

The Cellar Songs

by Emecheta Christian

I was thirteen when I first heard the singing from our cellar. Not the kind of singing you'd expect—not the muffled voices of my parents doing laundry, or the hum of our ancient furnace. This was different. Pure. Beautiful. Like wind chimes made of quartz, or the way I imagined starlight would sound if it had a voice.

Mom had been gone three months by then. The doctors called it rapid-onset dementia, but I knew better. I'd watched her change that summer, watched her start talking to empty corners and drawing strange symbols on the walls with her fingernails until they bled. Dad painted over them every weekend, his hands trembling as he covered each mark, pretending everything was normal.

But nothing had been normal since we moved into the Tudor-looking house on Sycamore Street.

The singing started on a Tuesday night in June. I remember because Dad was working late at the hospital again, leaving me alone with my homework and the creaking sounds of our too-big house settling into its foundations. The melody drifted up through the heating vent beside my desk, so faint I thought I was imagining it at first. Three notes rising and falling like a question asking to be answered.

I should have ignored it. Should have turned up my music, finished my algebra, and gone to bed like any sensible person. But Mom always said I had more curiosity than sense, so I followed the sound.

The cellar door was at the end of the kitchen hallway, a heavy oak thing with black iron hinges that groaned when I pulled it open. The wooden steps leading down were steep and narrow, worn smooth by generations of feet. I'd only been down there once when we first moved in, helping Dad store boxes we still hadn't unpacked. The bare bulb at the bottom cast more darkness than light.

The singing grew stronger with each step I took. It was a woman's voice, I realized, though it had an odd echoing quality as if it were coming from the bottom of a well. The words were in a language I didn't recognize, but they made my skin prickle with goose bumps.

I fumbled for the light switch at the bottom of the stairs. The bulb flickered twice before steadying, throwing harsh light across the concrete floor and stone walls. Everything looked normal at first—the washing machine, the old workbench, boxes of Christmas decorations we'd never put up. But then I saw it. A door that hadn't been there before, set into the far wall.

It was small, barely four feet high, made of dark wood that seemed to absorb the light around it. The singing was coming from behind it, clear as a bell now. And underneath the melody, I heard something else—the sound of my mother's laughter.

I knew, somewhere in the rational part of my brain, that it couldn't be her. Mom was in Silver Pines Care Center, barely able to remember her own name most days. But the laughter sounded exactly like her—the way she used to laugh on Sunday mornings when Dad made his terrible jokes over pancakes before the confusion set in and the light started fading from her eyes.

My hand was on the doorknob before I realized I'd crossed the room. The metal was ice-cold against my palm, and for a moment I hesitated. But then I heard Mom's voice, clear as day: "Freya? Baby, is that you?"

I opened the door.

The space beyond wasn't a room—it was a tunnel, its walls smooth and pearly white, seeming to glow with their own inner light. The singing pulled at me like a physical force, and the air smelled of Mom's vanilla perfume. I dropped to my hands and knees and crawled through.

The tunnel twisted and turned, growing larger as I went, until finally I could stand. The walls pulse with soft light in time with the song, which had changed to something sadder now, full of longing. I followed it around one last bend and found myself in a vast circular chamber.

The ceiling arched high above, lost in darkness, but the walls glowed as mother-of-pearl does. In the center stood a woman in a white dress that moved as if underwater. She was singing, her back turned to me, her long dark hair floating around her shoulders.

"Mom?" I whispered.

The singing stopped. The woman turned, and I stumbled backward. Her face—where her face should have been—was smooth and blank as an egg. But somehow, I could feel her smiling.

"Not quite," she said in my mother's voice. "But I can help you get her back."

I should have run. Every instinct screamed at me to flee, to scramble back through the tunnel and never look back. But she kept talking, her words wrapping around me like the

welcoming arms of my mom before her illness.

"Your mother isn't sick, Freya. She's just... lost. I can show you how to find her. How to bring her home." The faceless woman held out one pale hand. "All you have to do is sing with me."

I thought of Mom in that sterile hospital room, her eyes vacant, her fingers constantly tracing invisible patterns in the air. I thought of Dad's haunted expression every time he came home from visiting her. And I thought of how, just before they took her away, she'd grabbed my hand and whispered, "They're coming through the walls, Freya. Don't let them take you too."

"What happened to her?" I asked, my voice shaking.

"The same thing that happens to anyone who hears our song but refuses to join it." The woman's head tilted. "She tried to protect you, to block out our music. But no one can resist forever. She should have known better—should have taught you to sing instead of hiding you away."

My throat went dry. "What are you talking about?"

"Your grandmother heard us too, you know. And her mother before her. It runs in the blood, this gift. This curse, some might say." She laughed—my mother's laugh exactly. "Why do you think she never let you meet them? Why do you think there are no family photos older than your mother? Because they're all here, Freya. All singing. All waiting."

The chamber had grown darker, but the walls pulsed faster now, like a frantic heartbeat. And I could hear other voices joining the song—dozens, hundreds of them, harmonizing in that strange language. Among them, I recognized Mom's voice, but it was twisted and desperate.

"Join us," the faceless woman said, stepping closer. "Your mother misses you so much. We all do."

That's when I saw them—faces pressing through the pearly walls like masks pushing through a membrane. Women's faces, young and old, all with my eyes, my chin, my mother's high cheekbones. My family. My legacy. All of them singing, calling me home.

I ran.

