

A woman in a vibrant blue, short-sleeved, button-down dress with a black belt stands in front of a building at sunset. She is holding a black handbag in her right hand and a brown suitcase in her left. The background is a warm, golden-orange glow from the setting sun, with a building visible in the distance.

The House of Eve

a novel

Sadeqa Johnson

Author of *Yellow Wife*

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THE HOUSE OF EVE

BY SADEQA JOHNSON

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For my Mother and her Mother

In loving memory of Paula Marise Johnson

PART ONE

Each story has a monster in it who made them tough instead of brave, so they open their legs rather than their hearts where the folded child is tucked.

—Toni Morrison

CHAPTER ONE

Philadelphia, October 1948

MOMMIES AND DRAGONS

Ruby

My grandma Nene always said that early was on time, on time was late, and late was unacceptable. Fatty was unacceptably late again. Knowing full well that I had some place important to be. I didn't mind staying with Grandma Nene overnight once a week so that Fatty could clean offices. All I asked was that she be home in time for me to catch the bus to my Saturday enrichment classes. And for the third week in a row, Fatty dragged her heavy feet through Nene's apartment door fifteen minutes behind schedule, calling out in her high-pitched voice, "Ruby girl, I'm sorry. Let me tell you what happened."

My cousin had more excuses than a hoe going to jail, and I didn't have time to entertain her colorful tales this morning. I had one hour to get all the way down to South Philly, and I twisted up my lips in a way that I hoped conveyed how annoyed I was over her lack of consideration.

"You got my carfare?" I thrust my hand in her face, but Fatty brushed past me in the narrow hallway, past the crooked family pictures that hung in mismatched frames, through to the small L-shaped kitchen. I stomped behind her as she snatched back her pageboy wig and tossed it on the counter.

"Your mother said she'd leave it for you."

A baby cockroach scurried from under the toaster, and Fatty smashed it dead with her palm.

“You gonna make me walk all the way back in the opposite direction? Just give me twenty cents.”

“I would if I could,” she said, scrubbing her hands at the apron sink. “But I’m broke as a joke girl until next Friday.”

My scalp heated. “Grandma ain’t got no money round here? What if my mother forgot?”

“Chile, I talked to Inez last night, she said she would. Now quit wearing out my nerves. If you leave now, you’ll make it.” Fatty reached into the icebox and cracked open a can of Schlitz. She tipped it to her lips and took a long swallow, then exhaled in a way that suggested that she had been thirsting for that beer her whole way home. After another hungry swig, she undid the buttons to her blue uniform down to her waist. The rolls around her middle sighed with relief.

“Did Nene take her medicine?”

I snatched up my school bag, nodding my head with frustration. “She’s been sleep twenty minutes. Her next eye dosage is at eleven.”

With the front door open, I could smell scrapple frying from the new neighbor’s apartment on the first floor. She had twin babies who kept up a chorus of crying all night long. “I’m not doing this for you no more.”

Fatty belched, then called after me, “I said I was sorry. Damn girl, what you want? Blood?”

I slammed the door in response, then felt bad, hoping I hadn’t disturbed Nene.

The piece of toast I had prepared for my journey was now cold and stiff with butter. I shoved the bread in my mouth as I ran down the two flights of stairs and out onto 28th Street. A dampness clung to the air from last night’s rain, and I had to sidestep wet leaves that had gathered in potholes.

I had been marked tardy for the last three weeks in a row, and Mrs. Thomas said if I was late to one more enrichment class, she was writing me up. I wondered if Fatty was messing with my future on purpose. Everyone, even Fatty, knew how prestigious it was to be selected to participate in the Armstrong Association’s *We Rise* program. As one of twelve Negro students chosen from

across the city of Philadelphia, I was competing to receive a full four-year scholarship to Cheyney University, the oldest historically Negro college in the country. To earn it, I had to be impeccable in every way, and being on time was a requirement. If I wasn't awarded the scholarship, I could forget all about going to college for optometry. No one in my family had been to college, nor could they afford to send me. I refused to let Fatty's disregard for time muddy up my future. Especially since she hadn't even finished high school.

