



The Toucan

El tucán

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They say they won't come near this house. They say it's haunted grounds. Rachel must have said something like that. At the edge of insolation and with a mind full of ghosts, Damien had trouble grasping her exact words.

He was standing in the sun halfway across the backyard of his childhood house. In front of him, three or four meters of overgrown grass separated him from the jungle. Another four meters behind him, Rachel was standing at the back door. Framed by the decrepit wooden construction, his fiancée looked lovelier than ever, more foreign, more out of place than anything else he'd ever seen around the house.

"What does *Mama Ista* mean?" Damien heard *that* loud and clear.

Hand up to her brow to shade her eyes, Rachel walked to him. She was too white for this sun, too delicate.

"You don't want to know about it, about *her*," he whispered.

"I think I do. The woman from the house down the hill says no one in town will come up here, and it's all because of that."

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15517/7a04f685>

Recepción: 28/01/2026 Aceptación: 24/02/2026



Damien looked up to Bernard's old room on the second floor, its window overlooking the yard. From there, he traced the outline of the house. It had suffered too much under the tropical sun, its white paint peeling off, exposing the greyish boards underneath. With his mother and now Bernard gone, he was all that was left for the place, but he couldn't look after it. He didn't want to. Damien hadn't slept under its roof in over a decade. They were strangers to each other now.

"D, are you listening? I think we'll have to move the wake someplace else."

He nodded.

A few steps behind him, rusty and half buried in the ground, was the frame of a bicycle. Damien could hear his past howling from inside it, his own voice telling Bernard he could have the bike while he was gone, but he would have to give it back if he ever decided to return. Damien saw his little brother climbing on it for the first time, standing on the pedals because he couldn't reach the seat. Bernard must have been nine back then.

Rachel's fingers ran on Damien's shoulder. It had been years since he last felt his shirt so wet with perspiration.

"Who is this Mama Ista?"

Damien moved towards the remains of the bike and kicked it softly. The metal was so corroded that his foot bored a hole in it.

"I've heard of Mama Ista, but I've never seen it—her. Last time I was here, for my mom's funeral, Bernard told me about this time he saw her..."

Rachel conducted him inside as he went on. "It happened sometime after I left, during the last days of summer vacation, when the boys had run out of things to do after almost two



months off school. That day, my brother woke up early. I can see him. Walking in the morning twilight.”

##

About a mile from the house, by the dry creek, Gilbert and three other boys are sitting on their bikes, waiting for him at the edge of the forest. It seems no matter how early Bernard leaves, they always arrive before him, everywhere he goes. The mocking starts as soon as they see him in the distance. He sees them shouting. Their voices don't reach that far, but he knows they're having fun at his expense. He busted his bike three days before, and they still tease him about it. “Get a move on, Flat-feet!” they shout, and Bernard runs, hating every second of being the only one in town who has to walk everywhere.

Lucky for him, they are going on a hike, and the bikes are left chained to trees at the edge of the forest. They walk in single file with Gilbert at the lead, like always. He's the only one old enough to be allowed his own machete. He takes pride in the blade and swings it incessantly against the jungle, clearing paths wider than they need, even where they don't need them. An hour on foot gets them to the pond; it's large and oval and fenced by rock. Gilbert's first to see it. He shrieks with excitement and makes a run for it. He slips off his shirt and hurls it to the ground. It is the signal for the rest of the boys to do the same. They all dress down to their underwear and plunge in.

After a while in the water, Gilbert comes up with a diving game. The pond is about three meters deep near the center, which makes it a perfect place to test their manhood, he says. They'll swim to the bottom and hold on to the rocks for as long as they can.



One by one the boys set their times. Bernard is third to take a turn. He dives in at the signal without hesitation and kicks so fast he feels his legs are about to come off, but the pit is too deep for him. Halfway down he stops making progress. He's caught in place despite his efforts. The water is too cold, too dark. He fails. He fails the second and third times too. The boys don't tease him too much, though. They are more interested in Gilbert, who is next in turn. While Gilbert is readying himself for his big dive, Bernard walks out of the water, knowing he wasn't enough of a man today.

Bernard's stomach growls. All that effort, all that wasted effort, has made him hungry, so he goes for a slice of watermelon he smuggled out of the house. Lunch in hand, he finds a good spot to eat on the rocks right above the water. The boulder he's found is cut in an angle. From there he can watch the others without being seen. The perfect spot for self-indulgence.

