



Ghost

Temenos (Spring 20120, 36-41)

Her name is Kamali. She is Albino. *Zeru* in Swahili. It means ghost. Her skin is white, not black like her people. Her eyes are pink, not black like her people. Her hair is red like a fire ant. Not black like her people. The villagers say she is cursed. She will bring bad luck to her family. They say she is white because her mother, that whore, fucked a *mazungo*, a white man. That is not true. The villagers say her mother should have killed her at birth. They say her father should have abandoned them. But her mother and father love her. Her mother says she is white like the beautiful white flamingo. White like the light of the full moon over Lake Victoria. White like the wings of an angel. Her father named her Kamali because it means “perfect.”

His name is Mwamba like his father and grandfather before him. It means powerful. But the villagers call him *sangoma*, witch doctor. He lives in a squat, mud-thatched hut surrounded by five more huts, all hidden among rocks and acacia trees. Between the huts, four young chickens cackle and pace and peck at insects on the red dirt ground. Villagers tell their problems to the chickens—intermediaries between the witch doctor and the *jinnns*, the spirits. The villagers fear the witch doctor. Mothers tell their children do not look him in the eye when he passes by in his long black robes. They say he is a healer, a magician, a seer. Is your child sick? The witch doctor will cure him. Are you unlucky in love? The witch doctor will help you beguile a beautiful, fertile woman. Do you seek revenge? The witch doctor will put a hex on your enemy.

The witch doctor is a businessman. And business is good. The fishermen who troll the waters of Lake Victoria worry because their catches have been meager. Miners who dig for diamonds and gold and tanzanite seek new veins. Rich men from Burundi and the Congo wish to be richer. The witch doctor chants and conjures and anoints. He conducts eerie ceremonies. He collects good luck charms: old coins, cowry shells, nails, pebbles, nuts, bolts, screws; crude,

carved crosses with Jesus figures for the Christians; money notes tucked between Koran pages for the Muslims. He concocts magic potions and pours them into amulets that his clients wear on strings around their necks. His latest magic? Very powerful *juju*. A putty-colored powder made from ground albino bones, albino skin, albino hearts, albino kidneys, albino livers, albino genitals, albino tongues. Outside the witch doctor's hut, a bonfire burns suffusing the air with thick smoke. Always the fire burns.

Sometimes Kamali draws in the red dirt with a stick. Sometimes she draws designs on rocks with stones. Today she sits on the ground in front of her cinder block house and draws with black chalk in a sketchbook mama bought for her thirteenth birthday with money she earned selling woven baskets to tourists. The family dog, a scrawny mutt, noses at Kamali, hoping for food. She shoos him away. A man in the village, a Tingatinga artist, told Kamali to draw her dreams, to draw the future the way she wants it to be, to draw her heart, to draw her spirit, to draw her family's love. She closes her eyes and pictures her mama's smile, her *baba's* wise eyes, her giggly little sister Chriki, her older brother, Kwanza, her favorite, her younger brothers Radhi and Masmakali, her baby brother who died of malaria and is with the ancestors. Her mind floats. She pictures Mt. Kilimanjaro, its craggy surface, its snow-capped peak. Kamali opens her eyes and holds the chalk loosely between her thumb and forefinger. She draws the outline of the mountain, then with strokes of the chalk marks its surface with rocks and crevices and craters. Within the jagged terrain, she draws the faces of her family, her mama and baba in the center, her brothers and sister upside down and sideways. She shades the skin of their faces black. At the summit, in a patch of snow, she draws her own face. She leaves it white.

Inside the hut, the witch doctor sits cross-legged with his two hunters on reed mats. The baby toes of his feet and the pinky fingers of his hands are unusually short, a sign of his magic powers, he says. The men conspire and plot and negotiate. Bring me a zero baby's head and I will pay you by the weight, the witch doctor says. Bring me an arm, I will pay you 600,000 shillings. A leg, 750,000. He calculates his profit margin. His clients pay 1.2 million for an arm, 1.5 million for a leg, and 38 million—\$25,000 U.S.—for a complete set of body parts: limbs, genitals, ears, tongue, nose. The hunters will go into the village tomorrow, they promise. They

will follow the zero girl. They will also look for customers. They ask for a fifty percent commission for new business. The witch doctor agrees.

