

A woman in a vibrant blue, short-sleeved, button-down dress with a black belt stands in front of a building at sunset. She is holding a black handbag in her right hand and a brown suitcase in her left. The scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of the setting sun, creating a nostalgic and elegant atmosphere.

The House of Eve

a novel

Sadeqa Johnson

Author of *Yellow Wife*

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THE HOUSE OF EVE

BY SADEQA JOHNSON

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For my Mother and her Mother

In loving memory of Paula Marise Johnson

PART ONE

*Each story has a monster in it who made them tough instead of
brave, so they open their legs rather than their hearts where the
folded child is tucked.*

—Toni Morrison

CHAPTER ONE

Philadelphia, October 1948

MOMMIES AND DRAGONS

Ruby

My grandma Nene always said that early was on time, on time was late, and late was unacceptable. Fatty was unacceptably late again. Knowing full well that I had some place important to be. I didn't mind staying with Grandma Nene overnight once a week so that Fatty could clean offices. All I asked was that she be home in time for me to catch the bus to my Saturday enrichment classes. And for the third week in a row, Fatty dragged her heavy feet through Nene's apartment door fifteen minutes behind schedule, calling out in her high-pitched voice, "Ruby girl, I'm sorry. Let me tell you what happened."

My cousin had more excuses than a hoe going to jail, and I didn't have time to entertain her colorful tales this morning. I had one hour to get all the way down to South Philly, and I twisted up my lips in a way that I hoped conveyed how annoyed I was over her lack of consideration.

"You got my carfare?" I thrust my hand in her face, but Fatty brushed past me in the narrow hallway, past the crooked family pictures that hung in mismatched frames, through to the small L-shaped kitchen. I stomped behind her as she snatched back her pageboy wig and tossed it on the counter.

"Your mother said she'd leave it for you."

A baby cockroach scurried from under the toaster, and Fatty smashed it dead with her palm.

“You gonna make me walk all the way back in the opposite direction? Just give me twenty cents.”

“I would if I could,” she said, scrubbing her hands at the apron sink. “But I’m broke as a joke girl until next Friday.”

My scalp heated. “Grandma ain’t got no money round here? What if my mother forgot?”

“Chile, I talked to Inez last night, she said she would. Now quit wearing out my nerves. If you leave now, you’ll make it.” Fatty reached into the icebox and cracked open a can of Schlitz. She tipped it to her lips and took a long swallow, then exhaled in a way that suggested that she had been thirsting for that beer her whole way home. After another hungry swig, she undid the buttons to her blue uniform down to her waist. The rolls around her middle sighed with relief.

“Did Nene take her medicine?”

I snatched up my school bag, nodding my head with frustration. “She’s been sleep twenty minutes. Her next eye dosage is at eleven.”

With the front door open, I could smell scrapple frying from the new neighbor’s apartment on the first floor. She had twin babies who kept up a chorus of crying all night long. “I’m not doing this for you no more.”

Fatty belched, then called after me, “I said I was sorry. Damn girl, what you want? Blood?”

I slammed the door in response, then felt bad, hoping I hadn’t disturbed Nene.

The piece of toast I had prepared for my journey was now cold and stiff with butter. I shoved the bread in my mouth as I ran down the two flights of stairs and out onto 28th Street. A dampness clung to the air from last night’s rain, and I had to sidestep wet leaves that had gathered in potholes.

I had been marked tardy for the last three weeks in a row, and Mrs. Thomas said if I was late to one more enrichment class, she was writing me up. I wondered if Fatty was messing with my future on purpose. Everyone, even Fatty, knew how prestigious it was to be selected to participate in the Armstrong Association’s *We Rise* program. As one of twelve Negro students chosen from across the city of Philadelphia, I was competing to receive a full four-year scholarship to Cheyney University, the oldest historically Negro college in the country. To earn it, I had to be impeccable in every way, and

being on time was a requirement. If I wasn't awarded the scholarship, I could forget all about going to college for optometry. No one in my family had been to college, nor could they afford to send me. I refused to let Fatty's disregard for time muddy up my future. Especially since she hadn't even finished high school.

