondescript, this house was small, timeless and ever so there.

There was a light shining behind the windows. Sarah walked toward it. From outside the window, she saw a poor, bare room. There was a table, two chairs, and a candle. A fire was burning in the hearth but it could not fill the cold and loss that trickled through. There were holes in the walls and flakes on the floor. Then Sarah saw her. The woman sitting on a stool by the hearth, stoking the fire. The woman looked up, and her face was old and gnarled like the olive trees surrounding the shack. But her hair was long and beautiful and her eyes of the deepest, darkest green.

Sarah pressed her face to the window. The old woman seemed younger than she had a moment before. Her back was straight and her hair long and thick. There was a gleam in her deep, dark green eyes. She seemed to be saying something. Sarah put her ear to the window and thought she heard the following: “anna, anna, anna.” The woman was chanting her name into the emptiness. Who would ever know? Sarah moved back, feeling very little. She noticed, however, that the woman pronounced her name “ana” with a soft *n* in the middle . . . *ana* . . . a barbaric, nomadic consonance.

She knew what had to be done. Later that night, deep in the night, she received a call from the CEO.

“Is it done?”

“Yes. It is done.”

“Good. I will see you in the office tomorrow. There is a surprise for you.”

The next morning, Sarah woke up. The city’s noise had taken over her house and her bedroom. The silence and peacefulness were gone. She did not mind. The noise was all around her, a constant companion,

a reminder of the path chosen. It clanged her superiority and applauded her transformation. Everything was now in its place.

Beithe was a loud city. It had the loudness of a city that no longer controls itself. Its steel rang against the steel of its people. There was no respite from its demands.