In the morning, Kamali walks through the village to school, her back pack resting between her shoulders. The dog follows for a few paces then loses interest. Kamali wears her school uniform—a white short-sleeved blouse and royal blue jumper—and a pink, floppy sun hat donated by a British charity. The sun is her enemy, the enemy of every Albino. The sun burns her skin and blisters her lips and sears her eyes. She used to wear plastic sunglasses from the Red Cross, but one of her classmates stole them. Sometimes she forgets the hat and her cheeks turn red and raw. Kamali has seen zeros who work outside in the hot sun farming or fishing or selling vegetables. Their skin is rough as the hide of an elephant. They will die young like her Aunt Badriya. She watched Auntie waste away from the skin cancer, only thirty-four, but old, skinny, shriveled, blind, and covered with sores, burns, scabs, and welts, her flesh rotting from her bones. People say zeros never die. They fade away, vanish, disappear like fog after rain. But this is not true. Kamali cried when Baba lowered Auntie's body into the ground. He rolled heavy rocks on top of the grave so people would not steal her body and chop it up.

As Kamali weaves through alleyways, people snicker, click their tongues, shout nasty words, give her the evil eye. A little girl hides behind her mama as if she's seen a crocodile. Only Ambonisy, the Tingatinga artist, smiles and waves. Kamali remembers another woman from the village who gave birth to a zero. Her husband left her. He blamed his wife and her ancestors. It was their fault, he said, there were no zeros in his family tree. People spat at the woman when she shopped as if she were lower than a locust. She cut off her baby's hair so no one could steal it, because some women believe the hair will keep them from birthing their own zero babies. The woman ran away with her child and no one knows where they are. Some people say Kamali's parents waste their money sending her to school; everyone knows zeros are *mjinga*, stupid, retarded. But Kamali is smart. Maybe she will be a teacher. Or a doctor. Or an artist. Maybe she will be a member of Parliament like Al-Shymaa Kway-Geeri, the zero woman appointed by President Kikwete.

Inside the concrete schoolhouse, Kamali sits at her desk at the front of the class, the only place from which she can see the words the teacher writes on the chalkboard. Like all Albinos, she is nearsighted, so much so she must hold a book just inches from her eyes to read. Some of

the students laugh at her, push her, taunt her, tease her, pinch her, pelt her with chalk. Stop it, the teacher says, weary of admonishing the children almost every day.

Today Kamali gets all the right answers on her mathematics test. The teacher rewards her with a fresh piece of chalk because she knows Kamali likes to draw. On her way home from school, Kamali skips through the market past a couple of taxi bikes, past wooden stalls stocked with second hand Nikes, past women sitting on blankets wearing red and gold and purple print *kangas*, their hair wrapped in bright scarves, potatoes piled like pyramids before them, a few pineapples for sale, too. Someone plays music, *Kipenda Roho* by Remmy Ongala. Kamali hums the familiar tune. She notices two men, strangers, standing in front of the Friendly Butchery. One man is tall with cheek bones sharp like rocks. The other is shorter, his head shaven and shaped like an ostrich egg. She watches them watching her. The men stare, squint, point, sneer, whisper, nod. Their eyes dart back and forth like green mambas. They stroll over to Akilah, the village gossip, and cozy up to her. She gives Kamali a sour look. Do the men ask where Kamali lives? Do they ask how many brothers she has? Do they ask if she is the only zero in her family? Kamali walks faster, hunches her body, tries to disappear.

Mama is preparing dinner when Kamali arrives home—*ugali* made with lentils, and sweet *mataki*. Kamali stirs the thick porridge and spoons it into clay bowls. While the family eats, she tells them about the strangers. Mama and Baba trade anxious glances. There is too much danger, Mama says. She's heard more bad news. Zerus have been attacked, maimed, killed in Mwanza, in Shinyanga, in Mara. A body was left on the street in Magu with no arms, no legs, and a big hole in the neck where the head was, where the murderers drained out the blood. Another woman was hacked to death in Lamadi, her eyes, tongue, and breasts gouged out. A fisherman at Lake Tanganyika tried to sell his zero wife to a businessman from the Congo for 3.6 million shillings. His own wife. It is not safe here. Mama starts to cry. Kamali, Baba says, there is a shelter in Arusha. The police watch over it. You could live there, go to school there. You would be safe. No, please, Kamali says, I do not want to leave home. I will be lonely. Please do not make me go. I will be very careful, please, she begs. I will protect her, Kwanza says. I am strong, clever, quick. I will make sure she is not alone.

It is dawn. The witch doctor's hunters watch the fishermen row their rickety boat to the shore and haul in their heavy nets. The fishermen look grim. Another bad catch. The hunters

approach the fishermen, acting friendly, so interested, so concerned. How many tilapia in the catch? they ask. How many perch? Better than yesterday? Most fish too small to sell? Very sad. Maybe they can help. If the fishermen weave the red hair of the zero into their nets, it will bring them good luck. The fish will be drawn by the sparkles in the hair and the fishermen will catch more fish. Good juju. You know, the tall man says, zeros float on water. They do not sink. Yes, the fishermen say, they have heard this. Can the men provide the magic hair? How much will it cost? The fishermen confer. Yes, they will pay. The hunters promise to return in three days with a bundle of hair. The zero head itself they will deliver to the witch doctor.

