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Of Bees and Mist

Written by Erick Setiawan

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OF BEES AND MIST

Erick Setiawan



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1

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*For my mother,
whose stories continue to delight and inspire me*

ONE



Few in town agreed on when the battle began. The match-maker believed it started the morning after the wedding, when Eva took all of Meridia's gold and left her with thirteen meters of silk. The fortune-teller, backed by his crystal globe, swore that Eva's eyes did not turn pitiless until Meridia drenched them in goose blood three months later. The midwife championed another theory: the feud started the day Meridia held her newborn son with such pride that Eva felt the need to humble her. But no matter how loudly the townspeople debated, the answer remained a mystery – and the two women themselves were to blame. Meridia said little, and Eva offered conflicting explanations, which confirmed the town's suspicion that neither one of them could actually remember.

The town first took notice of Meridia at the hour of her birth. That evening, following what would be remembered as twenty-seven hours of labor, she was extracted blue and wrinkled from Ravenna's womb. Her lungs, despite the ten

slaps administered to her rump, refused to take even one breath. The midwife was about to bundle her away when Ravenna scolded: ‘What are you doing, woman? Give her to me!’

In her calm, ordinary voice, Ravenna told the baby that after putting her through eight months of discomfort and twenty-seven hours of unadulterated pain, after ruining her figure and swelling her breasts and wreaking havoc on her appetite, the least *she* could do was give her mother a farewell cry. ‘The tiniest squeak would do,’ said Ravenna. ‘A yowl would be even better.’ Ravenna went on for some minutes, rocking her daughter gently, and by the time she recited the intimate details surrounding the baby’s conception – ‘if you could only see the ungodly contortions your father had me do’ – Meridia spluttered a cough and inhaled her first breath.

‘Stubborn little creature,’ chuckled Ravenna. ‘Do you think you’re too good for this world?’

The midwife waited in vain for the baby to cry. Meridia gasped and grimaced, but one thing she did not do was cry. An hour later, shaking and scratching her head, the midwife departed. To every person she saw she confided, ‘One hundred babies delivered and I’ve never seen one like her. Whether she is an angel or a demon only time will tell.’

A few months shy of Meridia’s first birthday, a blinding flash of light traveled at great speed in the dark of night and awakened her. There was a crash and a tumble, followed by a terrible scream, and suddenly she was snatched up from her bassinet and crushed against Ravenna’s bosom. At the

age of three, after Meridia learned enough words to speak, she tried to articulate to Ravenna what she had witnessed. All her mother did was sigh and mutter, ‘Some things are better left as dreams, child.’ Was it a dream then? Meridia wanted to ask, but Ravenna had turned to her vegetables and forgotten her. Her mother’s back was straight and sturdy – capable, Meridia suspected, of holding unknowable secrets.

The house at 24 Monarch Street was made of glass and steel. Perched on a high hill, it boasted a mansard roof, large latticed windows, and a veranda banked by daffodils. Stone steps climbed the sloping garden to the front door, over which an ivory mist hovered regardless of weather. The mist was a bane to peddlers and visitors alike, for it often held them suspended in midair, stole their hats, or chased them away with terrifying noises. Inside, the house obeyed a law of its own. The wood floors echoed no sound of footsteps, and people simply appeared in doorways without warning. The spiral staircase shortened and lengthened at random, and it could take toddling Meridia two seconds to two hours to go from one floor to the other. Mirrors were especially treacherous: in them Meridia could glimpse unfamiliar landscapes and all shapes of apparitions. Despite the large open windows, dusk never quite left the rooms; the sun could be blazing yet inside the brightest objects looked dim and unappealing.

It was always cold in the house. Even at the height of summer with the fire going, Meridia was unable to keep warm. In the mornings the nurse dressed her in heavy winter clothes as though a storm was brewing. At bedtime the good woman wrapped her in two or three blankets and

still her bones chattered. The cold emanated from one room, where at all hours a frosty wind fluttered curtains and rattled lamps. Meridia did not know how Ravenna could sleep in that room; her father Gabriel certainly never did. Meridia was four when she noticed that no words had ever passed between her parents. Five when she realized that the three of them were never in the same room at the same time.

Gabriel spent his days in the study at the front of the house. Exactly what it was he studied, no one could say. In hushed tones the nurse and the maids referred to him as a man of science, a celebrated scholar, an astute investor who had doubled his inheritance and was now living for the sake of knowledge. They were all terrified of him. No sooner did they sight his shadow than they trembled like leaves. Gabriel seldom spoke to them. A gesture or a look was all he needed to convey his command, which everyone but Ravenna followed like a mandate from heaven.

Meridia regarded her father with both fear and respect. A tall and elegant man, Gabriel was direct in manner, limited in patience, scrupulous in appearance. He had a firm chin and a grim mouth, and his dark eyes were severe and without warmth. He walked with a slight stoop, which gave him the appearance of a swooping raptor. Not once had Meridia heard him laugh. That he resented her – for reasons that would not become clear until years later – was the first thing she noticed about him. If he were ever to take her in his arms or speak a kind word to her, she would not have the slightest idea of what to do.