Out on Columbia Avenue I passed by the Temple of God, where women dressed in white from head to toe stood greeting the congregation by the storefront entrance. It was the only church in the neighborhood that met on Saturday mornings, and I avoided eye contact, lest one of the women think I was curious about being saved by their Lord and try coaxing me to join them.

I hurried on, rounding the corner onto 33rd Street. In the middle of the block, I could see four men huddled in folding chairs in front of Process Willie's barbershop. A backgammon set hunkered between two of them, and they all clung to paper cups, probably sipping brown liquor that kept them warm so early in the morning. Their wrinkled clothes and befuddled expressions suggested that they had been carrying on all night long, and I knew that meant trouble.

I buttoned up my jumbo knit sweater hoping that would make me invisible to them. But I wasn't fast enough. As soon as I stepped down off the curb, I heard the first one call.

"Girl, you fine enough to make a grown man cry."

The one next to him grinned wide enough for me to see that he was missing a tooth. "Yes, Lawd. Shaped like a Coca-Cola bottle. Got me thirsting for a drink."

"Bet she taste sweet like candy, too."

The one closest to me reached for my hand, but I sidestepped it.

"Whatcha in a rush for? Big Daddy got everything you need right here."

I shot him the most evil eye I could muster as I slipped past them. The men continued to wolf whistle, and I could feel their eyes fixed on my behind. It was times like this I wished there was a button that would erase me. Not to die or nothing. Just so I wouldn't exist. At the very least, I'd like to take a pin to my oversized tits and pop them like water balloons. Making me flat like a pancake, and as boring to watch as a teacup. Maybe then my mother would see me for who I was and stop calling me out my name.

We lived in a rented apartment on the corner of 33rd and Oxford. It was the third place we had called home in the past two years. Across the street from us was a huge park that we wouldn't dare venture into. The closest I got to the lush greens was from our front porch, where I sat in a rusty folding chair and watched red-faced men play golf, their blonde wives parked with their children and packed snacks on nearby blankets, blasting the latest hits by Tony Bennett and Percy Faith.

Skipping up the cement steps of our redbrick building, I fumbled for the keys around my neck. None of the doorbells ever worked, and I had to jimmy my key in the deadbolt several times before it turned. Whenever it rained, the door jammed and I had to shove the heavy wood with my shoulder to pry it open. As I moved up the creaky stairs two at a time, I could feel my blouse sticking to my back. Whenever I got nervous, my face and back broke out into an annoying sweat. The bus would arrive in twenty minutes, which gave me time to change into another top that didn't need pressing and sneak some of Inez's perfume.

The front door of our apartment opened into the canary-colored kitchen, and I smelled a cigarette burning. I dabbed the sleeve of my sweater against my forehead and swallowed down my unease.

Inez always left money for me in the same hiding place: wrapped in a paper towel and slipped between two steak knives in a kitchen drawer. I slid open the drawer, breathing a sigh of relief when I saw the napkin. My fingers curled around it, but it felt light. I shook the tissue free, then moved the other knives around, hoping the money had slipped out somehow. But found nothing.

A new wave of sweat moistened my hairline as I tried to think of what to do next. There was no loose change laying around the apartment; I had used the spare coins last week when Inez hadn't left the money. I had no idea how long it would take for me to walk from North Philly to South Philly, but just the thought of crossing the city on foot made my head hurt.

My unsteady fingers gripped the upholstery stuffing that was loose in the kitchen chair, trying to make a plan, when Leap, my mother's latest boyfriend, strolled into the kitchen with a cigarette fastened between his nicotine-stained teeth.

"What are you doing here?" fell from my lips.

He cocked his head at me. "You my woman now, too?"

“You usually at the barber shop on Saturday morning.”

Leap drifted to the sink and turned on the faucet. He let the water gush out for a few seconds, and then he picked up a glass from the dish rack and filled it. While he sipped, his eyes roamed over me. Leap’s wandering eyes always made me self-conscious. Usually I avoided him as best I could, but in that moment I didn’t look away.

A baby-blue satin scarf was tied around the sides of his processed hair, knotted at his forehead. He had smooth, cherrywood-colored skin. A rope chain hung from his neck, and his T-shirt was untucked from his drawstring pants. He thought he looked like Nat King Cole, but he wasn’t nearly as cute.

