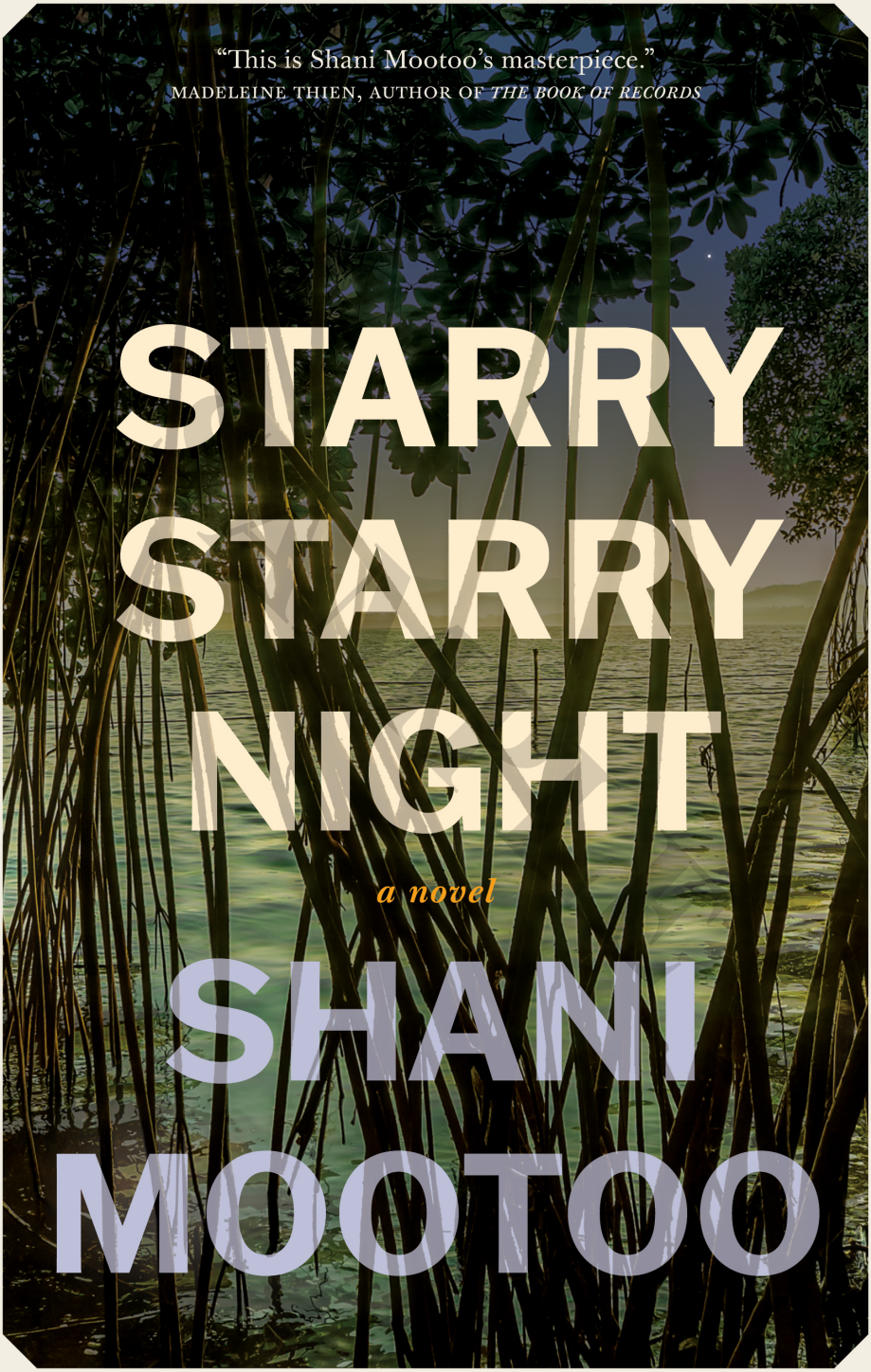
"This is Shani Mootoo's masterpiece."
MADELEINE THIEN, AUTHOR OF THE BOOK OF RECORDS
STARRY STARRY NIGHT
a novel
SHANI MOOTOO

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STARRY STARRY NIGHT

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You don't want those fingers, skin all chipped up, razor-like flecks slicing your own skin, fingers that even in a soapy lather exude the odour of garlic, you don't want fingers and hands like that bathing you, the same hands you'd witnessed pull and, with one swift twist, wring the neck of the chicken that had looked, wide-eyed, straight at you, pleading for one terrified second when it suddenly understood what was about to happen.

