

Deeper Than the Worms

By Sydney Manns

There were lots of things that didn't surprise Kya. Like how it sometimes rained in Florida when the sun was out, or how her friends didn't call during summer vacation. She wasn't surprised when her father forgot her tenth birthday last month or when she woke to her parents shouting downstairs. But when Mrs. E stuck a for sale sign in her front yard, Kya thought she must be dreaming.

Kya watched her neighbor from across the street with elbows propped on the windowsill in her living room, palms clasping her freckled cheeks. The harsh July sun beat down on Mrs. E while she staked the *For Sale by Owner* sign at the edge of her yard. It's not as if Mrs. E could've put it anywhere else—her front yard was the nightmare of homeowners associations across suburban America. Grass grew taller than Kya and covered the area in thick patches. Cattails peeked out and so did flowers of red and orange, but Kya's favorite part of the yard was the sunflowers standing like centurions along the single narrow path that she assumed led to the front door. The only glimpses of the house anyone could see was its faded green paint and a roof with so many missing shingles, that it looked like tiles on a checkerboard.

Today Mrs. E was clad from head to toe in her usual vibrant colors, her long tie-dyed skirt and matching blouse looking like a twisted rainbow. A sudden wind stirred her gray curls and flowing skirt, but the grass behind Mrs. E or the trees on the streets didn't move. It was another thing that didn't surprise Kya. She knew Mrs. E was different, but she didn't think she was crazy like everyone in town did. Mad 'ol Gypsy, they called her. Buck-Toothed Witch. Kya often wondered what they'd call her if she were a man.

Mrs. E had lived in that house longer than anyone in town. She had no friends, no family anyone knew of, and was known for her odd comings and goings—sometimes leaving for weeks, months, or even years without a word. But while Mrs. E had walked down that path many times before to go who-knew-where, she'd always returned. So why was she selling the house now?

Kya was pulled from her thoughts by her parents talking in the kitchen, their voices growing louder. They discussed something about staying for Kya, something about a divorce. Her father yelled. Her mother sobbed, the sound echoing across the freshly repainted walls. Kya's parents had argued for most of her life, but recently their voices seemed louder, crueler when they spoke to one another. Kya tried to ignore them, but it was like trying to ignore a tornado that touched down right behind her, and no matter what she did, she was always sucked in.

Kya turned her attention outside.

She jumped from the window, eyes wide when she saw Mrs. E standing on Kya's porch, staring directly at her.

"I saw you watching me," Mrs. E said, by way of greeting, her raspy voice audible through the glass. She tilted her head. "And not just today."

Kya didn't move. Her neighbor didn't seem mad that she was watching, just curious, right? The two had never spoken before so Kya wasn't sure how to read her moods.

They studied each other through the glass like a human and a tiger at the zoo, and for some reason, Kya felt like the one in the cage.

"Wanna help me, Kya? I'm working on a big home improvement project. Gotta get it ready to sell." She motioned to the sign in her front yard.

The woman wiggled her gray eyebrows at Kya, the wrinkles on her forehead dancing. The lines reminded Kya of the rings inside an ancient oak tree, but it was her black eyes that spoke of something *other*, something so dark that not even the noon sun could lighten. It wasn't a bad darkness, Kya decided, but one rarely appreciated. It was the kind of darkness people sought so they could see the stars, and the kind you saw when you closed your eyes and waited to dream.

Curiosity pulled Kya to the front door, and she slipped out, closing the sound of something fragile breaking behind her.

"How do you know my name?"

Mrs. E put both hands on her curvy waist, the jeweled bangles around her wrists clacking together when she moved. "The same as you know mine. I've lived across from you your whole life."

It made sense, Kya thought. She knew she was acting like one of those stupid girls her parents would warn her about, trusting strangers. But Mrs. E wasn't a stranger; she was the strangest. Surely, the rules were different then, and anywhere was better than going back inside.

Mrs. E shrugged. "If you don't want to help me, that's fine. I understand. Just thought you—"

“I’ll do it.”

“You will? It’ll be hard work. Not a job for the light-hearted.”

“I’ll do it.”

Mrs. E laughed, revealing perfect rows of white teeth.

*So much for a Buck-Toothed Witch*, Kya thought. What else wasn’t true?