The kitchen felt cramped and hot with both of us standing there. Leap leaned over the table and tapped his cigarette into the glass ashtray that sat among scattered bills. I could hear the wall clock ticking, and the toilet running from down the hall. Leap had forgotten to jiggle the toilet handle again after he flushed.

“What you in here rummaging around for?”

“My mother said she’d leave twenty cents for my carfare down to Lombard Street. You seen it?”

“Naw.” He dragged.

“Well, can you loan it to me till she get back?”

A slight smirk played on his face. “What you gonna do for me?”

My bus arrived in ten minutes, and I could hear each precious second ticking away on the kitchen clock.

“What you want?” I chewed on my fingernail, spitting out flecks of pink polish.

Leap stamped out his cigarette. “A kiss.”

“Huh?” My stomach sank so low I forgot to breathe.

“Just a quick one. No harm in that, and I’ll give you a quarter.” He flashed me a smile. His gold crown glinted from the upper right side of his mouth.

That was ten cents each way, plus five cents extra for a pretzel and juice on our break. Inez never gave me extra for food. I usually just sat in class hungry. My schoolbag had gotten heavy; I hadn’t realized I was still holding it.

The stress of it all was getting the best of me. I was desperate to get to my classes, determined to earn my scholarship, so that I could stop depending on Inez’s creepy boyfriends to keep a roof over our heads.

“Just a peck?” My voice cracked, hating that I was in this position, and Inez even more for putting me in it.

“Yeah.”

“On the cheek?”

He reached into his pocket and flipped the quarter in the air with his thumb and pointer finger, caught it and slammed it down on the table. “The lips.”

I shivered.

Leap folded his hands behind his back, squinting his eyes the way I saw him do to Inez when he wanted her to give him some sugar, as he called it. Shame flooded through me. Gulping down my nerves, I willed my feet to move around the chrome kitchen table toward him.

The only thing standing between me and getting to the program on time was a kiss. A measly little kiss. I could do this. When I closed my eyes and leaned up, I could smell a mixture of last night’s whiskey and this morning’s cigarettes reeking from him. I held back my gag.

Leap pressed his thick lips against mine and my knees knocked against each other. In an instant I felt his slimy tongue force my lips open. When I tried to pull away, Leap cupped one hand over my left breast and used the other hand to grab my behind, tilting me up against him. I squirmed but he just held me tighter, thrusting his thing up against my thigh over my skirt.

“Stop,” I whined, pressing my elbows against his waist, trying to free myself. But his grip was unbreakable.

Just then, the front door swung open. Leap stumbled back and pushed me away, but he wasn’t quick enough. Inez’s big eyes roved between us like a madwoman’s.

“What the hell?” she shouted, dropping the brown grocery bag. I heard something crack as it hit the linoleum floor.

Leap backed farther away from me with his hands up, like she was the police. “She came on to me. Talking about needing bus fare. All up on me before I could stop her.”

“Liar,” I hissed. “It was you.”

“Get the fuck out of here.” My mother put her arm in the air like she was firing a warning shot. Soft tendrils from her ponytail had come loose. We shared the same walnut-colored skin tone, but hers had turned apple red.

I turned to Leap, waiting to see how he'd react, glad that my mother was finally taking my side. But then I realized: she was looking at me. She was speaking to me. I was the one she blamed. Her eyes sliced into me like a butcher knife.

“Now! Fast ass.”

I palmed the quarter, and when I got to the front door, she pushed me in the back of my head. “Got no business all up in my man's face. Stay in a child's place.”

She slammed the door behind me so hard that the impact shook the hinges. I stumbled down the steep steps, reaching for the banister to catch myself from falling. Once outside I tried to shake the whole scene from my mind, but I kept feeling Leap's fingers clawing me, kept feeling Inez's fury burn my chest, as I ran the three blocks to the bus stop.

About a half block away, I could see the bus pull over to the curb, and I ran faster, pumping my knees under my skirt as my bag slapped hard against my hip. I called out, waving my hands to get the driver's attention. A few feet away, the door cranked closed, but I was near enough to bang on the metal siding with my fist.

“Please, wait!” I hollered.