On an early morning she'd come upstairs, having just showered in the workers' downstairs bathroom stall—floating off her is the scent of the big, jagged bar of mottled blue soap, its lather running down the concrete wall of the stall, turning it slippery with thick streams of grey-blue slime. She smells like that soap. And gasoline. Chicken blood. Wet feathers. Garlic. All those odours, right there, when she tries to hold on to you to shower you. You struggle to get away, but she makes you sit on the peerha that the carpenter made and painted bright green just for you—and she tries to ladle water over your head.

Water sputtering out of the low shower tap onto the pale green bathroom tiles sounds like the wings of a headless bird beating the hard floor of the shed out in the back.

Her long braid glistens like asphalt after rain.

You bawl for Ma to come and save you.

SELVON STREET

ONE

Barlow grips my arm with her soapy hands; I can barely look in her eyes—when I do, even for one tiny second, I see in them the ruby-red water gushing-gushing down the sloped open gutter on its way out of the yard, under the backyard wall, and *fwoooooshhh* into the municipal gutters beyond.

Give your grandmother a little break, child. She have other things to do. Stop getting on so. Let me bathe you.

I scream, tug, and pull.

But what wrong with you, child? Behave, na.

What can Ma be doing that she isn't bathing me? How can she allow this to be happening? I just have to keep pulling away long enough and Barlow will give up. I just have to scream until I feel the pain and the scratching in my throat. I will become hoarse, and later—when I'm clean and dressed, my hair still wet—Barlow will make the lime-and-honey drink she says will soothe my throat, and she will stand there and watch me sip it.

I like lime and honey together, but not lime—and not even honey—by itself. If I let a piece of lime touch just the tip of my tongue, the inside of my mouth curls up and twists, and saliva comes from all under my tongue and at the sides of my tongue and from the back of my throat, and tears run down my face,

and all of me—my arms, my feet, my back—every part of me gets squeezed up, tight-tight-tight. But in the lime-and-honey drink, honey wins over twisty lime. The lime still tastes just a little twisty in the drink, but it doesn't make me pull inside of myself like what happens to snails when Sheldon and Colin sprinkle salt on them. I don't like honey by itself either, because even though it is supposed to be sweet like sweeties from Mr. Tang's shop, it still makes my mouth a little scratchy after I swallow it. It's too-too sweet. So they are good together, lime and honey. I want to drink all of it, but she doesn't let me. She says I will get a tummy ache. So I can only sip some of it, then she takes it away and puts it on a shelf and puts a saucer over it so ants won't get inside the cup. But when she is in the bedroom area cleaning the rooms there, I can climb on a chair and reach it. So I don't really mind screaming until my throat is sore. The louder I scream, the sooner she gives up, and Ma comes in to take over. By the time Barlow can't take it any longer, she'll be soaked from her head all the way to her bare feet. I wave my arms to try to stop her from holding on to me, and I kick my feet about and she gets even wetter and wetter. Steups, steups, steups. All the time she is steupsing. Steupsing isn't nice. And finally she lets go of me. Her large dark hands turn off the tap, and she stands up.

Look at how you have me. You wet me up good. Look at my dress. You are trouble, yes, child.

She wipes her face and her arms with my clean towel. She leaves me standing in the bath, naked and wet, and marches out of the room. She has been told not to leave me unattended because I could slip in the soapy water and hit my head on the tiles and maybe end up in hospital or die of a broken head.

Maybe now Ma will fire her. I grip the taps and try not to move about, but I continue to sob loudly. I pause for a moment to listen, then I cry out some more. I pause again and listen. And then, there is Ma in the doorway.

Tut tut tut. What is all that noise about?