One day, despite the nurse's warnings, Meridia stole into the study when no one was looking. She had simply meant

to peek around the door, but when she saw that Gabriel was out, she braved herself to enter. Though she had no previous recollection of being there, the room looked welcoming and familiar. She grinned at the towers of books that made up the walls, at the hanging maps and graphs full of numbers. Cabinet after cabinet was jammed with flasks, beakers, burners. Meridia skipped toward the massive desk by the window. Jars of growing seeds populated the surface, and they were all winking at her. She was reaching to touch them when a shadow fell across the desk.

‘Who gave you permission to enter?’

Meridia turned and shrank. Her grin instantly melted from her face.

‘Speak up! Don’t just stand there drooling like an ape.’

‘I – I—’

Gabriel had not raised his voice, yet Meridia felt the whole world was screaming at her. Confronted with his immaculate suit and shiny oxford shoes, she felt dirty, small, purposeless. As she beseeched the maps and books for a way out, every object in the room darkened like an artifact of hate. Meridia dropped her eyes and did not dare lift them.

‘You are five years old and quite capable of forming a sentence. Do you mean to stand there and insult me with your silence?’

‘Papa – I—’

She was saved from further agony by her nurse, who ran into the study trembling with fright.

‘It’s my fault, master. I didn’t think—’

Gabriel did not deign to look at her. ‘It is immaterial

what you think or don't think. If I ever find her in here again . . .'

Quick for her considerable bulk, the nurse yanked Meridia out of the study. Once upstairs, she berated her charge soundly, but soon took pity and enfolded the child in her arms.

'You darling girl,' she said with infinite tenderness. 'Don't you mind your father too much. Some men can't help themselves when they're battered.'

Her eyes pale and small, Meridia stood without moving. What had she done wrong? Why did Gabriel despise her like an enemy? Failing to stop the chill where his shadow had touched her, she wondered if all fathers were cruel and all mothers forgetful.

If the study was Gabriel's shrine, then the kitchen was Ravenna's sanctuary. In this large, bright room where the ceiling soared two stories high and the tiles were scrubbed four times a day, the lady of the house poured her venom into the endless meals she cooked. As she chopped, grilled, and boiled, Ravenna addressed the vegetables in a dark and private language, telling them of sorrow and despair. The fury of her pots and pans kept visitors away, while her air of absentmindedness spun a web of solitude about her. These endless meals, much more than her family could eat, were invariably donated to the poor. Apart from the kitchen, Ravenna entrusted the house to the care of the nurse and the two maids. This included the rearing of Meridia, whose existence she seemed able to recollect only with difficulty.

Ravenna's attire was limited to a plain black dress, which

she kept protected with a white apron while she cooked. Long-sleeved and high-necked, the dress hid her pale arms and pointed shoulder blades, but did little in softening her appearance. Her face was so sharply angular it was saved from gauntness simply by her generous nose. Perfumed with verbenas, her black hair was swept up into an implacable knot, so tight and bonelike it seemed a natural projection of her skull. Ravenna moved in a stiff and sudden manner, as though the aim of her action was decided at the tail end of a moment.

Due to her mother's forgetfulness, Meridia did not correctly estimate her date of birth until she was six. For years, using her own approximation, the nurse had always given her a present – her one and only – on July 2. However, on the morning of July 19 in her sixth year, Ravenna made a great clatter in the kitchen and summoned her. 'Child!' she said breathlessly. 'Why do you wear such a long face on your birthday? Look, I've made you a caramel cake. Go up to your room and put on a nice dress. I hope you don't mind that our party will be smaller this year.' Meridia did not care for caramel and Ravenna never once held a party for her, but she did not trouble to correct her mother.

On the few occasions when they sat together in the living room, Ravenna would often drop her knitting and regard Meridia as if she had no idea who she was. Recognition, if it did occur, was swiftly followed by a tremor of shame. 'Are you unhappy, child?' she would ask anxiously, sinking her chin to her bosom. Before Meridia could reply, Ravenna would snatch back her knitting and let fall a torrent of words: 'Keep your spine stiff at all times.

Never show anyone your tears. Never be at anybody's mercy. Nod if you're listening, child!

