

Book One:

Sunsum

## **Sunsum**

*Noun*

1. Spirit
  - some things are Sunsum – God; while others have Sunsum – people;
  - an element of God within the human being;
  - unified touch with the Divine.
2. The mystical force of destiny.
3. One's character, spark and morality.
4. That which connects the body (*honam*) to the soul (*okra*).

# Arrival

Sparrows chirrup and settle on the cold slate shingles of the old shop roof. The shop used to be called Eady's Saintly Sherbets. It had a wooden sign hand-carved by Edward Grimauld with a little symbol that looked a bit like a soldier's helmet but was meant to be the rice-paper fizzy sweets that gave the shop its name. Mr Grimauld's sign has been replaced by a white plaque with EP written in a large blue font and *Eadberht's Place* scrawled beneath it like an absent-minded doodle. I stand in front of it, examining the shop's transformation. A layer of snow powders the shop roof and lightly covers every surface, from the trees, to the parked cars, to the cobblestone paths. No one is around and the frosting is unblemished, but the sun has started to break through the clouds and the suggestion of warmth has begun to melt the sprinkle. I'm back. It's winter again and time has folded in on itself to confuse me. It offers reflections as keepsakes then snatches them away before I can catch them. I see ghosts everywhere: in the gloom of the trees, the nooks and crannies of the lanes, in shop windows, and out in the waves.

A shadow crosses my path; my nineteen-year-old-self steps out of the shop with a paper bag in her hand and a rucksack on her back. Her focus is on the contents of the paper bag; peering inside, she inspects the sweets. She bundles the bag into the side pocket of her coat and looks up – straight at me. Squinting, she shields the glare of the sun with her hand, as though trying to see me more clearly. She pauses for a moment, then turns and walks away.

My twelve-year-old self nudges past me and drops a book in the brief collision. I bend to look at the fallen thing, but she's snatched it up before I can read the title. I find myself running along to keep

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up with her and realise too late where she's heading. The large iron gates are confrontational and the redwood trees beyond it cast huge shadows. 12 walks into the grounds and strides along the path to the main building. Cradling her books in one arm, she searches inside her satchel and retrieves a key; unlocks the door, pushes it open and is gone. I'm left alone. Outside. The old building looks frail and infirm in the winter sun. Light is so unforgiving; I've always preferred the warmth of darkness, where you can hide until you're ready to be seen. I open the gate tentatively and walk towards the first redwood tree that lines the path. I hesitate, then touch it; press my cheek against its spongy bark and wrap my arms as far around its trunk as they will go.

Voices from the distance pull me out of the embrace. A group of tourists has stopped and they peer through the gate. I let go of the tree and walk towards the building, escaping their gaze.

In front of the convent, I wait before knocking. I pick up the brass knocker and bang on the door as a guest might. The sound is deep and full. After a few moments, the oak door creaks and staggers open. Sister Alma smiles up at me. We stare at each other from opposite sides of the threshold: me, the gangly, dark Amazon; her, the squat, yellowing cherub, her skin almost transparent now.

'We've missed you.' Her words are whispered, her eyes are wet.

'I've missed you, too,' I say.

She wipes a tear from the side of her eye. I bend to hug her. My dreadlocks brush her face. I'm sure they horrify her, but she doesn't say anything – she's so unlike Mother.

'She'll be glad you came,' Sister Alma hurries to say, as though she's heard the mention of Reverend Mother in my thoughts. 'We didn't know if you would.'

'Of course, I ... how could I not?' I feel ashamed and break our gaze.

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She smiles apologetically, 'You're early.'

I try to explain and we end up talking over each other in a flurry of words and misjudged pauses.

'I arrived in Newcastle late last night-' / 'I need to go to the mainland to pick up a few things-'

'I thought I'd come for a walk..' / 'Odds and ends really-'

'Come early, I mean, to just walk around the island.' / 'I shouldn't be long-'

'I didn't mean to come here so early, though.' / 'No, no, it's not a problem...'

'I just ... sort of ... found myself here.' / 'That's fine, dear, it's fine, really.'

She reaches for my hand and strokes it. 'It's fine,' she says, stroking me again. 'You always had such beautiful skin.'

I pull my hand away defensively, and repeat that I didn't mean to come so early.

'Really, you don't need to apologise,' she says gently, looking a bit bruised by the way I snatched my hand from her. 'This is your home.' She asks if I'd like to go to the mainland with her, but I'd rather not. 'Of course, of course,' her voice is almost shrill. 'You'll want to look at the old place again. That's not a problem at all.' She steps aside and ushers me in, 'Come here, come in, don't stand on ceremony. This is your home. This is your home.'

