

## **After Algae Day**

By Aparna Kapur

### Part 1

I never used to be scared of the dark. But that was before Algae Day.

I got a whiff of something wet and muddy at the front door. Where was it coming from? It was too sunny, even for a summer morning. The smell followed me everywhere. It was earthy and alive and, by the end of the day, I'd grown fond of it. I'm not a very curious person so I soon stopped worrying about its origin.

At the end of the day, it had gotten stronger. Maybe it was saying goodbye. But when my head touched my pillow, I instantly recoiled. I turned on the light and that's when I saw that my pillow was green and slimy and sopping wet. It had been dry and clean a minute ago, I was sure of it. I bent towards the green thing. Algae. Of course! That's what that smell was. But how did it get here? There was no water body nearby and, even if there was, there certainly was no water body in my room. Did someone place it on my pillow? Who would do that? I lived only with my mother and she was not one for practical jokes.

I needed to know what had happened. Maybe, I thought, as I washed my pillow cover and changed the sheet, maybe I *was* a curious person after all. And that's when I first heard the voice.

Every night since Algae Day, I check my bed for anything green before I lie down. Every night, just as I'm about to close my eyes, I hear it.

A dry, cracking voice.

It always says the same one word.

“Lost.”

Yesterday, when I was walking to the kitchen for breakfast, I felt a squelch under my foot. But my slippers were dry, and so was the floor. I took off my slippers and I could still hear and feel a squelch with every step. I asked her but my mother had no idea what I was talking about. I was sure it was connected to the voice somehow. I was not hungry anymore. So I squelched back to my room.

I had been putting it off but I finally told Dia about the voice and the squelch and the algae.

“It’s a ghost! Got to be.” Dia believes in all sorts of things—telepathy, the loch ness monster, even auras. But ghosts are her favourite. “A spirit with unfinished business,” she likes to say.

I don't believe in ghosts, obviously. But something about that voice feels, well, not human. I tried sleeping with the light on but the voice hasn't gone away.

## Part 2

I'm not a dramatic person but things took a strange turn soon after I spoke to Dia. It started off small: clumpy leaf mulch on the windowsill first thing in the morning. I would clean it and it would be back by the following morning. It was always the same window—the one that faced the main

road behind my house. Then there were the puddles. I'd see muddy puddles dancing right at the edge of my vision and they would disappear as soon as I'd turn to look at them.

Then things escalated. I'd finish opening the windows or clearing up the kitchen, and I'd turn around to discover muddy bootprints on the floor. I didn't even *know* anyone who wore boots, let alone them being in the house. I'd never see them appear but I'd turn around and there they'd be—leading out from the back door towards the fields.

Another time, I was hanging my towel out to dry and *a dead fish* fell out of it. If anything can be called a 'last straw', it's a dead fish in my towel.

Dia was breathless when she came to see me days later. In a trembling voice, she insisted I follow her, and led me up the muddy hill around the field behind my house.

"What happened?" I asked her again. It was a hot day and dust rose with every step I took. I stopped at the top to try and catch a mild breeze and to take in the view. And there, in the bottom-left area of the field, a face was staring up at me. It was the ghost.

I recognised it right away. Maybe because it looked both lost and squelchy. Its wide stony eyes drooped downwards, its muddy mouth was open in a silent scream. All the plants around it had wilted. The mud looked grey.

“I knew what it was the moment I saw it. I told you that things fall sick around a ghost!” Dia said. I could see that she was right. But I didn’t tell her that. I just stared at the ghost. My ghost. Its irregular shape reminded me of something.

The ghost stared back at me. “Lost,” I heard. A chill ran down my spine.

### Part 3

“Unfinished business!” Dia said, for the eighteenth time. I thought I might start calling *her* unfinished business. First name ‘un’, last name ‘finished business’. I nodded my head instead. What did the ghost want from me? What did it mean ‘lost’? Was I meant to find it? I already knew where it was. In fact, I could not get it out of my head. I was seeing the ghost’s face all the time in my mind now. And I still heard its voice every night.

