



Excerpt: Lost from The House that Jack Built and other stories

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Stamford Hill, Stoke Newington, Kingsland High Road – electric and alive, the streets buzz with night creatures. Shadows take form, sounds skate on black ice and dreams spiral and yawn. And there they are, the proverbial men peeing against dark railings, holding their cocks like tools that can be put to good use for something, cleverly but economically fashioned tools, easily handled, fit for purpose. Forming one twisting, hungry animal, a couple kiss and grind against a dark alley wall. Unexpected heat rises to her chest, and quickly Naomi turns her head to look the other way. In a doner kebab shop, skewered lamb spins and spits like a defiant living thing. Warm, meaty breath sneaks into the car, making Naomi’s stomach rumble. Bartek smirks.

‘You hungry? You want some food?’

‘No, thank you,’ she says. ‘I’m okay.’

Naomi’s wedding ring is loose on her finger and her cheeks have hollowed. She can’t remember when she last ate a good solid meal. Somehow good solid things are no longer a part of her life, and won’t be until she has found what she has lost. Penance and punishment can take many forms, her mum once told her.

Visiting Sister Augustine, the local Obeah woman, was one particular sin that Naomi sorely regrets. Slowly shifting her heavy weight from one side of her body to the other, Sister Augustine had led Naomi into a candlelit room at the back of her house. A beaded curtain rustled her welcome. One strand snagged on a button of her coat. Sister Augustine kissed her teeth. 'Chut! That keeps happening – I mean to get it sorted.' The room was dank with incense, and on a small cupboard sat large crystals, their pink and purple innards splayed like the open bodies of gutted fish. There were no ornaments of teeth, bone or feathers, just soft dimmed light. Draped in her black crochet shawl, Sister Augustine had ushered Naomi to sit down by a square table. She stared at Naomi through milky eyes, and breathing deeply said, 'I'm in spirit now, and my guide Chéckina is waving a white flag... She's telling me you must leave your son be, let him find his own way.' She leaned forward and, clasping Naomi's hands, stared down at her palms as if reading a map.

'Now lissen, daughter, and lissen good.' The veins in the back of the old woman's hands, like breakaway brooks, bulged beneath her brown skin. 'Fish have fins and birds have wings. There's no point trying to give a bird fins – how's the poor thing ever gonna fly? You better take my advice: it is wisest to accept your son for who and what he is.' Prising her hands away from the woman's surprisingly strong clasp, Naomi nodded like she understood, but insisted on paying the woman for the reddish-brown grains of guinea pepper. While Delroy slept, she sewed the tiny seeds into the soles of his trainers.