

# Opelousas Electric

Shome Dasgupta

Basin was in the dryer—perched in the backyard on a sunny day, just behind the clothesline, glittered with towels and bedsheets that created a colorful array of quilted ghosts, floating—peering through its opening with one hand covering the left half of his face, he saw the world in slits through the refracted gleams of the glass door.

“If you turn your head this way and that, it looks like we’re all tumbling,” he said with a voice full of adventure, as if talking to a friend.

Calais walked out through the back of the house—the grass prickled her bare feet, making her tiptoe toward a patchy spot in the yard. She looked around while the sun was on her back—freckled shoulders in constellation—calling out his name as a dragonfly whirled around her head.

The dryer rattled. Basin heard the faint sounds of music, head lifted like a pup, hearing those magical words.

“Ice cream,” he whispered.

The dryer shook as if it was alive.

“Get you out of there, short sweet,” Calais said.

“Dodo,” Basin called out. “Dodo, Dodo, Dodo, Dodo.”

Calais heard the distant music too—a pillow for the air, so it seemed on that April evening in Opelousas.

Dodo was the first word Basin started to mouth ten months after he had ventured into this tumbling world—this was when he was trying to call out for his father. Dada, but Dodo, and Dodo wasn’t around anymore—gone, dead. Dodo remained, though, as the name shifted over to his mother, fingers pressed against her chin, feeling her nose or ears, tracing his fingers around her neck—Dodo, he would mouth, Calais his only universe.

“Get you out of there.”

“Dodo, Dodo,” Basin echoed.

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“I know, short sweet. You coming?”

The dryer shook. Basin, making the machine come alive, opened its mouth and hopped out in one fluid motion and rolled toward his mother like a bent wheel. Then came a cartwheel.

“How long were you in there?” Calais asked, patting him on the back.

Basin hugged her knee.

“About a week,” he said.

“No you weren’t.”

“I promise.”

“What did you eat then?”

Basin scratched his cheek.

“Opossums and flowers.”

Calais scrunched her face.

“Yuck,” she said.

“Yuck,” Basin repeated.

A Doppler effect, and Basin twirled around, dizzying himself.

“Not wise, short sweet.”

“Iowa,” Basin said.

“What?”

“Ice cream,” Basin said.

Calais crouched down, and Basin clasped onto her back.

They met the ice cream truck on the corner of South Main Street, about a block away from their home—a string of hypnotized children, and Basin could recognize their looks of anticipation and joy, almost making him feel melancholy.

Basin tugged on Calais’s hand and pulled her aside.

“Dodo.”

“Hey, we’re out of the line, short sweet. What’s wrong, little thing?”

“Let’s wait, Dodo.”

“How come?”

Basin looked at the children who were standing in line behind them, picking and choosing and pointing at the pictures on the side of the truck, dreams full of splashed colors.

“I feel bad,” Basin said.

“Are you feeling bad?”

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Basin nodded.

“Is it your stomach or your head?”

Calais put the back of her hand against his forehead, gentle.

“Not like that, Dodo.”

“What is it, then?”

Basin looked down the road and waved at a cat fiddling around in a garden. A different kind of music could also be heard, mixed in with the melodies of the truck, zydeco on a Friday night. A bicyclist rode by, holding a bag from Raising Cane’s—Basin turned his attention toward the sky and saw a cloud of cupcakes, soothed by hues of pinks giving way to a yellow-and-orange bleached air—where the world ended, Basin gathered, he whispered nothing.

“I just want everyone to be happy, Dodo,” Basin said, playing with Calais’s fingers. “Let’s let them get their ice cream first, then we can have ours after.”

“You’re a little twinkle of twilight, little thing.”

And there was a twinkle in Basin’s eyes, hearing the loving voice of his mother, though he didn’t know what she meant.

They stepped aside and watched the line of children make their way, one by one, asking for this and that, counting out their quarters and dollars, their parents helping. By the time it cleared out, the sun was down, and the music coming from the ice cream truck matched the stars.

“Grandie,” Basin said.

He held a ten-dollar bill and looked around at all the pictures of ice cream.