But the bus driver pulled away from the curb like he didn't hear me. Like I didn't matter. Like I didn't exist. I hurled my schoolbag to the ground, then bent over and spit the overwhelming taste of Leap from my mouth.

CHAPTER TWO

Washington, D.C., October 1948

THE LINE

Eleanor

Eleanor bustled across Howard University's campus, clutching the letter in her right hand. The return stamp was crested with the Alpha Beta Chi emblem, so she knew it was what she'd been waiting for: a response to her interest letter to join the sorority.

She had watched the girls move about campus with prominence all of last year. They were glamorous, always with their matching lavender scarves, tight knit sweaters, sleek high heels and glossy curls. They did meaningful work, like organize mobile book drives for children in the rural South, draw picket signs to support Mary Church Terrell in her tireless fight to end segregation in public accommodations and collect food for the poor. But most importantly, they were the baddest steppers on the yard. When they twirled their pretty heads, called out, stomped and clapped, everyone stopped at attention. While there were other sororities on campus, it was clear that the ladies in silver and lavender were the pinnacle of the pile, and Eleanor, now a sophomore and finally eligible, was eager to join them.

She moved across the lawn, careful not to walk over students studying or relaxing on the grass between classes, and dodged up the steps to her dormitory, accidentally trampling on a young man's boat-sized foot.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she shouted over her shoulder as she hastened down the first-floor corridor to her room on the left.

Her heart was beating fast with anticipation, and she tried to steady herself by placing the letter over her chest. This *had* to be her invitation. The one that would change her life. Make her shiny instead of dull. Popular instead of overlooked. A part of a vibrant group instead of plain and solo.

She did not know where the funds would come from for her initiation fees; after all, the money for books and supplies for the past three semesters had bled her parents dry. But the details didn’t matter. She’d figure it out. Eleanor’s fingers shook as they slid under the flap of the linen envelope, loosening the glue on the seal. A matching piece of stationery slipped into her hand.

October 01, 1948

Dear Miss Quarles,

Thank you so much for your application and inquiry for the sorority Alpha Beta Chi. We appreciate your dedication and enthusiasm for our members and mission. Although you have great spirit, we had a strong pool of applicants and cannot offer you a place on line this year. Please keep up your community presence, study hard, and we invite you to try again next year.

Yours in sisterhood,

Greta Hepburn

President of Alpha Beta Chi, Incorporated

Eleanor’s vision went blurry and she blinked several times before reading the letter again, this time more slowly. She mined through each word, searching for it to say the opposite of what she’d first read. By the third time through, her eyes were warm with tears. She hadn’t read it wrong; she’d been rejected. Eleanor was crumpling the letter in her hand just as her roommate, Nadine Sherwood, burst through the door.

“Why do you look like someone died?”

Eleanor flung the crumpled correspondence into Nadine’s gloved hand. After smoothing it out and dragging her eyes over it, Nadine dropped the sheet

into the wastepaper basket next to the chest of drawers.

"I could have spared you the trouble if I had known you were going out for the ABCs. Why didn't you tell me?" She removed her wool suit jacket while simultaneously kicking out of her peep-toe heels.

"I wanted to surprise you."

"Honey, everyone knows they only pick girls with hair straight as a ruler, and skin paler than a paper bag. Where have you been?" Nadine took a seat on her twin bed, tapping her gold cigarette case. "Sometimes you act like Ohio was another planet."

Eleanor had heard those rumors before about the ABCs, but she had written them off as just that. One because it was just plain foolish to judge a girl's worth by her skin color, and two because she knew at least two girls who'd got in and did not fit that description. "Millicent's an ABC and she's a shade browner than me."

"Millicent's daddy is a judge. She comes from old money." Nadine lit up her Chesterfield. "Her mother is an ABC, and both of her parents attended Howard. It's called legacy."

Eleanor hadn't realized that. This way of life was all new to her. She turned from Nadine and studied herself in the wall mirror that hung to the right of the door. Her eyes were still stained with tears. She had warm bronze skin, a broad nose, high cheekbones and a decent head of hair. That's how her mother, Lorraine, always referred to it when she ran the hot comb through it every Sunday before church. Eleanor had been told that she was good-looking, but she'd never considered her skin color a plus or a negative. It just *was*.

