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Icy Sparks



GWYN HYMAN RUBIO

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Para mi compañero, Angel

In memory of Rachel

O Master—Musician
Tune me for life again.
The awakening of new music
 My heart wants to become.
My life is now mingled
 In ecstasy's height.

—SRI CHINMOY

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Icy Sparks

PROLOGUE

Matanni, my grandmother, said it began deep inside my mama's womb when she was pregnant with me. Mama ate those little green crab apples that grow beside the toolshed. She ate oodles of them, popped them into her mouth like rock candy, crunched, and swallowed one right after another until not one was left to ripen on the tree. "Green apples ain't no baby's nourishment," she said, "but in the beginning they was all your mama could hold down."

No more than a seed myself deep inside her stomach, I had to eat crab apples bigger than I was. I had to take that sour skin into my wee little stomach, grind it down, digest it, and grow. In the darkness of my mother's belly, I ate the tart fruit, so sour on my tongue that it made my lips curl upward, so full of kick that I burped liked a bubble popping. Then, growing into a baby, I burst upon the world. The midwife slapped my bottom, and I croaked so loud that she turned around to see if the legendary bullfrog from Sweetwater Lake had hopped through the doorway. "But it was only you," Matanni said. "Your eyes were bulging from your head, two hard round marbles. Already the blue was tinted yellow. Your skin was as cold as fresh springwater, slippery and strangely soothing to touch. When the croak sprung from your mouth, your lips were opened wide, stretched not into a yowl but an oval. The croak boomed into the room and slapped against the midwife's cheek. She quickly turned her head, but you croaked again, and

she turned back. 'Cold as the bottom of Icy Creek,' she said, leaning over to place you on top of my daughter's stomach. 'Icy,' your mama said, stroking your bald head, and pulling up the quilt with her free hand until only the tip of your head showed. And the name, Icy, stuck," Matanni finished, dropping her head forward till her chin dotted her chest like a period.

Patanni, my grandfather, told me different. "The dynamite in the coal mines done it," he said. "All his life, your daddy was nervous, hearing them veins of coal popping open. Sometimes they exploded; sometimes they just croaked; but the noise always rattled in his brain. The hour you was born, his Chevy was curving along Black Knob Mountain when the coal truck in front of him backfired, blasting rocks down the mountainside. Startled, your daddy jerked the steering wheel to the right and swerved into a covey of quail feeding in the grass. The car slammed to a stop. Wings whooshed through the air, beating plumage and blood against the windshield. Powder-down feathers, like coal dust, flew through the open window; your daddy waved his broad hands in front of his face and closed his eyes; feathers swam around him; they fell upon his hands and seeped into his skin. He leaned back against the seat, breathing heavily, listening to the rocks settle, hearing the far-off rumble of tires crunching stones. He blinked his eyes several times, closed them, then opened them slowly. A dead quail, with squashed beak and smashed wings, stared at him. Your daddy was afraid and tried to open the Chevy's door and jump out, but his eyes were transfixed on the bird's glare, and his limbs were locked like death. Trapped, his eyes tried to escape. They pushed against their sockets, desperate to leap out and run; but try as they might, surging and popping like buoys upon the water, they stayed in place; and your daddy was forced to stay put and behold his future—a dark emptiness foreshadowed in the bird's dead eyes. When he caught sight of his fate, his arms began to shake violently and a bellow tore through his lips. At that very same moment, while your daddy's howl devoured the dusk and his eyes pounded away at the darkness, you—flying from your mama's womb—croaked loudly. In that departing light, your eyes also popped with the truth of what your daddy saw—beaked lips screeching into nothing."

I, Icy Sparks, can't recollect when I was born, but I still remember my daddy—how all his life his eyes bulged forward when he talked, like a dam holding back a flood of words, corking everything inside, so

afraid he was of the vacancy left behind should all his thoughts be spoken. I remember how he'd squat in front of the country store, resting on his haunches, talking so quiet that friends would lean over to hear him. The closer they came, the softer his voice grew until suddenly his eyes would protrude like two round stop signs, signaling to friends that they were too near, that he needed to be alone. He had to silence the rumble of dynamite and the thump of dead birds. He needed time to rearrange his insides and summon some quiet. Muffling a scream, he'd simply swallow and create a new thought. Then, another shy sentence would leak through his lips.

My legacy was come to rightly. The good Lord charts a path for each child, and no use comes from fighting against it. My mama died from kidney poison two weeks after she birthed me. From those little green crab apples, she created Icy, the frog child from Icy Creek, and an indigestion so troubled that it gnawed away her system and turned her water as yellow as my eyes. Matanni told me that before she died her urine was the color of acorn squash. "Child, them eyes of yours is her gift to you," Matanni said. "Your mama saw the golden light and sent it back to you. The minute your sweet mama passed into heaven, your eyes turned yellow."

With his eyes popped wide, my daddy died; but, unlike Mama, he didn't see the golden light, just the final scream descending. Patanni found him near Icy Creek. The tin bucket was overturned, its handle clutched in his left hand, the blackberries scattered the length of his leg, his skin puffed up from the stings. The bees so consumed with rage had plunged through his leather boots and bitten the tops of his feet, or so the coroner said. Even so, I remember only his eyes—iced surprise and anticipated horror, saying more to a four-year-old than those thousand pinpricks that covered his body.

I was born a frog child from Icy Creek. From my father, I inherited the fear that resided in his coal-black eyes, and from this fear I've gained wisdom. Fear placed books in my hands and led me to search for the answers. From my mama, I received lush hair, the color of golden-rod, and yellow ocher eyes. My mama gifted me with memory. Ask me to read the Book of Job. Afterward, I'll recite it back to you word for word. From my mama, I grew to see the world through hope-filled eyes. Though hope did not come easy.