Kamali climbs the *kopje* with Kwanza, balancing on the huge boulders, some piled one atop another. What do you see in the rocks? Kamali asks her brother. He laughs. I see rocks, silly. What else would I see? Look closer, Kamali says. See there? She points at a bulbous boulder. That is an elephant. See the head? See the big butt? And I suppose, Kwanza says, that small rock is an ear. Yes! Kamali says. And next to the elephant is a wildebeest. See the tail? Kamali climbs to the spot where the elephant and wildebeest meet. There is a space, a shelter between the two rocks, big enough for two people. Look, Kamali says, a hiding place, a secret place. Promise me you will tell no one about it. Not Radhi. Not Masmakali. No one. I promise, Kwanza says. It is our secret.

The witch doctor selects an arm that belonged to a six-year-old zero boy. With a sharp knife, he scrapes off the muscle, the tendons, the sinew. He wipes off blood and pats the bone dry. He positions the bone on a wool mat and, with a hammer, hacks it into pieces. Crack, crack, crack, crack. He gathers the fragments and drops them into a clay pestle he otherwise uses for grinding corn meal for porridge or millet for *lwangu* to appease the ancestors. He twists the mortar using both hands, his forearms taut, a five-inch scar bulging above his left hand, and pulverizes the bone pieces, turning them into powder. Yes, he will mix the powder with water and chicken blood and create a potion for the man from Burundi. He promised the man the juju will make him very, very rich.

Kamali and Kwanza amble along the road on their way home from the movie, a full moon lighting their way. The night is still except for the wild call of a hyena in the distance.

Before the trouble, night was the best time to go outside with her brothers, no sun to singe her skin or scorch her eyes. They would pretend to be The Hunter and Gazelle or sing The Lion Song or dance the *sindimba* and *mdundiko*. Now the dark is more dangerous than the light. But Kamali begged to go out, just this once, please, to watch the movie about Jesus at the church. She feels safe with Kwanza at her side. Do you think Jesus loves me? Kamali asks. Jesus loves all people, Kwanza says. Jesus loved the lepers. Jesus loved the prostitute Mary Magdalene. Of course, he loves you. I will draw a picture of Jesus, Kamali says. I will make him half black like you and half white like me, a Jesus for all Christians.

From behind a tree, two men spring like antelope. Kamali sees the silver slice of a machete, the sharp cheekbones of the tall stranger, the shiny head of his accomplice. She freezes, as if she were the silhouette of a giraffe in the Serengeti. Kwanza leaps in front of his sister, stretches out his arms to block the hunters. He kicks the machete man in the testicles. The man moans, crumples. *Kukimbia!* Kwanza yells. Run! Kamali runs. She does not know where she is running, only that she must not stop, she must run and run and run. She trips on a rock. She falls. She feels the wet of blood dripping down her shin. She crawls back up and runs and runs, tears filling her eyes, blurring her vision. Some instinct guides her to the kopje, to her secret place. She claws over the boulders, feeling her way to the opening where the elephant rock and the wildebeest rock meet. She hides. Seconds later, she hears the men, the rapid pad, pad, pad of their footsteps, their heavy breathing, their angry voices. One man yells instructions to the other. Look over there, he shouts. Kamali huddles in the hole, afraid the men will hear her heart beat, hear her thoughts, hear the blood coursing through her white body. She is not a ghost, no matter what people say. If she were a ghost, she would evaporate and reappear in her house surrounded by her family who love her. She prays to Jesus to protect her. Please, Jesus, save me. Please, Jesus, save my brother. Finally, the voices recede, a trail of grumbling. We will try again tomorrow, one man says. Yes, says the other. Maybe break into the house after dark. Kamali's body turns cold beneath her sweat. The men could kill her family and they may have already killed her brother and it's her fault.

It is past midnight when Kamali limps to the door of her house, her gashed leg throbbing. The dog barks and sniffs at the dried blood on her leg. Baba throws the door open, envelopes her in his arms, black over white. Kwanza? Kamali asks, fearing the worst. He is here, Baba says.

Safe. Baba guides her to a wooden chair. Kwanza lies on a mat on the floor, his left shoulder wrapped in a blood-stained cloth. His black eyes meet Kamali's pink ones and he smiles weakly. Kamali's younger brothers and little sister gather around her. Mama wets a cloth and wipes the blood from her leg.