Leading me through to the library, she fusses constantly, repeating the unnecessary over again. She brings in a china teapot with chrysanthemum tea and fluffs the cushions on the chair beside the window. Mr Bojangles pokes his head around the door. I put my hand on the floor and beckon him towards me. He sneers and turns, walking out with his tail hanging low.

'It'll take Mr Bo a while to get used to you being back,' Sister Alma says, in defence of her cat.

'He's probably forgotten me.'

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‘Never,’ she snaps. ‘He knows this is your favourite spot. No one’s really sat there since you left.’

I wonder if this is true or an indirect slight: if there’s one thing I was taught here, it was the poetics of guilt.

‘Reverend Mother will come soon and, Imani, promise me something? Don’t blame her. You mustn’t blame her, ok?’

A smile tugs at the corners of my lips; I wonder how I can use this opportunity for guilt creatively, though the look on her face defeats the impulse. ‘If you don’t blame her, how can I?’ I say, trying to reassure her. ‘But are you ok?’

‘I’m fine,’ she says. ‘You can see that with your own eyes.’

After more to-ing and fro-ing she finally leaves. It feels like there is more oxygen in the room. I sip the tea, and try to relax. I’m glad Sister Alma seemed ok; the email had been cryptic and I wasn’t sure what state I’d find her in. Looking up from the teacup, I notice it for the first time, the tapestry of the Assumption of Mary, hanging on the wall. Mary rises to heaven surrounded by clouds and cherubs. It caused quite a stir when it was given to the convent as a gift: not because it wasn’t an accurate copy of Rubens’ original painting, or because the embroidery framing the main image made the piece look too busy, as Sister Magdalene had complained. The main issue, although no one said it, was that Mary, Mother of God, was depicted as a black woman, rising to heaven, in clouds and cherubs. I smile at the image and fiddle with my dreadlocks, trying to break one strand from another. They’ve started to grow into each other, webbing and tangling without permission.



I wander down the halls and stop when I reach the kitchen. The old Aga stands in place, the matriarch still. A microwave and a blender sit to the right of it, next to the alabaster pestle and mortar. They are new and bright, but she offers them only a little

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of the spotlight. My twelve-year-old self walks in. Mother is cooking at the Aga; she turns as 12 enters.

Two of the classes from the day school are being taken on a trip to the mainland to visit the Grace Darling Museum. I wanted to go, but Reverend Mother refused. She turns her back on 12 and dismisses her with a wave. I can't hear their conversation, but I remember the moment. 12 is crying as she moves to leave. Before she reaches the door, a cupboard opens, then slams shut. 12 stops, cheeks wet with tears. She turns to look at Mother. The cupboard opens again: a plate lifts from the shelf, hangs in mid-air then falls, shattering on the ground between them. I hear it.

'Stop that at once, Imani!' Mother says, her voice suddenly audible.

'It's not me,' 12 whimpers.

'Now! Stop it right now!'

A patch on the floor beneath 12 grows progressively wetter. A mug flies from the cupboard and hits the wall.

Mother raises her voice, 'Imani! I'm not telling you again.'

I can't see her, but I know - it's Amarie.

12 hangs her head, staring at the puddle that's formed between her feet.

'Go! And don't come out until you've thought about the things you've done,' Mother says.

12 runs out. Hunched over the Aga, Mother has her back to me. The kitchen smells of burnt milk and urine.

I'd been sent to sit in the confessional, the penitent's booth. No priest would enter the adjoining compartment. The curtain wouldn't be drawn from the grille because I hadn't been sent to confess. Mother would send me there to think about my actions and pray for forgiveness. After a time, she'd send one of the sisters to get me out. The door was always left unlocked, so I could go to the toilet if I needed to. I suppose I could just have left if I'd wanted to, but the thought never occurred to me.

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After I'd been sitting on the wooden stool for a few moments, I heard Mother's footsteps. Her approach was distinctive; she was the only nun who wore a slight heel. I heard the key and its turning screw, and I understood that this time I wouldn't be able to get out, even if I'd wanted to. At this stage in our lives together it had been years since I'd mentioned Amarie. I'd learnt not to talk about her. I think Mother hoped she'd gone, and this reappearance confirmed that I wasn't becoming the person Mother hoped I would be.