Kya looked around at the near-empty street. Children shrieked from two houses down while splashing in the sprinklers, a lawnmower growled a ways away, and a dog barked at a jogger long gone. No one would see her disappear behind the jungle. She couldn’t tell if that was good or bad, but Mrs. E didn’t give her time to decide. Kya turned back to give her answer, but Mrs. E was already halfway to her house.

Kya followed.

The grass rose taller with each step until it cast shadows on Kya’s sneakers. She stared up at the closest sunflower, its yellow face looking down at her, deciding if she was a threat. Mrs. E gave its stalk an answering pat and walked down the weed-riddled and cracked concrete path.

Kya followed the long flowing hem of Mrs. E’s bright tie-dyed skirt until the overgrown grass pressed closer. She could barely see, wildly swatting at the grass and using her sneakers to feel for the hard sidewalk even as she tripped over roots and vines, but she couldn’t tell where she was let alone if she was still on the path. Her heart beat fast and her panic only subsided when she caught glimpses of a green house and white porch.

She broke through the grass and into a clearing, arms peddling like someone who’d been pinned down by a wave. In her hurry, she missed Mrs. E’s warning shout and splayed palm.

Kya shrieked. Her right foot hung in the air as if she'd just walked off the end of the world. She tipped forward and grabbed blindly for something, anything—her small hands found a sunflower stalk just in time.

“Watch your step,” yelled over Mrs. E.

Kya steadied herself and looked at the ground—or rather, lack thereof. The mouth of a wide gaping hole stood below her with Mrs. E on the other side of it. They'd come to a part of the yard where there was half an acre of no grass, just mud. There was a wraparound porch a few yards away up the path, but there were *things* scattered in the mud that lured Kya's attention. A dirt-caked rocking chair lay on its side with a missing arm, and a child's doll lay face down with her ragged yarn hair strewn every which way. Kya spotted a clunky television set, and an old rotary phone, nearly mistaking its stretched-out coil for a garden snake. It was an odd sort of graveyard, all this old junk, mummified in dirt and irreparable. But what was it all doing in Mrs. E's yard and what was this *hole*?

Kya suddenly wondered if the rumors about Mrs. E were right, maybe she brought Kya here to bury her and use her body for a spell or a meal.

As if reading Kya's mind, Mrs. E thrust her shovel into the ground and said, “Kya, dear, I'm not going to bury you alive. I can barely lift a shovel, let alone throw you in a hole.”

Kya didn't think this was a good time to say that she didn't need to push her when Kya could just fall in, and clearly Mrs. E could do more than she let on. The hole was as deep as Kya was tall.

“Why are you digging a hole? And where's the rest of the...” Kya looked around.  
“...dirt?”

“Somewhere safe. Wouldn't want someone to take it.”

*Right.*

“Then what’s going in the hole?”

“Who said anything about *in*, dear,” she picked up a nearby shovel. “I’m taking something out.”

“Out? Like buried treasure?”

“Boy, you ask a lot of questions. Forgot what kids are like. But, sure, call it buried treasure.”

“Is that what all this junk is—your treasure?”

“One woman’s junk is another woman’s gold, or how’s the saying go?”

Kya frowned at a nearby cluster of broken mud-encrusted pots.

“It’s one of my quirks. Some people collect baseball cards, I dig holes and throw things inside them. Tomato, Tomahto.” Mrs. E leaned against the shovel and grinned. “Problem about digging holes is you forget where you put things sometimes. Luckily, this isn’t one of those times. There’s something down that hole I need to get, but it’s buried too deep and I can’t dig it up on my own. Can’t keep ignoring it, not with my house on the market now and all.”

“What’s down there?”

“Ask me the wheres and the whens and the whys and the whos and the hows, but don’t ever ask me the whats, Kya. That’s the deal.”

Mrs. E’s proposition didn’t sound like much of a deal, but the mystery intrigued Kya. She bit her lip, surveying the hole.

“How far down?”

“Deeper than the sun shines and the worms burrow.”

From here, Kya could just make out the roof of her house through the towering grass. Even from this distance she felt the walls press in and her skin cinch tight. But over here, at least the pressure stopped before her bones cracked. Questions clamored for answers in Kya's mind, and the one she wasn't allowed to ask sparked her curiosity the most. Mrs. E extended her shovel, her own question to Kya.

