

The
Gravity
of
Lies



DOROTHY DEENE

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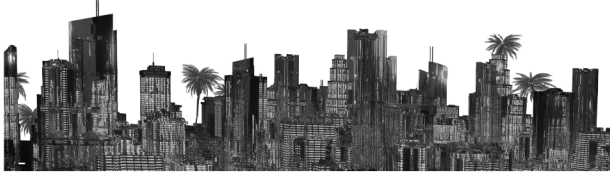
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First Edition: JUN 2023

To my flock...thank you for soaring the uncharted skies with me.

I am forever grateful for each of you.

One



I DRAW THE LINE at cockroaches.

I can tolerate a lot of things: sleeping in a cramped car, the empty hole in my stomach, pungent BO, and even breathing in second-hand smoke containing thousands of chemicals and hundreds of toxins. But staring into the devil eyes of a flesh-eating, hard-shelled, antenna-reaching roach isn't one of them.

And yet there it is, watching me, the devil roach itself, just inches from me as it teeters on the arm of the couch with its spiny legs and thread-like antennas twitching. And here I am, frozen with fear, about to be its prey.

A cold chill washes over me as I remember Uncle Richard telling me about how he and my mother once lived in a place infested with cockroaches, which he called *tiny-but-mighty beasts*. He said they could be found anywhere, like in shoes, cupboards, clinging to the walls, hiding inside the toilet rim, munching away inside cereal boxes, and even floating in a pot of soup simmering on the stove. He said one of them had found him in his bed and when he woke up, he

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was missing eyelashes.

That explained his right eyelid.

Eyeing my science book on the table, I slowly sit up and edge my way over to the book while keeping watch of the repulsive intruder. But that thing is one step ahead of me and leaps off the couch and darts across the floor. Crap, now my chances of being eaten have just gone way up.

Shivering, I pull the covers up to my neck and listen to the refrigerator gurgle on the other side of the wall, probably because it's empty. Like my stomach. Sighing, I close my eyes just for a second and there it is again, the haunting image of juicy meat, mashed potatoes, and bread slathered in butter. It reminds me of a story I heard once about a guy who was lost in the desert for eight days without food. He kept seeing mirages of food, and starving, he began pretending to eat the visions right up until he was rescued. He not only miraculously survived, but he was found in relatively good health.

It's gotta be worth a try. I bite into the meat and chew, and I swear it tastes like the slab of meat I was served at the homeless shelter.

I wish I was there now. That place gives out three meals a day and an evening snack.

Fiery bile shoots up my throat. Gagging, I pull my knees up to my chest and consider drinking from my mother's bottle again, even though the last two times I tried that, it made me throw up.

Taking a deep breath in, I think about how happy my father will be when we finally meet. Breathing out, I think about how when he

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sees me, he'll probably say something like he's been hoping for this day because he had no clue how to find me. And when he discovers what my life has been like the last few years, he'll insist I come to live with him. I bet he'll even give me my own room with my own bed, and I'll go back to public school, and every night the two of us will eat dinner together.

It's going to be perfect.

I check the walls and ceiling for any sign of said roach, but all I see are the mustard-colored water stains that have taken on a life of their own. Just last week, those shapes were clearly that of a wolf chasing a fawn across a snowy backdrop. But now, I realize it was never a wolf at all, but a lion with a bushy mane. And what was once a helpless fawn with scrawny legs and pointy ears running for its life is now a deer, one with fully grown antlers and muscular legs sprinting through the air like one of Santa's reindeer. Although I more than sympathize with the lion's ravaging hunger, I still hope the deer makes it out alive.

As for me, I've long since learned how to ration food, but the hunger inside of me lately has been hard to fill up. So I ate everything a few days ago, or rather, everything I could find... The Fruity Tooty cereal, the last of the milk, some boiled noodles, and I even scraped out that micro-thin layer of peanut butter that was stuck to the wall of the jar.

Guess I forgot all the stuff that can go wrong.

And stuff always goes wrong.

Like how my mother's in one of her funks again, which means she won't get up from the couch, which means she won't leave the

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apartment. She gets like this when I don't have work. She's got this notion that I'm the answer to keeping us afloat.

And I don't even know how to swim.

The mini-mart must be open by now. But I can't go without my mother. She made it clear that I must never, ever go out into the world without her. She's afraid I could disappear like her mother did the day she vanished off the face of the earth.

At least, that's what my mother told me one night in the car. It was a really cold night too; we had just gotten kicked out of the apartment where I had lived my entire life with her and Uncle Richard—that is until he died, and everything fell apart, including my mother. While the bottle of rum kept her warm, I shivered in the backseat under a pile of blankets. She started crying and saying things like she wished her mama had never disappeared.