Owing to her fear of infectious diseases, the nurse seldom allowed Meridia out of the house. Twice a month at most, when the sky was clear and the sun gentle, the good woman would take her to Cinema Garden for a brisk stroll. These outings were far from pleasurable for Meridia. Boiling inside a contraption of scarves and underclothes, not to mention knee socks and unyielding rubber boots, Meridia attracted as much jeering as pity as she staggered from one street to the next. The nurse, oblivious to her condition, would embarrass her further by remarking loudly, 'Mind that dirty boy – from the looks of him he hasn't seen soap in weeks . . . See that wart-ridden woman over there? You'll end up like her if you don't do as I say . . . You're sweating an awful lot, dear. Tell me if you feel an attack is coming on . . .' Ten minutes after they arrived at Cinema Garden, before Meridia had time to inspect the blossoms or feed the golden swans in the fountain, the nurse would insist that they return home immediately before a contamination could occur. All of Meridia's objections would be met as follows: 'You're irritable. Are you sure you haven't touched anything? Let's leave before it gets worse.'

One afternoon in her ninth year, after Meridia had been housebound for three weeks, Ravenna suddenly switched off the stove, untied her apron, and declared that she would take her to the market. Curious to know what a market was, Meridia hurried to put on her shoes. The nurse attempted to fortify her with the usual garments, but Ravenna stopped her with a bellow. 'Have you lost your mind, woman?

It's hot enough outside to brand a cow!' Amid the nurse's scandalized look, they set off, Ravenna severe in her black dress, Meridia torn between a smile and a sense of disloyalty to the nurse. She soon forgot the latter, however, when Ravenna took her hand and led her across the street. To her amazement, no one laughed at her. Several onlookers even complimented Ravenna on her pretty daughter.

'I can't and won't argue with you,' answered Ravenna solemnly. 'Any woman would be lucky to have a darling like her.'

Meridia blushed all the way down to her shoulders. It was the first time her mother had ever praised her.

That day, Ravenna took her to a hot and crowded square. Meridia's eyes flew wide at the sight of people jostling and arguing, stalls crammed with fruit and vegetables, sacks of rice and flour, spices sold in egg-shaped jars. There were fowls dead and alive, fish heaped on beds of ice, crabs in bamboo crates, meat suspended from iron hooks. A woman grew herbs out of her body – thyme on her arms and rosemary on her chest – which customers plucked fresh with their own hands. A tattooed man swallowed whole radishes and spat them out chopped, seasoned, and pickled. The air was thick with aromas – both pleasant and odious – and the ground was wet and dirty. Had it not been for Ravenna's hand, which she clutched tighter as they made their round, Meridia would have felt overwhelmed. The nurse would never have taken her to this place.

Somewhere along the butchers' aisle, Meridia lost her mother. A current of people swept her back; she was pushed and prodded, stepped on, then driven against her will up

and down the square. Ravenna was nowhere in sight. Without her, Meridia went unnoticed, glared at by shoppers only when they found her in the way. The butchers' cleavers frightened her beyond measure, the ruthless thwack of blade against bone and meat chucked hastily onto grainy papers. Along the ground blood formed a fly-spotted river. The louder Meridia shouted, the more the crowd roared to drown her.

Perhaps she cried for hours. Her throat was certainly hoarse when a hand fell on her cheek.

'Why are you crying, little girl?'

Meridia looked up to find a well-dressed woman in a sea-green hat. Choking back tears, she labored to explain, but the woman interrupted her.

'Don't worry. Your mother is only playing hide-and-seek. Come, we'll find her soon enough.'

The nurse's warning about the ghastly things that happened to children who followed strangers went off in Meridia's brain. However, not knowing what else to do, she took the woman's hand and followed.

They searched the square twice without finding Ravenna. On their third try, just as the last ray of hope faded in Meridia's breast, the scent of verbena came strongly to her nose. She froze in her tracks, then quick as lightning dropped the woman's hand and charged against the crowd. She had spotted Ravenna's implacable knot. So great, so complete was her relief that her heart felt like bursting.

Standing before a flower stall, Ravenna was carrying packages in her hand. She turned abruptly when she felt the urgent tug on her dress.

‘What is it, child?’

Ravenna’s face was calm and untroubled. Meridia could not speak, for tears had once again sprung to her throat.

‘What is it? Why are you crying?’

‘What do you mean?’ rebuffed the woman in the sea-green hat. ‘She’s been looking everywhere for you!’

Ravenna shot her a puzzled look. ‘What on earth for? I’ve been right here all along.’

Unable to contain herself, Meridia broke out sobbing. Ravenna bent down and wiped her tears with her sleeve.

‘Tilt your chin up, child. Keep your back straight. Why are you letting the whole world see you cry?’

Meridia sobbed all the more. Tossing her head, the woman in the sea-green hat snorted, then gave Ravenna a sharp look before leaving. This look, unnoticed by the mother, sliced deep into the daughter’s heart.

Though Ravenna held her hand all the way home, Meridia took no pleasure in it. The stranger’s look burned in her vision, and along with shame and sadness, it stirred a reckless dark feeling inside her. More than once she wished she had a cleaver to hurl, not at the woman in the sea-green hat, but at the forgetfulness that imprisoned Ravenna in a different world. She wanted to strike until her arm was tired, scream until her voice was gone, and hound down whatever demon had erected this wall between them.