With hands and chin dripping with juice, Bernard watches the rest of the boys plunge and play. Gilbert picks them up and hurls them back into the water. He's only a few years older than the rest of the boys, but he is nearly double their size. Bernard is tempted to join them again, though sitting on the warm stone on his wet briefs feels good. The watermelon's cool and satisfying. He is at peace.

Twigs crack behind him. Bernard's heart jumps inside his chest. He scans around, finding nothing. He tries to quiet himself and notices leaves shaking in a shrub nearby, but he can't see what shakes them. Something's moving in the shade.

Then he sees the red tip of a beak. It is only a bird, a toucan, perching on a branch nearby.



Bernard calms himself and the toucan can feel it. The bird acts curious. Bernard bites off a piece of watermelon and spits it on his hand. When he tosses the offering, the toucan leans its head and shrieks, a sound halfway between a croak and a chirp. It studies him and then approaches. The tips of its wings smile blue in the sunlight. Its beak is mainly yellow, with merging tones of green and vermilion at the tip, as if the bird had dipped it in red ink. It skips forward and takes the piece of fruit.

Bernard bites off another piece and feeds it to the bird. He's never seen a toucan so close. Though most of its plumage is black, its face is covered in yellow feathers that spread down to its chest like a bib. It has thin green rings around its eyes as if the blue of them had spilled and tinted the feathers around them. He looks at Bernard as if humans fascinate him too.

Bernard's about to feed him another piece of fruit when a hand projects from the corner of his eye. It's Gilbert's, who is yelling with excitement and has the bird locked in a tight grip. He swings it in the air as the toucan fruitlessly tries to escape.

"Let it alone, man! Let him be," Bernard yells, but no one listens. The other boys join Gilbert and push him away. They yank the bird's feathers as Bernard screams. It pains him when they hit the toucan against the ground. One of them elbows him on the nose and knocks him back. Through his tears, Bernard can see everyone has feathers in their hands. They've all got their souvenirs. All except one.

"Hold him," Gilbert commands two of his chums. They throw Bernard on the ground and grab his arms. The third boy takes the toucan and holds him against the rock. They hold them both down while Gilbert searches his clothes. He returns with his machete in hand.



Bernard wriggles, trying to free himself. The rocks cut his naked torso and his knees bang on the surface. Everything feels hard against his skin, and he wishes he had some of his clothes on. He begs them to stop, but they won't listen.

Gilbert has put one of his boots back on. He places his knife on the base of the toucan's beak. His dick is hard, showing through his wet briefs. He tells his chum to hold the blade and stomps. He stomps his boot on it. He growls with pleasure as he stomps, all three times it takes him to get his souvenir.

##

Bang. Bang. Bang! Rachel jolted, sitting on the church pew as Damien hit the wooden surface with his palm. Her hand rushed to cover her mouth and drowned a shriek. Other mourners at the wake were startled too. A lady gasped and a few eyes landed on Damien and Rachel, yet no one addressed the mourning brother; they just seemed to pity him more.

"Those other boys," Rachel whispered. "Are they here tonight?"

"Beats me. Bernard never told me who they were." Damien looked at the people sitting on the pews and gathering in small groups around the coffin. Most of the town's people had come to the wake. It was bound to happen. Death is a powerful agent to gather small communities.

"I have my suspicions, but I don't think I'd recognize them. I only knew them as small children." He looked up at the fan hanging from the ceiling. It turned hypnotically slow. He closed his eyes against the faint breeze. "I'd recognize Gilbert," he said and looked at Rachel. "But there is not a chance in the world he's here."



“Anyone who does that to an innocent creature should be put in jail,” said Rachel. “I hope he’s rotting in a cell, that or dead!”

“Never wish for a person’s death during a wake, honey. The wrong one might be listening, and you may end up regretting what you said.” Damien paused while Rachel looked over her shoulder as if searching for something.

“That night back in the house,” he resumed, “Bernard was startled awake.”

##

An echo pricks his inner ear like a needle, but in his sleep, Bernard can’t recognize the sound. It isn’t what he hears that awakes him. It’s the drilling pain, the sound opening way through his flesh. He sits on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, face buried in his hands, and begins to cry. He cries because he hasn’t cried yet, because he needs to.