I don't remember much about the journey back through the tunnel. Just the sound of their voices rising to a shriek behind me, the feeling of hands grabbing at my clothes, the smell of vanilla turning sickly sweet. I emerged from the small door at a roll, slamming it behind me hard enough to crack the frame.

When Dad found me hours later, I was sitting at the top of the cellar stairs, my back pressed against the wall, still shaking. I tried to tell him everything, but the words wouldn't come out right. Maybe that was for the best. He's got enough to worry about with Mom.

That was two weeks ago. The door in the cellar is gone now, as if it never existed. But late at night, when the house is quiet, I still hear them singing. Their voices rise through the heating vents, sweet and terrible, promising everything I've lost. Sometimes I catch myself humming along before I can stop.

And sometimes, in the bathroom mirror, I see my reflection smile with too many teeth. But only when I'm singing.

Yesterday, Dad said Mom's getting worse. The doctors want to try a new treatment, but they're not optimistic. I caught him crying in the kitchen this morning, holding one of her old photos. He didn't see me watching.

Tonight, the singing is louder than ever. I can hear Mom's voice clearly now, calling my name between verses. My throat aches with the effort of keeping quiet, of not answering her call. But I know if I start singing, I'll never stop.

Still... I can't help wondering. What if they were telling the truth? What if I could bring her back? What if all it takes is one song, one moment of surrender, to have my family whole again?

The cellar door is open now, spilling darkness up the kitchen stairs. I don't remember opening it.

But I can hear them singing.

And this time, I know all the words.

The first step down feels like falling.

My bare feet know these stairs—seventeen worn wooden frames, each one crying out beneath my weight. But tonight, they feel different. Softer. Almost fluid. The darkness below pulses like it were conscious, and I swear I can see filaments of pearly light weaving through it, reaching up toward me like hungry fingers.

"Freya." Mom's voice is clearer now. "Come sing with me, baby."

My hand trembles against the wall as I descend. The concrete floor at the bottom is ice-cold, but I barely notice. Because there's the door again—that impossible door—exactly where it was before. It seems bigger now, its dark wood swirling with patterns that weren't there the

first time. Or maybe I just hadn't noticed them before. They look almost like faces, these patterns. Familiar faces.

The singing swells, and I recognize the melody from my dreams—the ones I've been having every night since my first visit. In them, I'm always five years old again, sitting on Mom's lap while she brushes my hair and hums this very tune. But in the dreams, when she leans down to kiss my forehead, her face is smooth and blank.

"It doesn't hurt," the faceless woman's voice joins Mom's. "Becoming. Belonging. We've been waiting so long for you."

My hand finds the doorknob. The metal burns cold against my palm, but I don't let go. Because I've realized something in these past two weeks of resistance: the singing isn't just calling to me. It's already inside me. Has been since the day I was born, maybe even before. Every lullaby Mom ever sang, every bedtime story she whispered—they were all rhythms of this song. Preparation. Practice.

The door swings open at my touch, lighter than air. The tunnel beyond is wider now, its pearly walls rippling and glittering like the surface of a pond on a sunny day. The air smells of vanilla and something else—something older, like earth after rain or wood buried deep.

I step through.

No crawling this time. The tunnel seems to draw me forward, its walls pulsing in time with my heartbeat. Or maybe it's my heartbeat matching their tempo. It's hard to tell where I end and the singing begins.

The circular chamber opens up before me, vast as a cathedral now. The faceless woman stands in its center, but she's not alone. They're all here—my grandmother who died before I was born, my great-aunt whose name was never spoken, cousins and ancestors I know only from the whispers of their songs. Their faces press through the walls, no longer trapped behind them but emerging, taking shape, singing.

And there, in the front—

"Mom?"

She turns, and for a moment she's exactly as I remember her from before: beautiful, whole, her blue eyes bright with love. Then I blink, and her face is smooth and perfect and blank, like a canvas waiting to be painted.

"It's better this way," she says, holding out her arms. "No more pain. No more forgetting. Just the song, forever and ever."

I think of Dad, alone in our big empty house. I think of my friends at school, of sunlight and homework and all the normal things that seemed so important just hours ago. I think of Mom's last lucid moment, trying to warn me about the very thing I'm facing now.

But mostly, I think about the song. How it feels like coming home. How it feels like truth.

I open my mouth, and the first note rises from somewhere deep inside me. It's perfect, pure, and exactly the right pitch to match their harmony. As I sing, I feel it happening—the change starting at the edges of my face, smooth and cool like water washing away everything unnecessary. Everything human.

Behind me, the tunnel seals itself shut. I won't need it anymore. None of us will, until the next daughter is born, until the next voice is ready to join our choir.

We sing together, my family and I, our voices pitching through the earth, through the foundations of houses built on ancient ground, through the dreams of other girls who carry our blood. Some of them will resist like Mom tried to do. Some will run like I almost did.

But in the end, they'll all come home. They'll all sing with us.

Because that's what we are, what we've always been: not just a family, but a song that never ends. An appetite that's never satiated. A choir that grows with each generation, calling through the walls, through time itself, until every voice that belongs to us is finally here.

I reach up to touch my face—smooth now, perfect now—and smile with a mouth I no longer have.

The song goes on.

And somewhere above, in a house that's no longer mine, a man I once called father wakes from a nightmare, thinking he hears his wife and daughter singing in the dark.

But by then, of course, it's far too late.