What if Dia was right? What if the only way to get rid of the ghost was to figure out what it wanted?

Unfinished business lies in the past, so I decided to look into the ghost’s past. The field didn’t really have a name but the past would be easy to find because it was right near the cricket stadium. I decided to ask the oldest person I knew.

“The stadium has been there for so many years,” Ali uncle said. “At one time, it used to be the only stadium. I used to stand on the roof and watch all the cricket games.” I looked at Ali uncle’s excited face. Some people really love cricket. “My house was in the newspaper once! When they had written

about a traffic jam that went on for two hours outside the stadium. It was after an India-Australia match.”

“Two hours?” I said. Ali uncle and I both laughed at that. Now, there was a two-hour traffic jam here every morning.

I found the newspaper article in the library. I looked at the photograph closely. I could just make out Ali uncle’s house in the background. I looked at the date. 17 years, 2 months and 12 days ago. I looked at the photograph again. There it was. The ghost. Except, it was not a ghost. In the picture, it was alive. Smiling. Very much not lost.

The photograph in the newspaper—grainy and old though it was—had a weird effect on me. I still saw the ghost’s face everywhere but it now seemed sad, not scary. I still heard the voice every night but it didn’t sound raspy and cold; it sounded choked. Then one day, I woke up in a cold sweat with the most clear-headed realisation. The ghost wasn’t haunting me; it was asking me for help.

I kept thinking back to the photograph, and the happy scene it depicted (despite the traffic jam).

When it was alive, the ghost was bustling and active and beautiful. What had happened? How did we manage to lose it? Who could be careless enough to lose an entire pond?

*Humans*, I thought, answering my own question from days ago. I was kneeling down in the field, wearing black trousers and a jacket, and shades. I felt sweaty but also cool. *Humans have been so careless, they’ve lost an entire pond. Now it’s up to this human—here, I pointed to myself with my thumb—to find it again.* I was pretending to be a crack detective brought in to solve the case of the ghost pond.

#### Part 4

“It’s under there,” I told Dia. I’d carried two spades and dragged her back to where we’d seen the ghost.

“Whose bones are we digging up?” Dia asked, putting spade to ground.

“You’ll see,” I said, since she liked mysterious things so much.

We dug all afternoon. In the evening, people came by and yelled at us.

“You can’t dig here!” they said. “This land doesn’t belong to you.” It didn’t belong to them either. (I was not sure whose it was. I was not sure it mattered.) I showed them how the rest of the field was healthy but things didn’t grow properly in that part of the field. And then I told them about the pond. I handed them the newspaper clipping. All of them drove off. Some of them came back and joined the digging.

The next day, they brought others with them and soon, there were more than twenty of us. We all dug for many days. Over the days, we got to know each other. I had not known there were people in my neighbourhood who wanted to save ponds.

The days I spent digging, I didn’t hear the voice at night. I still saw the face in the field but it looked less sad. On the last day of the dig, I must have got home late because my mother was already back from work. She had bought me jackfruit chips. “I’m proud of you,” she said. Her smile was almost as wide as the edge of a spade. If I liked hugs, I am sure she would have hugged me.

## Part 5

I had been living my ghostless life for many months now. By the end of the dig, we had removed all the dry leaves, all the silt, all the mud; we had cleared everything between me and my ghost. Then we let it be. And I had nothing to show for the whole episode. But that was before Wednesday.

On Wednesday, it rained. It also rained on Thursday, and then again yesterday.

This morning, Dia and I were walking behind my house, when we saw it. The most beautiful pond. The no-longer-a-ghost pond.

The pond had spent so long forgotten and dry, clogged up and alone. Now, it was making up for lost time.

The mud around it was dark red, and the plants lush. There were birds gliding down towards their mirror-selves, and then quickly flying away. The dragonflies and damselflies were out in such numbers that their beating wings blurred the view of the pond. I could hear the high cricket chirps and deep frog hums. A large milkweed snout moth flew towards me and it looked like a drifting leaf against the grey sky.

It was haunting.