A caw replies to his sobs. The sound is followed by the flapping of wings, which Bernard catches in the corner of his eye when he glances up. Something has just flown out from the windowsill.

He hurries to the window, and out there in the moonlit yard, a toucan perches on the skeleton of his busted bicycle. It can’t be the same toucan, he tells himself. He watches it. The bird watches him back. It’s wearing its mourning plumage. The bird flaunts the shape of a toucan and the cloak of a raven. Even its beak is black, all except the tip. It shimmers vermilion like an ember. The toucan croaks again, and Bernard knows it is inviting him outside.

Bernard hurries, but when he reaches the spot, the bird’s gone. He looks back to the house and up to his window on the second floor. He imagines himself watching down at him.



The other Bernard stares. His gaze is unnerving, so he tries to shake the image out of his head. The grass is imbued with the bluish gloss of the moonlight. The breeze makes it hiss. A few steps away, the first wall of trees is a dam containing the blackness of the jungle.

A familiar croak comes from the shadows. Perhaps he's not too late. The thought pulls Bernard a couple more steps towards the jungle before he stops again. Something like fear makes the air thick. His limbs become rigid and he struggles not to run back to the house.

Another croak lures him. He forces his legs to move, and from closer he sets eyes on this odd tree, jutting out from the rest of the jungle. Strange he has never noticed it before. The tree's lean trunk stretches out from the darkness into the moonlit bay of the yard, branches shooting up, ready to hold the sky in case it falls. The bark is twisted like strands of rope.

Bernard reaches, and just as his index touches the bark, the branches recoil with loud violence. Like the tail of a peacock, the tree that Mama Ista carries on her back splinters into a hundred bony branches; they open like a fan and then contract into what looks like a braid, hanging down from her naked lower back. Mama turns to him and croaks.

She stares at him with ember eyes.

The next croak sounds like a question, but he can't answer. Bernard retraces his steps and Mama follows him out into the moon's light. In the yard, her bark, her skin, glistens. Her face is black leather and her eyes are large, round and seemingly out of focus, like a toad's. A large exoskeletal structure in the shape of a set of hip bones covers her cheekbones and temples. It extends back and upwards like short misshapen antlers.

Mama Ista is big. She is at least twice Bernard's height but she's thin, her body shaped like a mantis. She walks farther into the yard, her train of branches dragging behind her.



Mama brings the jungle with her. The dam is broken and darkness floods the pale blue yard. The grass stretches and stirs where she steps, and the air becomes more humid. Frogs sing, raving to accompany the treble of crickets and cicadas.

She croaks.

“Please forgive me,” moans Bernard.

She croaks again. Her pitch rises at the end.

Mama whips the ground with her vine fingers. Bernard tries to recoil, walks backwards. He stumbles when she eyes him, as if her gaze had pushed him. She comes closer and leans down. When she starts making a long, rattling sound, Bernard can’t take it anymore.

“Gilbert. His name is Gilbert,” he squeals. “The green house across the river.”

Mama Ista springs back and howls deep like a Congo monkey. The sound echoes on the nearby trees and travels like a wave across the canopy. The branches of Mama’s tail rise again and rattle.

Bernard drags himself back in another attempt to escape. Mama Ista notices but she doesn’t care. She has Gilbert’s name. She’s got someone to punish. As her silhouette merges with the darkness, the clamor of the forest begins to fade, and soon the night is mute again.

##

“Is *that* what is haunting this house?” Rachel didn’t close her mouth after posing the question. Damien looked at her in the mirror as he struggled with his tie knot.

“No, nothing is haunting anything,” he affirmed and undid the knot to start over. “But yes, that’s what they *say* is haunting this old house.”



“Didn’t it occur to you to tell me this before? Before we spent the night here?” She shoved her toothbrush in her mouth and started brushing indignantly.

“There was no other place we could’ve slept in, unless you wanted to share a coffin with Bernard.” The awkward sentence reminded Damien that today he was burying his brother.

He abandoned his effort to tie the knot and sat on the edge of the bed. “After that night, Bernard struggled to tell what was real and what wasn’t. He told no one he saw Mama. He swallowed it down and didn’t spit it back until years after, when I made him.”

Rachel rinsed her mouth and went to Damien.