Grandie wasn’t the name of the man in the truck—actually, no one knew his name—it was only Basin who called them that. Seldom did he call anyone by their actual names.

“Hey there, little Bass,” Grandie said. “Fancy this or fancy that?”

Basin gave him a high five.

“I got it,” the child said in a squeaky voice.

But before he ordered, he tugged on Calais’s hand.

“What do you want, Dodo?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m good, short sweet. You order what you want.”

“But Dodo, I can’t, not until you get an ice cream.”

SHOME DASGUPTA

Moments like those led Calais to see the world in a loving way. She whispered into Basin's ear.

"Grandie," Basin said.

"Yes, sir."

"Maybe one Strawberry Delight and one Fudge Fudge Delight?"

He took out two popsicles from the freezer and handed them to Basin.

"Grandie, do you have hot sauce?"

He pretended to look around the truck, shuffling about and making cluttering sounds.

"I'm all out, little Bass."

"Grandie, do you have any Tony's?"

Grandie pretended to look around again.

"Sorry, young sir."

"Thanks, Grandie."

Basin gave Calais the Strawberry Delight.

"This one's on me," Grandie said.

Another high five.

The music of the ice cream truck continued to play in Basin's head, hovering around, matching the magic of his night as they walked back home.

"Which one would Dodo have gotten, Dodo?" Basin asked.

"Definitely the Fudge Fudge Delight," Calais replied. "You two share the same sweet tooth."

"Sweet tooth," Basin echoed. "I like it."

He was back in the dryer. Calais sat outside on the rear porch as Basin's world tumbled and tossed around, licking the popsicle with one eye closed, tilting his head this way and that.

This was Calais's favorite kind of day, when she could relax in the backyard with Basin playing in the dryer, letting his imagination rumble. There was a time when Calais didn't know if she was going to make it. She and her boyfriend had Basin when they were only eighteen, after just graduating from Opelousas Catholic. Both she and Houma found themselves in a tough situation. Having strained relationships with their own parents, which was one of the reasons why she and Houma had found solace in each other, brought them close during their

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senior year of high school. Houma started off strong during Calais's pregnancy, finding a job as an electrician—quick to learn and skillful hands led him to stable income. Calais picked up shifts at the local bar. Its owner, Ledet, looked after her, giving her the Friday- and Saturday-night shifts and the Sunday-afternoon slots during football season.

With just a glance over her shoulder Calais found herself alone when Houma died while volunteering with the fire department. During the hurricane, he had gone to help an elderly family take shelter from their trailer, only for it to come crashing down in the winds, taking him away.

“Dodo,” Houma had said, just before he closed his eyes.

Using her shifts at the bar to fund her tuition at the T.H. Harris Campus, the community college led her, much like Houma, to become an electrician, which was now her profession, the town seeing her as one of the most reliable, kind technicians in the area.

“Basin,” Calais called out.

A dragonfly whirled around her head before making its way to the porch light. Basin had fallen asleep in the dryer again, his face—covered in dried chocolate from the ice cream—pressed against the gray metal of the machine. She pulled him out and carried him inside, on the couch.

“Wake you up, Basin, little thing.”

She tugged on his ear.

“Hot dog,” he said, yawning.

“You know it.”

A plain hot dog in a bun with Tony's sprinkled on it—that was all it took for Basin to enjoy his dinner. He sat on the carpet in front of the TV. It was off. Basin liked to watch television without it being on, pretending and imagining all that he saw on the screen, sometimes startling Calais when he giggled or shouted or jumped around with the creations in his head. Calais would sit next to him, looking at the blank screen and playing along.

This time, Basin was different, and there was a silence, which led to this sensation of sadness as he sat in front of the blank screen, eating his hot dog. Calais noticed tears as she sat down next to him.

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“Little child,” Calais said. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m just watching TV, Dodo.”

“What are you watching?”

“I’m watching Dodo.”

He wiped his face with his wrist, the other hand still holding the hot dog.

“Like me, Dodo or Dodo, Dodo?” Calais asked.

“Like Dodo, Dodo,” Basin replied.

“What’s he doing, short sweet?”

She put her hand on his back.

“He’s in the attic.”