Ma kneels on the wet mat on the other side of the low tiled wall and holds out her arms. I fall into them, limp. I heave and sob, squeezing my eyes tightly to get whatever tears I can out of them. She smells like paratha roti and then, when I turn my head into her neck, like cream of wheat. Her housedress is drenched fast as she wipes tears and water from my face, but she doesn't steups or scold me or pull away, and with her soft plump hands, her long fingers and clean nails, she begins the slide of soapy water all over my body. She tells me what she is doing, so I can be prepared. Like when she's about to dribble the water on the front of my head, to close my eyes and hold my breath. The warm water trickles from the ladle onto my head, then down my face, like a long slow waterfall. I stick out my tongue and lap the warm water. And it rolls down my neck, onto my shoulders, and down my back. I open my eyes and, through the beads of water on my lashes, I see her—she is blurred, but it is her, it is her—and she takes the bar of pink soap that smells like roses from the edge of the nearby sink and rubs it into the white washcloth that sits in her open palm. She takes her time. The bathroom fills up with roses. She is looking at what she is doing, not at me, and I am left standing on my own. I know I won't fall because she is there, but still, I stand very carefully. She puts an arm around my waist and steadies me while, with the other hand, with which she holds the limp warm rag, she bathes me. First my shoulders and then down

my arms. She pulls and pushes the cloth gently up and down each arm—I offer each to her—holding my hand with one hand and the other lightly rubbing soft, slippery rose on the inside part of my elbows. She lifts my arms and passes the washcloth across my armpits. She pokes a finger into the cloth and makes a kind of tent, but then she closes the tent around the finger and uses the dressed-up finger to wash behind my ears. Then around and around inside my ears the finger goes, and when she tickles inside my navel with it, I wriggle about and laugh, and she smiles. Not just her lips, but her eyes smile, too. And her cheeks. I love my ma. She holds the cloth under the running water and the rose soap slides off. Then she wrings the cloth and the water hits the tiles, ragged and loud. Ma is strong, and pretty like a bunch of pink-and-yellow flowers. She soaps up the cloth again, and now the scent of roses is too high. It hurts my eyes. But I am not trouble for Ma, so I try not to make trouble for her. I stand strong, taking care not to fall, and she runs the cloth along my thighs, which I push out toward her, and I bend into her and grip her shoulders with both my hands to steady myself and offer her one leg, then the other, and she rubs the cloth over my knees, then behind them and down my shins and on my calves. She takes hold of my foot and passes the cloth quickly back and forth, and my feet curl in, just as if they were tasting a piece of lime without any honey. I giggle and try to pull away. She tells me not to wriggle like that because I might slip and fall, and she, too, is laughing as she says, If you fall, what would Ma do, eh, baby? A laughing matter will turn into what?

I know the answer, so I say, A crying matter.

And she says, proud of me, And we don't want that, do we?

I giggle. Mm-mm, we don't want that, Ma, do we?

She turns me around, and the cloth drags heavily down my back and across my bum. There, through the thick wet pile, are her hands. She doesn't let soap go in my eyes, but when Barlow bathes me, Barlow puts soap in my eyes.

*

When she, Barlow, and Polly clean shrimp, I help. Polly showed me how to do it. First, you pull the head off. The head is ugly. Stiff black strings wave around on the head. Ma calls those antennae. The strings have beads on them that are maybe eyes. You have to be very careful because there are parts on the head that are hard and sharp and will stab you if you're not, and your finger will bleed and you'll need a bandage. It will hurt a lot.

But I know how to be careful now, so I can pull the heads off without getting stabbed.

I think the shrimp in the big blue basin smell like how the bottom of the sea smells to other creatures great and small who live down there. I like that smell. It is also the smell of the blue sky over the sea, and the sun shining down on the sea and sand on the beach. All of that comes mixed up inside the bag of shrimp Polly buys at the market, and then when she empties the bag out into the basin, that mixed-up smell escapes and takes over the kitchen and enters my nose. It's very loud, but I close my eyes tightly, and when I do that, I see the sky and sea and sand and then I think about the holidays. First there is the long drive from our house, number 39 Selvon Street, San Fernando, all the way to the house in Mayaro. Mr. Monty drives one car, with Polly and Frank in it, and Pa drives the other car, the blue one, with Ma and me. We go through the town, then over the hills, past cane fields and through coconut groves.