Kya grabbed the shovel and dug.

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That night Kya returned home long after the cicadas sang and the sun painted the sky red. She had mud on her shoes, down her legs, in her fingernails, and the strands of her hair, and she trekked it across the floors and up the carpeted stairs to her bedroom. She smeared her hands on the white walls and fell into bed, drifting off to the thought of pirate gold and a starry sky.

When Kya awoke the next morning, the floors were spotless and the walls white. If it wasn't for the mud still on her clothes she would've thought she'd dreamt her time with Mrs. E. She expected her parents to scold her at breakfast, but they only greeted her at the kitchen. Her mother cooked while her father sat at the kitchen table reading the newspaper. It was like every other morning. The eggs sizzled on the stove. The microwave beeped. The toast sprang up. And when Kya's mother brought her a plate with a hefty serving, she noticed how her eyes were puffy, rimmed red like a moat of lava. Yes, it was like every other morning.

But when Kya craned her head to peer out the front window, she saw Mrs. E at the end of her path, looking at Kya's house as if she could see the girl inside. Her skirt blew sideways, the phantom wind still tugging, and Kya felt her own mysterious force pull her cheeks into a smile.

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Kya dug with Mrs. E every day that week. Each day the hole grew larger, and Kya found the most random things. First she found a toaster, then a tin can of buttons, a hair brush, and a radio, but Mrs. E assured Kya she wasn't much closer to finding what they searched for. She'd tried to get a clue out of Mrs. E about what that was exactly, but the woman either acted as if she didn't hear Kya, or went off on a tangent.

"You know the Vikings used to bury their dead in ships," Mrs. E said when Kya asked for a hint. "Fill it with gold and silver and bullshit. It'd take days."

"And you think it was a waste of time?"

"No, dear. I think the fancy stuff was pointless. But the time, I can appreciate the time."

Clearly, Kya thought. Whatever Mrs. E buried was deep down. The hole was now nearly eight of Kya stacked together, and growing so skinny that when Kya put her arms out, her knuckles grazed hard earth. Mrs. E fashioned her a long rope to get in and out of the hole, tying a bucket to the end of it. Kya tossed the dirt into the bucket while Mrs. E hauled it up from somewhere above, dumping it out into a pile. A dirt pile that, to Kya's bafflement, disappeared every night.

The two talked through a can and string long enough to reach Kya down below.

"So, that's what we're searching for?" asked Kya from below. "A body you buried?"

Mrs. E cackled, and Kya swore a crow cawed in the distance.

"I told you I'm not strong enough to put a body *in*. You think I'm really going to take one *out*? Oh deary, and I thought I was supposed to be the funny one."

Kya climbed out of the hole and threw her exhausted body on the ground. Mrs. E stood above Kya, blocking the little sun that was in the sky. It was cloudy out today, and the smell of

rain was strong despite the dirt and sunscreen stuffed up Kya's nose, and so was the neighbor's wafting barbecue. Her stomach grumbled in sync with the distant thunder.

"Better come inside." Mrs. E stuck out a hand for Kya. "Where there's boom there's bang."

She followed Mrs. E up the porch, intrigued. Mrs. E had never invited her into the house before. The house was as mysterious as the rest of the woman, and Kya's imagination filled with trinkets from far off places. Maybe there was a clock inside with ten hands and walls lined with funhouse mirrors. Maybe there was a colorful bird that sang the National Anthem backward and a dog that meowed. Maybe the counters shimmered with gold dust and the carpet was made of marshmallows. Maybe—

Kya's imagination vanished as Mrs. E swung open the old door of her house. She stepped inside and frowned. The house wasn't as large as hers, but all Kya could see was yellowing walls with peeling paint. What should've been the living room wasn't very *lived* in—it was bare of furniture and the kitchen had only a single chair pulled up to a small black card table. The only hint that this was a home was the single pot on the stove and the lone photograph hanging from the bulky white fridge. But the lack of furniture wasn't the strangest part of it all—Kya had finally figured out where Mrs. E was keeping all the discarded dirt Kya dug up.