“What do you mean, she disappeared?” I asked because my mother rarely spoke of her life growing up.

“My mama and me were staying at some motel, and one night she said she'd be right back but when she walked out that door, she never came back. She just up and disappeared into thin air.”

“What did you do?”

“I went to live with my brother. He said he'd take care of me... but now he's left me too.”

It was one of the longest nights of my life, huddled in the backseat of the car while she cried and smoked one cigarette after another. I was worried that all that smoke that stung my eyes and burned my lungs was going to suffocate me. I would have opened the window, but she wouldn't let me.

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My mother stirs next to me. I glance over and there she is in the milky glow, just inches away from me with her mouth gaping open and a thin trail of drool making its way down her chin.

I shake her.

She moans.

“Wake up. We have to get some food. I’m starving.”

She pulls the covers over her head.

“You *must* be hungry too?”

“Huh-uh.”

How is it possible that she doesn’t need to eat? Pulling my legs out from under the covers, I scan the room for any signs of the roach before placing my feet on the floor. Wobbling over to the other side of the bed, I plop down at the edge of the mattress and pull the blanket off her head. “We need to go to the store right now.”

“What the hell, Skye.” My mother wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and stretches her bony arms out in front of her. Her straw-colored hair is matted to the side of her head. I don’t think she’s brushed it in a week.

“I’m hungry,” I insist, staring down into her pale blue eyes.

Frowning, she yanks her old brown bag from the floor and rummages through it. “Here.” She tosses over a piece of hard candy. “How come you haven’t been getting any work?”

I wish I had known about the life-saving candy. “I don’t know.” I rip off the wrapper and shove it in my mouth. “Why don’t you call and find out?”

I’d be more than happy to make the call myself, but she won’t tell me her passcode. Plus, she’s got this fingerprint safety feature.

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And even worse, I don't have a cell phone of my own because she won't let me have one. I've tried to get her to tell me why, but she won't give me a reason. I'm not sure what she's so worried about. It isn't like I have any friends to get into trouble with. I bet there's not another sixteen-year-old girl on the planet who doesn't have a cell phone *or* any friends.

But my mother doesn't answer me as she turns up the volume on the TV. "That dumb chicken picked wrong." She's almost hysterical with laughter.

My eyes water as I suck up the thick butterscotch and gaze over at the TV to see what's so funny. A woman is dressed in a chicken costume and standing next to Wayne Brady on *Let's Make a Deal*. The chicken, ironically, has just won a very large and very real cow.

I don't get why there's even a show where people dress up in costumes and make fools of themselves to win stuff. The host bites his lower lip as he shows the chicken what she didn't pick inside the box—a trip to Hawaii and two thousand dollars cash.

Chicken Lady bursts into tears.

Wayne Brady tries to comfort her.

The cow pees on stage.

My mother laughs.

"If you won't take me to the store, then I'll go myself," I shout over the noise.

She stops laughing and glares at me. "We'll go tomorrow."

"That's what you keep saying."

"Later." And she turns back to the TV.

Fine. I bolt up from the mattress and the room spins. Steadying

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myself, I make my way over to the only room where I can get away from her. Locking the door, I plop down on the toilet seat and squeeze my eyes shut to stop the tears. If only I were back with Uncle Richard. Why can't things be the way they were?

I chew the rest of the candy and swallow, but it doesn't change how hungry I am.

I tell myself to hold on a little longer.



My mother's 'later' has come and gone. She's been sleeping for hours. All she seems to need to stay alive is her booze and cigarettes.

Considering my present situation, I've come up with a plan, one I should have thought of days ago—first, I pour out the rest of the alcohol into the sink. Then I plan to suppress my hunger pangs by smoking every cigarette in her last pack and getting her to take me to the store.

Sitting on the toilet, I light the first cigarette and *inhale... exhale...cough*. Repeat. I continue smoking and coughing while humming some made-up tune until the cigarette is down to a butt. Only nine more to go.

Next cigarette, I picture her face when she realizes she's cigarette-less and how she'll insist we go to the store because she can never be without them. *Puff, puff*.

Starting on the third, my lungs start to seize up. Now my mouth tastes like an ashtray and I'm nauseous again.

Pulling out the cigarettes left in the pack, I break them in half

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and flush them down the toilet.

When she wakes up, it plays out exactly as I pictured it, but with the addition of cursing as my mother frantically searches through her bag and under the sofa cushions while muttering a string of F-bombs about how she could have sworn she had a pack left. “Skye, get ready. We’re going to the mini-mart,” she declares.

I’m already dressed.