Honestly, she hadn't even known that Negroes separated themselves by color until she stepped foot onto the all-Negro university's campus a year ago. Eleanor's house in Ohio was wedged between Italians and Germans; a Polish family lived just up the block. The Negroes in her hometown were too busy getting along with everyone to pit themselves against each other.

"What am I going to do now?"

"Forget about those stuck-up hussies and come to the dance with me tonight."

Eleanor blew out her breath. That was Nadine's response to everything. Go to a party. It was a wonder how she got any studying done at all.

"I have to work."

“You are always working. College is supposed to be the time of your life and you never let loose. I don’t think you’ve been to a good party all year.”

“I have to keep my grades up. My parents didn’t work their butts off to get me here to waste it away doing the Lindy Hop, Nadine.”

Eleanor wanted to add, *I wasn’t born with a silver spoon in my mouth like you*, but Nadine didn’t deserve that. She had always been sweet to Eleanor, never making bones about their differences.

Nadine got up and thrust open the closet they shared, though the reality was that almost everything in it was Nadine’s. After pushing around a few tailored frocks, A-line skirts and silky blouses, Nadine tossed a scoop-neck dress onto Eleanor’s bed.

“I can’t fit into this anymore. Looks like it’s just your size.”

Eleanor pressed her lips together to keep them from breaking into a smile. It was a beauty. Belted at the waist. The perfect blush color. Satiny material soft to the touch.

“Stop trying to tempt me.” She turned away.

“Dancing will release those blues from your bones.” Nadine teased her, crossing the tiny room back to her bed. “And just so you know, no one does the Lindy Hop anymore.”

Eleanor shook her head and reached under her bed for her one good pair of wedged shoes. After a year of wearing them a half size too small, they had finally stretched out to being somewhat comfortable. Her shift started in thirty minutes, and with the library on the other side of campus, she needed to get moving.

Stubbing out her cigarette, Nadine fixed her with those haughty eyes. “I’m not taking no for an answer.”

Eleanor caught herself sizing up Nadine’s slender features. If what Nadine said was true about the ABCs, she could have easily checked the hair and complexion box requirements, though she didn’t appear the least bit interested in social clubs. Nadine had lived in Washington, D.C., all her life and didn’t have to work as hard as Eleanor to fit in. Her last name opened doors for her, without her having to lift a finger to make a single connection for herself.

“I better go.”

“Tonight. Ohio,” she hummed her pet name for Eleanor. “I’m going to wait for you to return, and then hound you until you put on that dress.”

“I didn’t even put in for a pass to go out this evening.”

“I’ll take care of the dorm matron,” Nadine shot back.

Eleanor nodded in exasperation, and then closed the door behind her. How could she focus on going to a party when her confidence was so injured? Eleanor couldn’t remember the last time she wanted something as much as she’d wanted to join the ABCs. She had worked extra hard on her application, spending over a week on perfecting it. Her GPA was well above the requirement, and she had volunteered several times at Harrison Elementary school for her community service. What was worse, it had been the first time she had put herself out there, after that trouble she had gotten herself into her senior year of high school. Only for it to blow up in her face. On paper she looked like the model candidate.

Not in the mirror, you aren’t.

She picked up her pace, trying to dampen the flicker of self-doubt that had started whispering to her when she arrived at the university. In her distraction, she wandered through the Founder’s Square, treading over the university’s limestone seal. It was believed that if you walked over the mark without reading it, you’d earn a semester of bad luck. Eleanor stopped. She couldn’t take any more bad luck.

The campus library was just ahead, and Eleanor walked through the doors and up the marble steps to the second floor. Her boss, Dorothy Porter, stood on the other side of the glass wall in the collection room, holding a magnifying glass to her eye. Her tight curls were pushed away from her forehead, and she wore a polka-dot dress that hit below her knees.

“Has a new flat arrived?” Eleanor asked as she dropped her bag.

The collection room was always kept cool and dry, providing a stable environment for the assemblage of rare manuscripts, pamphlets and books that Mrs. Porter curated in her role as an archivist.

“It’s a letter written from James Forten, of Philadelphia, addressed to William Lloyd Garrison, dated December 31, 1830,” she spoke in a hushed voice, as if talking at full volume would destroy the delicate paper in her hand.