Basin took a bite out of his dinner. Outside, the frogs were loud, almost as if they were generating energy for the rest of the world.

“What’s he doing in the attic?”

Basin turned his hot dog the other way around and bit from the uneaten end.

“He’s fixing the house,” he said between his chews. “He’s holding wires and connecting them, Dodo, and he’s pushing switches, Dodo, and he’s wearing a brown cap.”

How would he know this, Calais wondered. Her son was too young to recognize that his father was an electrician, and not only that, but also that he wore a brown cap when he went to work, a hat that Calais had given him as a gift.

“These are memories,” Basin said.

“He loves you so much,” Calais said, her voice in a hush.

“I know. I miss him.”

“He misses you too. I miss him too, little thing.”

Calais kissed him on the top of his head, just where his hair parted, and just as she tapped his nose with her index finger, the power went out.

“Dodo,” Basin said.

Calais looked around the living room. She leaned back and looked into the kitchen—at the microwave, which was blank, no time.

“Must be something,” Calais said. “Just sit put. Finish your dinner, then stay in this room.”

“I love you, Dodo.”

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“Oh, I love you as big as the galaxy.”

That was Basin’s favorite word, and Calais could see his teeth. She walked out front, and there was no light.

“So it’s not just us.”

She looked around and didn’t see any movement. The frogs echoed in her head, a dragonfly whizzed by.

“You still there, Basin?” Calais called out.

“I’m sleeping in the dark,” he replied.

“You keep doing that.”

Inside, Calais took out her phone, and there was a notification. It was from the City of Opelousas, a warning that there was an escape—an alert. A photo was attached to the message, someone Calais recognized from her time at the bar. He wasn’t a regular but would pop in from time to time. She remembered him to be nice, though, clean-shaven with a hint of cologne. He was handsome.

“You keep sleeping in the dark, short sweet,” Calais said.

“I’m still sleeping in the dark, Dodo.”

Calais pulled out a baseball bat from her closet. She went to the kitchen and pulled out a steak knife—all of the other ones, she hid. A hammer in one pocket and a screwdriver in the other.

“Basin,” she whispered.

“I’m pretending to sleep,” he whispered back.

“Get you to the spaceship. Real quick. Get you to the spaceship until I come get you.”

She heard a shuffling and the door whine. Through the window, she saw his motion, entering the dryer.

“Shut it,” she whispered, hoping he’d somehow understand.

He did.

She sat in the kitchen, the bat leaning against her knee, looking through the window.

Then it happened.

There was a tap on the screen door, like it was in rhythm, almost in a beat which Calais once knew. She remained still, grasping the bat.

“Houma, honey, I need that electricity, dear,” she whispered.

The screen door swung open, the same knock on the wooden door.

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*What is that? Why do I know that knock?*

She remained still. The knocking continued. It was quiet, nothing rushed or loud. Calais didn't know why, she couldn't understand what made her want to, but with the bat in one hand and the knife in the other, she walked to the door, putting her ear against it.

More knocking, still in rhythm.

"What?" Calais said.

A quiet voice: "I need some help, ma'am."

"Are you trouble?" Calais asked, taking a step back.

"I'm not trouble, ma'am."

"I have a knife and a bat."

"I understand, ma'am."

She unlocked the door and took a few more steps back.

"Come in."

The knob turned, and the door creaked open—a silhouette inside a shadow as the man walked in.

"You can stay put right there," she said. "Just at the front."

A dragonfly flew behind him.

"I'm hurt, ma'am."

"You're Renee, right?"

"That's right."

"I know you from the bar, some time ago."

"Is that so, ma'am?"

"It's so."

Renee turned on a flashlight and shone it at the floor, then he turned it around to reveal his face, bloodied and ruined.

"That's not good."

"No, ma'am."

Calais couldn't stop thinking about it.

"That knock, why'd you knock like that?"

"Houma taught me."

"Houma."

"Yes, ma'am."

"What do you know about Houma?"

"He saved my life once."

Calais told him where to shine the flashlight.



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“You sit right there.”

“Is Basin good?”

“He’s not here. You’re in trouble. You know that, right? They’ll be here soon.”