“People started talking, started calling him names,” continued Damien. “They also said they saw things wandering around the house, that they heard strange sounds, howls.” His gaze swept the planks of the wall as if he was reading, as if each piece of wood contained a line of his story. “I told him they were lying. That they were trying to hurt him. I begged him to move to the city with me. I did.” Damien turned to Rachel, “after mom died I should have made him leave.”

“Oh D, don’t go there. You can’t blame yourself for what he did.” Rachel’s voice was sweet and reassuring.

Damien sprang up and said, “Guilt killed Bernard. This damned place killed him, not himself. Not himself.”

Rachel gently sat him down again.



“He sent Mama Ista to Gilbert, but he never wanted anybody to suffer.” He began to sob. “I should—I should have forced him to come away with me. He was my little brother, and I should’ve made him leave.”

Rachel hugged him and he cried some more.

##

The toucan comes back to Bernard’s window the following night. The purring notes of the bird awake him. He recognizes the sound in his slumber and turns towards the window as fast as his somnolence will allow. He barely catches a glimpse of the shadow of the bird fluttering away. He is being summoned, no doubt. It takes him a moment to gather his nerve, before he goes out to meet Mama. It would be worse if she decided to come into the house, looking for him.

In the yard, she makes him wait for a moment before revealing herself. Her upper limbs are long as a monkey’s, naked, twisted bark. Bernard can see her better this time. She has two sets of fingers, one set of bony wooden members that she uses to call someone from behind her, but whoever it is they don’t step forward, so she extends her other fingers. They grow long and thin like vines. They fly through the shadows and fetch him. It’s Gilbert, covered in mud from head to toe and wearing only a pair of pants. Mama Ista’s got her vine tied around his neck. Gilbert doesn’t struggle, though. He doesn’t complain. His eyes on the ground, he hardly even moves. He is without will, a sleepwalker, a shadow. With a shriek, Mama commands him to remove his only garment.



Bernard is paralyzed, staring at the horror underneath Gilbert's clothes.

His dick's been cut off and a beak placed in its stead, hard and slightly bent as the other time he showed himself.

Gilbert will never torment anyone again.

Bernard falls on his knees, thought suspended. He barely notices when the two monsters disappear back into the forest.

He stays alone in the dark for a minute, trying to assimilate what has happened. He instinctively knows the image of that beak, tinted with mud and blood, will age and die along with him.

##

"And it did. Gilbert disappeared to most people, but my brother kept seeing him every night in his mind when he went to bed."

Damien placed his arm around Rachel. They were sitting on a cement grave, waiting for the gravediggers to lower Bernard.

"That's what he told me, anyway. You are only the second person to ever listen to the story. It's funny, never mind how long you try to stay away from a place, its monsters never leave you. They keep pulling you back."

Rachel took a deep breath, absorbing the words in the warm air. "Do you think it's true?"

"It frightened me back then when I believed it," he answered. "It appalls me more now that I can't."

"You don't believe he saw Mama?"



“Oh no, Mama Ista is real. I just don’t believe it was a toucan they abused.”

Rachel gasped and laid her head on his shoulder.

They watched the gravediggers in silence. Rachel saw two men with shovels, one tall and one short. Damien saw the men but no shovels. He saw them digging with their bare hands, burrowing like rodents.

Damien shook his head and looked away. In the distance, the jungle rested in its mid-morning tranquility, and the sun burned like always.

“I had a dream last night,” said Damien. “Remember that pond in the middle of the jungle? I dreamed Bernard went back there, recently, as a grown man. He jumped in the water and dived to the bottom. I could see him holding on to a large boulder, his hands laced around the rock. And the water was cold and murky, but his face was placid. Then I realized, still in the dream, that I wasn’t there, that I was being told the story. I was lying in bed with my eyes closed and a woman’s voice was telling me the story. It said that Bernard hung on for so long down at the bottom of the pond that his spirit decided to stay there and his body had to float back up to the surface all by itself.”

Rachel’s eyes sparkled with tears. “I like that,” she said.

“I like it too. The woman told me he’ll be fine, and that I’ll be fine, and that you’ll be fine. It felt true. It will be fine now,” said Damien as he pulled his arm away. “He’s found his own way to leave his monsters behind.” He gave Rachel a faint smile.

When they started pouring earth on the coffin, Damien stood up and walked towards the grave.



Rachel saw the tall gravedigger welcome him with a smile, his eyes seemingly out of focus, like a toad's.

Together the three of them buried his brother while Rachel and the jungle watched.



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