Part I



Chapter 1



On June tenth, I turned ten. The Saturday after my birthday, the eye blinking and popping began. We were eating breakfast. Matanni was sitting across from me; Patanni was at the head of the table. To this day, I can remember my first urge—so intense it was, like an itch needing to be scratched. I could feel little invisible rubber bands fastened to my eyelids, pulled tight through my brain, and attached to the back of my head. Every few seconds, a crank behind my skull turned slowly. With each turn, the rubber bands yanked harder, and the space inside my head grew smaller. My grandmother was studying me, making sure my face had been washed, my hair combed and fastened on each side with the blue barrettes she had bought me for my birthday. While Matanni studied me, I stared straight ahead and glued my eyes, growing tighter with each second, on the brown fuzz above her lip.

“Icy,” she said, sipping her coffee, “what are you staring at?”

“Them hairs above your lip,” I blurted, extending my arm and pointing at her face. “They’re turning gray,” I said, jiggling my arm at her nose, “right there.”

Patanni, spooning sugar over his oatmeal, snatched up his head and turned toward me. “Calling attention to a person’s weakness ain’t nice,” he said.

“B-but Patanni . . .” I stammered, aware only of the pressure squeezing my head and the space inside it constricting.

My grandfather laid his spoon beside his bowl. “Apologize, Icy,” he demanded. “Tell Matanni you’re sorry.”

“But Virgil . . .” My grandmother reached out and caught his hand in hers. “What the child said ain’t so bad. If them hairs turn gray, they won’t stand out. Gray is almost white, Virgil, and white matches my skin.” She smiled, caressing the top of his hand with her index finger. “It even feels white,” she said, releasing his hand, stroking her upper lip.

Patanni pushed back his chair; the legs scraped against the blue-checked linoleum rug. “That ain’t the point, Tillie,” he said. “Icy, here, made mention of your weakness like it weren’t nothing.”

“She’s just a child,” my grandmother said.

“But it ain’t respectful,” he said.

“She meant no harm,” Matanni assured him.

“Icy, what do you say?” Patanni insisted, leaning toward me.

“’Tain’t necessary,” my grandmother said, sitting on the edge of her chair, her large breasts weaving over her bowl.

“Icy!” Patanni ordered.

“Icy!” Matanni shot back, looking straight into my eyes.

“Icy!” he began again.

“Icy!” she repeated.

I jumped up. “There ain’t no fuzz on you!” I hollered, feeling the rubber bands tug tighter and tighter, sensing the blood in my body pooling behind my eyes, pushing them forward, so far forward that I could stand it no longer, not a moment longer, and, hopping up and down, I bellowed again, “Fuzz is on my eyeballs. It itches my eyes!” Frantically, I wiggled my fingers in front of my face. “They itch!” I screamed, fluttering my fingertips. “They itch!”

Then, unable to close my eyelids or scratch my eyes, I covered my face with my palms and inhaled deeply, hoping that the itchiness and tightness would go away; but instead I felt my eyelids, rolling up further like shades snapping open, and my eyeballs, rolling back like two turtles ducking inside their shells, and the space inside my head, shrinking smaller and smaller until only a few thoughts could fit inside; and, terrified of the contraction, of each thought’s strangulation, I threw back my head and cried, “Baby Jesus! Sweet Jesus!”; and, not knowing what to do or how to stop it, I gave in completely to the urge:

Out popped my eyes, like ice cubes leaping from a tray.

Patanni and Matanni just sat there and watched my eyes spring from my head, but a minute later both pretended that everything had passed like it always did each morning. Matanni drank four cups of her mud-black coffee with a squirt of Essie's cream. Patanni finished his one cup, black with six tablespoons of sugar, and I drank my milk. All of us ate our oatmeal. I ladled honey on mine. Patanni preferred sugar. Matanni ate hers unadorned. No one resurrected Matanni's mustache. That one big pop had unleashed all of the tension, and the space inside my head grew large again, plumped up with thoughts. We ate in silence, and I sat calmly, as though nothing had happened.

Still, after that Saturday morning, during the summer of 1956, the urges claimed me. I was no longer Icy Sparks from Poplar Holler. I was no longer that little girl from Icy Creek Farm—our sixty-acre homestead, replete with two milk cows, a dozen chickens, and Big Fat, the five-hundred-pound sow. I was now a little girl who had to keep all of her compulsions inside. Whenever it became too much, after hours of hoarding blinkings and poppings that threatened to burst out in a thousand grotesque movements, I'd offer to get Matanni a jar of green beans from the root cellar, a pantry-sized room dug from a hill not twenty feet from the back door; and, once inside, I'd close the wooden planked door and let loose. Every blink that had been stored up spilled forth. Every jerk that had been contained leaped out. For ten minutes, I'd contort until the anxiety was all spent. Then I'd climb up on the footstool and grab the Mason jar.

With canned beans in hand, heading toward the house, I thought, Secrets are evil, and wondered what secrets my grandparents kept hidden. I listened to the crickets sing. Covered in shadows, their legs contorted deep in the woods; chirping, they gave their secrets away. A wildcat cried, mourning over something forbidden. Down a dirt road cradled between two gnarled, unfriendly mountains, Poplar Holler guarded its mysteries. So far, mine were hidden in a root cellar. Clitus Stewart's were tucked beneath his mattress. Mamie Tillman would throw hers into Little Turtle Pond. Everyone in Poplar Holler had secrets, even the animals, but I—Icy Sparks—knew that mine were the worst.