Out on Columbia Avenue I passed by the Temple of God, where women dressed in white from head to toe stood greeting the congregation by the storefront entrance. It was the only church in the neighborhood that met on Saturday mornings, and I avoided eye contact, lest one of the women think I was curious about being saved by their Lord and try coaxing me to join them.

I hurried on, rounding the corner onto 33rd Street. In the middle of the block, I could see four men huddled in folding chairs in front of Process Willie's barbershop. A backgammon set hunkered between two of them, and they all clung to paper cups, probably sipping brown liquor that kept them warm so early in the morning. Their wrinkled clothes and befuddled expressions suggested that they had been carrying on all night long, and I knew that meant trouble.

I buttoned up my jumbo knit sweater hoping that would make me invisible to them. But I wasn't fast enough. As soon as I stepped down off the curb, I heard the first one call.

"Girl, you fine enough to make a grown man cry."

The one next to him grinned wide enough for me to see that he was missing a tooth. "Yes, Lawd. Shaped like a Coca-Cola bottle. Got me thirsting for a drink."

"Bet she taste sweet like candy, too."

The one closest to me reached for my hand, but I sidestepped it.

"Whatcha in a rush for? Big Daddy got everything you need right here."

I shot him the most evil eye I could muster as I slipped past them. The men continued to wolf whistle, and I could feel their eyes fixed on my behind. It was times like this I wished there was a button that would erase me. Not to die or nothing. Just so I wouldn't exist. At the very least, I'd like to take a pin to my oversized tits and pop them like water balloons. Making me flat like a pancake,

and as boring to watch as a teacup. Maybe then my mother would see me for who I was and stop calling me out my name.

We lived in a rented apartment on the corner of 33rd and Oxford. It was the third place we had called home in the past two years. Across the street from us was a huge park that we wouldn't dare venture into. The closest I got to the lush greens was from our front porch, where I sat in a rusty folding chair and watched red-faced men play golf, their blonde wives parked with their children and packed snacks on nearby blankets, blasting the latest hits by Tony Bennett and Percy Faith.

Skipping up the cement steps of our redbrick building, I fumbled for the keys around my neck. None of the doorbells ever worked, and I had to jimmy my key in the deadbolt several times before it turned. Whenever it rained, the door jammed and I had to shove the heavy wood with my shoulder to pry it open. As I moved up the creaky stairs two at a time, I could feel my blouse sticking to my back. Whenever I got nervous, my face and back broke out into an annoying sweat. The bus would arrive in twenty minutes, which gave me time to change into another top that didn't need pressing and sneak some of Inez's perfume.

The front door of our apartment opened into the canary-colored kitchen, and I smelled a cigarette burning. I dabbed the sleeve of my sweater against my forehead and swallowed down my unease.

Inez always left money for me in the same hiding place: wrapped in a paper towel and slipped between two steak knives in a kitchen drawer. I slid open the drawer, breathing a sigh of relief when I saw the napkin. My fingers curled around it, but it felt light. I shook the tissue free, then moved the other knives around, hoping the money had slipped out somehow. But found nothing.

A new wave of sweat moistened my hairline as I tried to think of what to do next. There was no loose change laying around the apartment; I had used the spare coins last week when Inez hadn't left the money. I had no idea how long it would take for me to walk from North Philly to South Philly, but just the thought of crossing the city on foot made my head hurt.

My unsteady fingers gripped the upholstery stuffing that was loose in the kitchen chair, trying to make a plan, when Leap, my mother's latest boyfriend, strolled into the kitchen with a cigarette fastened between his nicotine-stained teeth.

"What are you doing here?" fell from my lips.

He cocked his head at me. "You my woman now, too?"

"You usually at the barber shop on Saturday morning."

Leap drifted to the sink and turned on the faucet. He let the water gush out for a few seconds, and then he picked up a glass from the dish rack and filled it. While he sipped, his eyes roamed over me. Leap's wandering eyes always made me self-conscious. Usually I avoided him as best I could, but in that moment I didn't look away.

A baby-blue satin scarf was tied around the sides of his processed hair, knotted at his forehead. He had smooth, cherrywood-colored skin. A rope chain hung from his neck, and his T-shirt was untucked from his drawstring pants. He thought he looked like Nat King Cole, but he wasn't nearly as cute.