Eleanor read over Mrs. Porter’s shoulder, knowing from working with her for the last year that she dare not touch the naked sheet without washing her hands.

“Forten was a wealthy Negro sailmaker. A stunning piece to add to our manuscript puzzle.” Mrs. Porter’s eyes shone. “I’ll need you to codify this.”

“Freeman. Biography. Philadelphia?” Eleanor looked at her boss expectantly.

“Yes, and then by decade and gender.”

Mrs. Porter slipped the flat paper into a clear polyester film sleeve and then passed it on to Eleanor. “We have a private viewing of biographies and portraits for a donor in Boston next month. I’d like your suggestion on which pieces we should display.”

Eleanor whipped her head toward Mrs. Porter in surprise. This was a first, and it patted a layer of salve over the sting from the sorority’s rejection letter. Mrs. Porter was very protective of “her collection” that she had spent two decades amassing, and her zeal for her work was astonishing.

Eleanor had arrived at Howard as an English major with the mind that she would become a teacher, but that had changed only a few weeks into her first semester, when she’d first met Mrs. Porter.

Eleanor had been studying in the library when a voice behind her asked, “Would you mind lending me a hand, dear?” A woman—Mrs. Porter—had stood in a plaid suit with a bulky shopping bag in each hand. Eleanor had taken the heaviest one from her and followed her up to the Moorland Room.

“Careful with that.” Mrs. Porter chastised her when Eleanor thumped the bag on the table. “You never know what treasures can be found on the floors of people’s basements.”

The contents in the bag were odorous, but that didn’t sway Mrs. Porter from gently going through all the pieces with the care of a mother hen. There were letters, a diary, photographs, dusty books, rusty trinkets and newspaper clippings. Eleanor asked Mrs. Porter what the assortment was for as she had a propensity for antiquated things.

“My goal is to build a collection that would reflect all of our history. Comprehensive Negro history.” Mrs. Porter beamed.

Her enthusiasm was contagious, and after just a few moments together, Mrs. Porter asked, “Have you read *Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl*?”

“By Harriet Jacobs? It’s one of my favorites.” Eleanor grinned. She had been a self-proclaimed history hound since her eighth-grade teacher introduced her

to the writings of Claude McKay, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and her husband, Paul Laurence Dunbar.

Mrs. Porter had instructed Eleanor to put on a pair of white gloves and then placed a weathered newspaper clipping in her hands. Eleanor had looked from the piece between her fingers to Mrs. Porter with her mouth agape.

Mrs. Porter confirmed. “An original advertisement for Jacobs’s capture. It ran in the *American Beacon* newspaper on July 4, 1835, in Norfolk, Virginia.”

Chills surfaced up Eleanor’s arms as she pored over the ad offering a \$100 reward for Harriet Jacobs’s apprehension and delivery. Unexpected tears welled in Eleanor’s eyes as she recalled Jacobs hiding in an attic of her grandmother’s house for seven long years before finally escaping north to freedom. Eleanor’s gaze locked with Mrs. Porter’s as an understanding passed between them. From that moment on, Eleanor was hooked. Before her first semester was over, she changed her major to history, with the goal of becoming a library archivist, just like Mrs. Porter.

Curating a collection was a first step and she responded brightly, “I have a few ideas.”

“Wonderful. I’ve left a stack of card indexes for you at the circulation desk that need cataloguing. I’ll be in my office charming away monetary donations.”

Mrs. Porter picked up several new bags brimming with books and headed up to the third floor. When Eleanor arrived at the circulation desk, she found the list of patrons with overdue books who needed to be telephoned. Between the calls and Mrs. Porter’s assignments, she had more than enough work to keep her mind occupied.

The library was the most peaceful place on campus, especially for someone like Eleanor, who had grown to prefer the company of books to people. Though deep down she knew that she desired both, which is why she wanted to join the ABCs, and the new wave of rejection tugged her bottom lip into a pout. Perhaps she should consider going to the party with Nadine. It had been a long time since she dressed up and she had always loved to dance. But no, she had several chapters to read for her philosophy class. The time she’d spent working on her application for the ABCs had put her dreadfully behind on her studies. And it had all been for nothing. Eleanor cast that thought aside and turned to her library work.