She felt it first at her feet as they sunk two inches into the floor. Kya looked down in a mix of horror and awe at the dirt covering every baseboard and inch of carpet. It was as if she'd never left the outside.

The old woman kicked off her shoes and set them by the door. "No shoes in the house please."

Kya and Mrs. E ate whatever stew was in the pot, while Kya sat on the counter and Mrs. E on the lawn chair. Kya had about a billion and two questions she wanted to ask, but she started with one that was pressing behind her teeth, trying to squeeze through the gap between her front two.

“Who’s the girl on the fridge?” she finally asked.

“Who’s the man in the moon?”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

Kya jumped off the counter, her bare toes sinking into the soft mud as she walked closer to the picture on the fridge. The edges were faded and torn, and white creases ran perpendicular on the picture as if the image had been folded and tucked away just as much as it had been taken out and admired. Up close, Kya saw the woman was young, only slightly older than Kya. She had curly hair like Mrs. E, but hers was in a long dark braid. The girl was laughing, eyes turned away from the camera, looking at what—Kya wasn’t sure. The other half of the picture was missing, torn off.

“Who is she?”

A pause. Then a mushing sound as Mrs. E walked through the mud over to the door without looking at the picture.

“Let’s go dig, Kya.”

Kya was old enough to recognize the tone adults used when they didn’t want to talk anymore, but Kya pressed. She was digging this woman a hole large enough to swallow a town, she deserved to know something about her. Besides, it was raining out, and Kya preferred not to drown in a hole of her own making.

“Who is she?” she asked again, “Does she have something to do with why we’re digging the hole?”

“I take what I said back earlier. No *whos* either.”

“Well *why* can’t you tell me?”

Kya crossed her arms.

Mrs. E put her hands on her hips.

“We’re digging up the hole because I’m selling this house and I want all my things with me. I have a buyer lined up, you know. I have to be out by the end of the month.”

Kya laughed. Mrs. E clearly didn’t care about her *things*, if she shoved them in the ground rather than lived with them in her empty house. And Kya didn’t know much about selling a house, but she knew piles of dirt on the carpet wasn’t what buyers looked for.

“What, Kya? I dig holes all the time. All the places I go. Put something in there— Mementos. Souvenirs. Call it what you want, it’s just how I remember the pieces of my life. This time’s no different.”

Kya thought of Mrs. E’s sudden urgency to sell her house, how it finally forced her to dig up something she’d clearly dreaded. No, this time was different.

Outside, the wind howled and rain pelted the roof.

“Is the girl around? Can I meet her?”

“She’s gone, Kya.”

“Where’d she go?”

“She’s just gone now c’mon can we please—”

“Where’d she go?”

“Far! Somewhere far, far away!”

The thunder roared louder from outside, shaking the walls. Kya remembered how Mrs. E had always disappeared for weeks, sometimes years, then showed up only to leave again.

“Is that where you go when you leave? Wherever this girl is?”

“No, Kya. Dammit just—just stop. Stop asking about things you can’t understand.”

Kya stood motionless like how she did when her parents yelled. She stood like someone might after they felt the earth shake, afraid to move lest one step, one breath, make the world split open.

Mrs. E remained silent, looking out the window until the thunder was distant once again and only rain tapped on the windows.

“Something buried isn’t always something laid to rest,” she said. “I’m sorry, but I think it’s best if you go home for today.”

Kya nodded and walked out the front door and down the path, letting the rain wash away today’s mud. She thought of how Mrs. E was always on the move, and for the first time, Kya wondered if it was because she was running away.

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Two weeks later, Kya woke to cardboard boxes in her living room labeled *MINE* in the same silver Sharpie her mother used to write “*We love you!*” on her birthday cards. There were stuffed bags of clothes and half-used shampoo bottles in the hall. She heard her parents discussing something about loving Kya more, something about custody. Kya grabbed a piece of toast and bolted out the front door to Mrs. E’s and wondered if she would stay in the house or go with the boxes, or if from now on her life would consist of overnight bags and lateral moves between the pieces of the only family she’d ever known.