The kitchen felt cramped and hot with both of us standing there. Leap leaned over the table and tapped his cigarette into the glass ashtray that sat among scattered bills. I could hear the wall clock ticking, and the toilet running from down the hall. Leap had forgotten to jiggle the toilet handle again after he flushed.

"What you in here rummaging around for?"

"My mother said she'd leave twenty cents for my carfare down to Lombard Street. You seen it?"

"Naw." He dragged.

"Well, can you loan it to me till she get back?"

A slight smirk played on his face. "What you gonna do for me?"

My bus arrived in ten minutes, and I could hear each precious second ticking away on the kitchen clock.

"What you want?" I chewed on my fingernail, spitting out flecks of pink polish.

Leap stamped out his cigarette. "A kiss."

"Huh?" My stomach sank so low I forgot to breathe.

“Just a quick one. No harm in that, and I’ll give you a quarter.” He flashed me a smile. His gold crown glinted from the upper right side of his mouth.

That was ten cents each way, plus five cents extra for a pretzel and juice on our break. Inez never gave me extra for food. I usually just sat in class hungry. My schoolbag had gotten heavy; I hadn’t realized I was still holding it.

The stress of it all was getting the best of me. I was desperate to get to my classes, determined to earn my scholarship, so that I could stop depending on Inez’s creepy boyfriends to keep a roof over our heads.

“Just a peck?” My voice cracked, hating that I was in this position, and Inez even more for putting me in it.

“Yeah.”

“On the cheek?”

He reached into his pocket and flipped the quarter in the air with his thumb and pointer finger, caught it and slammed it down on the table. “The lips.”

I shivered.

Leap folded his hands behind his back, squinting his eyes the way I saw him do to Inez when he wanted her to give him some sugar, as he called it. Shame flooded through me. Gulping down my nerves, I willed my feet to move around the chrome kitchen table toward him.

The only thing standing between me and getting to the program on time was a kiss. A measly little kiss. I could do this. When I closed my eyes and leaned up, I could smell a mixture of last night’s whiskey and this morning’s cigarettes reeking from him. I held back my gag.

Leap pressed his thick lips against mine and my knees knocked against each other. In an instant I felt his slimy tongue force my lips open. When I tried to pull away, Leap cupped one hand over my left breast and used the other hand to grab my behind, tilting me up against him. I squirmed but he just held me tighter, thrusting his thing up against my thigh over my skirt.

“Stop,” I whined, pressing my elbows against his waist, trying to free myself. But his grip was unbreakable.

Just then, the front door swung open. Leap stumbled back and pushed me away, but he wasn’t quick enough. Inez’s big eyes roved between us like a madwoman’s.

“What the hell?” she shouted, dropping the brown grocery bag. I heard something crack as it hit the linoleum floor.

Leap backed farther away from me with his hands up, like she was the police. “She came on to me. Talking about needing bus fare. All up on me before I could stop her.”

“Liar,” I hissed. “It was you.”

“Get the fuck out of here.” My mother put her arm in the air like she was firing a warning shot. Soft tendrils from her ponytail had come loose. We shared the same walnut-colored skin tone, but hers had turned apple red.

I turned to Leap, waiting to see how he’d react, glad that my mother was finally taking my side. But then I realized: she was looking at me. She was speaking to me. I was the one she blamed. Her eyes sliced into me like a butcher knife.

“Now! Fast ass.”

I palmed the quarter, and when I got to the front door, she pushed me in the back of my head. “Got no business all up in my man’s face. Stay in a child’s place.”

She slammed the door behind me so hard that the impact shook the hinges. I stumbled down the steep steps, reaching for the banister to catch myself from falling. Once outside I tried to shake the whole scene from my mind, but I kept feeling Leap’s fingers clawing me, kept feeling Inez’s fury burn my chest, as I ran the three blocks to the bus stop.

About a half block away, I could see the bus pull over to the curb, and I ran faster, pumping my knees under my skirt as my bag slapped hard against my hip. I called out, waving my hands to get the driver’s attention. A few feet away, the door cranked closed, but I was near enough to bang on the metal siding with my fist.

“Please, wait!” I hollered.

But the bus driver pulled away from the curb like he didn’t hear me. Like I didn’t matter. Like I didn’t exist. I hurled my schoolbag to the ground, then bent over and spit the overwhelming taste of Leap from my mouth.