“I’m sure, ma’am.”

The softness in his voice, almost welcoming despite the situation, made Calais feel a bit more relaxed, even though she still held the knife and the bat.

“I had to come see you,” he said. “For Houma.”

Calais pictured Houma’s face—one big flash, a gleaming smile and a loud laugh. She missed that laugh.

“I got something for you, ma’am.”

“For me?”

“For Basin, ma’am, it’s from Houma.”

“Now how’s that? He’s dead now.”

“Yes, ma’am. I was there, ma’am.”

Calais started to breathe hard. She was feeling dizzy.

“At the house,” he continued, “I heard his last words.”

Calais stumbled a bit before regaining her strength.

“Dodo,” Renee said.

“Dodo,” Calais said, a trace of a smile.

Renee put his hand in his pocket, which made Calais flinch, but there was nothing. He pulled out a photo and held out his hand for her to take it.

“Hold it up, and shine your light on it.”

Renee did as she said. Calais, with all the strange energy inside of her, felt like she was seeing a ghost—a ghost of Houma through the photo that Houma was holding up to her. It was a picture of a galaxy. Calais remembered Houma buying the postcard from the museum, just after Basin was born.

“He wrote a note on it, ma’am, on the back. It’s for Basin. He told me to give it to him five years after his funeral, if he wasn’t going to make it, that is.”

Renee told her that before Houma had passed away, that he had always kept the postcard in his pocket in case something happened to him when he was volunteering for the fire department.

“This was such the occasion,” Renee said.

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It was exactly five years since Houma's funeral service. She grabbed the postcard with her knife hand and took a step back.

"I promise I'm no trouble," Renee said.

Calais believed him.

"I broke out just for this. I promise, ma'am."

"What did you do?"

"I just needed some money, ma'am. It's been tough the past few years. That's all."

Calais took in a deep breath. *I miss you, Houma, but here you are, right here in my pocket—a galaxy.* She walked to the counter and set down the knife and bat. Calais pulled open a drawer next to the fridge and took out some cotton, rubbing alcohol, and gauze—all easily accessible for those days when Basin would jump off the oak in the front yard.

"Let me fix you," she said.

"Thank you, ma'am."

Renee didn't wince or fidget as he felt the sting of the rubbing alcohol or the gauze pressing against his face. Soon after she poured him a glass of water.

"Thank you, ma'am."

He drank it in one gulp. His shadow, almost like a life in its own, vibrated against the wall from the shine of the flashlight. Calais's hands trembled.

"You should get," she said. "I'd gather they're all out looking for you."

"No need, ma'am. I'll be going back. I just wanted to keep my promise. That's all."

"You take care of yourself."

Calais's own shadow, the core of her body, was hesitant in its breathing against the kitchen tiles.

"Thank you, Renee," she said.

With a click, he was gone.

When Calais walked out to the dryer, she heard Basin laughing. The air was dark. An unusual quiet of the town settled in, just Basin and his laughter. She knocked on the door.

"You're still awake now, aren't you, sugar?"

"Dodo, Dodo. Good night, Dodo."

*OPELOUSAS ELECTRIC*

“We’ll get you back inside, short sweet, but I have a photo for you, a postcard from far, far away.”

“Dodo.”

“That’s right, little thing, Dodo.”

Using only the glow of the moon and the tint of the stars, holding it up, Calais read Houma’s message to Basin, her face, much like the morning dew to arrive in a few hours. Basin listed. He lay still in the dryer, head poked out and leaning on his mother’s shoulder, her back against the machine. As she read, the power came back on, the city hum intact. Calais continued on in a low voice, deep breaths in between, lips unstable. She was able to finish, and there was a silence. A dragonfly whirled around Calais’s head as Basin put his hand on her shoulder.

“Dodo,” he whispered, tugging on her hair. “That’s Dodo, right, Dodo?”

“From far, far away, sweet short. He loves you. From far, far away.”

“He’s in the galaxy,” Basin whispered.

Calais leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. She kept her head back, and Basin twirled his body around, head still poking out of the dryer, both facing the sky, and on that night, that very strange night, Opelousas was electric.