She told Mrs. E as much, and the woman hadn't approached it with her usual amusement, just squeezed Kya's shoulder and handed her a shovel. She'd lacked half-witted responses since the day it rained and Kya saw the picture of the girl. But in the days after, Mrs. E started to tell her stories while they worked, and Kya didn't question it. Happy tales of her time in far off places with odd people, but nothing about a young girl. The girl was there, though. Kya felt her presence in every word of every story, even the ones about adventures to weird sounding Welsh towns and sinking boats in dried-up bays, haunting all of Mrs. E's memories.

They went inside Mrs. E's for lunch every day, but the picture was always missing from the fridge. Kya knew it couldn't have gone far.

Today they ate a veggie stew while Mrs. E talked about a mishap at a circus, but Kya wasn't really listening.

"Did the girl live here?"

Mrs. E stopped midsentence and fixed those dark eyes on Kya, then pursed and unpursed her lips. Kya sipped her stew.

"Yes," said Mrs. E. "She lived here."

"But she doesn't anymore?"

"I—" Mrs. E paused. Opened her mouth then closed it. Kya waited.

"I suppose you're curious. That picture was like bait for your child mind. I shouldn't have left it out, but maybe it's for the best." She sighed. "Maybe it's time I shared. But I can't tell you when you look at me with those big eyes of wonder. They remind me too much of her."

So the pair went outside. Kya dug. Mrs. E heaved the bucket of dirt and talked to Kya through the string and can about the family that used to live in her house. She talked about a mother who loved her husband and daughter. She talked of a strange wind that pulled the mother

to far off lands, away from her family, away from her little girl whether she wanted to leave or not. She said the daughter was tall for her age and stubborn in her ways, and she hated when her mother had to leave. The husband hated it too, but knew his wife was like his daughter, and there was no changing her.

“And she left one day, the mother that is,” Mrs. E said. “Just left, pulled by that wind.”

There was a pause, and the only sound was Kya’s heavy breath and the shovel cutting solid earth. All the way down here, Kya couldn’t hear the birds chirp or feel the summer breeze. Could barely see the sun, a speck of distant light above her. All she knew was the ever-present dampness of sweat and mildew that clung to her skin. She was deeper than even the worms, in a place where no life should be lived.

“The mother left—I can’t even remember where she went now—but she was gone for a long, long time.”

Another pause. Though Kya couldn’t see Mrs. E, she knew she was looking down the path, watching the woman walk back up it all those years ago. Maybe she was a little thinner, maybe her hair was darker. Maybe her gaze was not as distant, but Kya knew it was the same Mrs. E, with the same windblown look and same restless soul.

“They never understood why she—I had to leave, and I could never explain it no matter how hard I tried.” She spoke faster now, rushing to finish. “But I wanted to stay this time, I was going to promise them I’d stay. I was. But when I walked in the house, they weren’t there. Only a note from my husband. There was a car accident. Monique—*my* Monique...”

Kya kept digging as the ground grew harder, the shovel’s hacks filling the silence.

*CHINK*

The sound ricocheted along the tunnel and up into the sky. The impact stung Kya's hands, and rattled her teeth. She couldn't speak until her body stopped vibrating.

"Rock bottom," Kya called up.

"We're close then," said Mrs. E. Her voice sounding even further away, and Kya knew she was still looking at the path, this time watching herself walk out of the house and into the yard, picking up a shovel and digging until she no longer remembered. "We're so close."

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It rained the day Kya's father stuck the for sale sign in their front yard and told her that the three of them were moving. Something about starting over together in a new place, something about it being good. So Kya spent her day trapped inside, wondering how her house could make two people hate one another, but a new house could make the same people love one another. Maybe this house was haunted—cursed even. Kya pretended as much as she sat in her room while her parents argued. She told herself the echoing yells came from the wailing ghouls, and the slamming doors and broken vases were the result of a pesky poltergeist.

Kya's mother packed Kya's room while she sat near the front window, watching Mrs. E's sunflowers thrash in the harsh wind and rain. She knew they were almost done digging, and that whatever Mrs. E was looking for was only a small pile of dirt away. She wondered if it was a lock of her daughter's hair, maybe her favorite doll, but every time Kya was sure of something these days, it changed, so she tried not to guess.

The rain didn't stop for another week, and by that point the movers had taken most of Kya's stuff away. When the sun finally came out, Kya ran across the street.

Mrs. E paced around the hole. It was covered in tarp, sealed from the rain. She stopped when she saw Kya.

“Kya! Hurry, we have to dig now before it rains again. The buyers will be here tomorrow.”

Kya opened her mouth to tell her that she was leaving tomorrow too, and not coming back, but Mrs. E handed her the shovel.

“I know, dear,” she said. “I know.”

Kya threw the shovel into the hole and clambered down the long rope. She dug faster than ever despite the hard rocky earth, and Mrs. E matched her pace, hauling the bucket. And when the shovel wasn't working anymore, Mrs. E joined her in the tunnel and they dug with their bare hands until their fingertips bled and their callouses cracked.

Kya tried not to cry, not for the pain in her fingers, but for the pain in her heart. She didn't want to leave, she didn't want this *thing* to be over. So she built floodgates to hold back the tears, only letting one slip through every now and then. She was afraid if she let anymore, she would drown and take Mrs. E with her, but Mrs. E wasn't in much better shape.

“I can't do it,” she said to Kya, ceasing digging.

“We have to,” said Kya. She grabbed Mrs. E's hand, squeezed it, then pressed it back to the cold, dark earth. “You have to.”

Mrs. E dug slow, then fast. She dug as if her life depended on it and Kya realized that maybe it somehow did. Sometimes Mrs. E screamed, then she'd cry, or maybe that was Kya, or maybe Kya imagined it.

“We're so close,” Mrs. E repeated, over and over again. “We're so close.”

And when Kya's fingertips scraped something cold and smooth, she knew they were close. She wiped away more dirt and found the top of something made of steel. From above, Kya's mother called for her, but Kya kept digging until the steel took on the shape of a large box.

“I have to go,” Kya told Mrs. E when her father’s voice joined her mother’s. “I promised I’d be back for dinner. I’ll come first thing in the morning, I promise, Mrs. E. I promise.”

Mrs. E kept digging. “It’s okay, Kya. I need to do this part on my own.”

Kya climbed the rope out of the hole, and, on her way home, she swore she heard the wind whisper *thank you*, in Mrs. E’s raspy voice.

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Kya dashed across the street first thing in the morning. She ran through the grass and into the small clearing, but she stopped short.

There was no hole.

Not even a small crack in the ground. The only sign that there was ever a hole was the tilled dirt positioned over the entrance, slightly raised above the ground like a freshly dug grave.

Heart racing, Kya sprinted up the porch steps shouting for Mrs. E. She didn’t bother to take off her shoes, and she nearly screamed when they made contact with fresh carpet. It made sense, Kya supposed. The dirt was back where it should have been. But where was Mrs. E?

Kya yelled for her, looking around the small house but not finding her anywhere. Then Kya went to the kitchen and saw the large steel box on the counter.

She held her breath and threw open the lid.

She frowned, there was another box inside, this one slightly smaller. She threw it open only to be met with another smaller box. Frantically, Kya opened the box, then the next and the next, until, like Russian nesting dolls only one remained. The smallest box was the size of both her hands put together, but she knew it was the last one just as much as she knew Mrs. E was long gone from here.

With certain hands, she grasped the edges of the box and opened it. It wasn't entirely empty like Kya half-expected it to be. Instead, there was a note inside addressed to Kya. Something about finding the what, something about finally healing. The lines blurred as Kya read, but all she heard was Mrs. E's thank you as she climbed the hole for the last time.

Kya tucked the note in her back pocket, tore out the front door and down the path. She stuck out her hands and ran through the tall grass feeling the blades lick her skin. She ran not from or to, but in circles like the arrow of a broken compass, even as she got in the car with her parents and drove away, she was pivoting, trying and failing to find her way. Her parents held hands in the front seat, and her mother looked back at Kya and said something about new friends, something about getting a dog, but Kya only thought of dark holes and metal boxes. She thought of a photograph with a ripped edge and imagined a woman with dark eyes and bright bangles on her arms, her face with only a few lines of age and her tight curls bouncing and as black as her eyes. She imagined the woman smiled until the skin around her eyes creased as she looked across the void to where the missing half should have been, not at something, but at someone.

Kya imagined a girl now gone, a girl still going, and a woman not just moving, but moving on.

The End