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Black Jade

an excerpt

THE STORY COLLECTORS

We are ravens. We pluck fallen color. We barter. With animals, incense, secrets and stolen scenes. We are bees. We touch two million scattered scented moments of life, reaping the small nectar of things. And we spread silences, our currency. Lifted from life's numerous offspring. We are stones. Living sentinels. (Those who have eyes let them see.) We soak up living, sorrow, dying, desire. Dreams. Drink story fragments, like dawn's dew, collected in the crevices of our roaming. One day, they reach a destination where truth pierces mystery. And when a story flows we distill it until we taste sweet smoke inside the bitterness.

An old adage intrudes on sleep: "Trust in Allah, but tether your camel first." A man stirs. "Huggung" ki gaal dakhamba a ko kaldach'. The way of the camel is one. The gaunt trader repeats "Huggung" ki gaal dakhamba a ko kaldach' in an exhaling sigh. Greyish vapor connects the breath to the spine of truth. He turns. Watches slumbering camels, sheep and cows. Rues insomnia. Sniffs the breeze surrounding the watering hole.

Ember smoke. No odd beasts or humans abroad. Turns. He trips over a companion with a gouged-out face, who is lolling on the ground, speaking in a woman's high voice, carving fleeting presences into the soul of stars running away from soft red rays that have invaded a dark violet night. The insomniac chews, ruminates on a tale that hounded them for fifteen nights across dry, hard vastnesses, resplendent tributes to fire. He stills his mind. The trader asks a question of the sprawled man. "So what of the woman?"

And the man modifies his narration. Portions of a fable emerge through his thin, fluting voice. Like a sad wind.

The trader listens.

"Her family sprung from a nomad. A black-skinned cattle man. The nomad was a water man as cattlemen are. A priest who would infect his

descendants with the drug of longing for other people and places.

Worried Nile River priests sent the nomad's people off to find and settle a nation around the source of the waters. So they left. So they moved south. So at Bahr-el-Ghazal, near Rumbek they stopped. So they waited for a hundred years to pass. After a red eclipse, they picked up their lyres from Kar Thum, and travelled south-west with a hundred thousand white, long, curved-horned cattle. So they stopped at Dog Nam where they marveled at the white silhouette of a jade-shaded lake that had been torn from its abode in the Nile in a cataclysm that created the Great Rift Valley. This exile made these waters brilliant, brackish and belligerent.

Something happened at Dog Nam. A small boy swallowed a large yellow bead. The bead belonged to his cousin. The swallowing became a squabble. The squabble became a fight. The fight broke the family in two. So one branch ran west. The other hurried south and renamed themselves Joluoyo—followers of the way. These walked and walked until they scented the breast of the Nile: Nam Lolwe. There they planted their spears.

Eons later.

An inheritor of the nomad's scent, another ebony-toned man flees his lakeside hamlet and falters into an invading stranger's delusion, which drags him east and then north where he meets the stranded green lake. He does not ask why this lake unleashes sudden storms, unveils congregations of crocodiles, pockmarked hippopotami and overgrown salt-fleshed Nile perch because he knows that banishment is a sorrow-like madness. In his first dawn next to the green lake, the black man watches the jade waters leach ochre mists. He does not flinch when the fog meanders into his memories and knits them into a crimson solid silence.

The trader eavesdrops.

WUOTH OGIK—THE JOURNEY ENDS

Not all ghosts are kind. Small discoveries still-born after seven months. Memory is a chatterbox. The shadow of past laughter is chilling. On its heels is silence that starts with a question. A charge. "Will you be a refugee forever? Listen you, every herdsman comes home some day." Odidi, my

brother reproached me, a break in his voice. Call-and-response. The continuation of a six-year brother's game designed to irritate his sister. And from me, always, a smothered retort. Answers enmeshed and swallowed in seething silence. I needed him to stop. Instead, Odidi always guffawed.

Except for that last time we spoke. My brother had listened to my silence. His answer, a matter-of-fact *Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you Ajany*. The problem of his chant was—and I should have remembered it then—Odidi never, ever swore, not even when he was enraged.

The shadow of past laughter is chilling. On its heels is silence that is also a question. *Where's Odidi?*

Rattle of dust carrying winds. Tiny moments. In a circle of birdsong, sun on skin whispers to me, "Snug?" Tiny moments.

I am here.

A roof tile shatters and I flinch. Intangible portions of my brother reassemble and create a vision. Dimpled handsomeness. The men of our house are gifted with soft-edged, rumbling voices. I see him; sculpted arms around an auburn-haired past girlfriend. Shirley Temple ringlets. Tube top, low-slung jeans, no-message-back-from-the-soul look.

"Her dress sense matches the class of my car." He explained.

"You're sh-shallow." I scolded.

"Wrong, sis. I'm human and therefore weak." He said. "Moreover, I'm beautiful."

"Odidi!" I protested.

"Arabel Ajany!" He mocked. "Admit it . . ." he cajoled.

And we had dissolved into cackling laughter. That is how it was with Odidi. Apart from that last time we spoke.

Where is Odidi? Where is Odidi? Where is Odidi?

A recital.

Silence scowls. Like Genesis' spirit. Aloof with threat.

I am home again.

Damp on unreasonable pink silk. Itchy clinging to my back. Scratch the heat where it pierces skin. Eyes asquint, fly on forehead; poster woman for the development cavalry. Nude, blue skies shimmer hot over

land that is in this season, drier than a dead chameleon's skin. Ten degrees below boiling. Still, it is cooler than sitting inside our coral-stoned house. The breeze east of Badda Huri hums over lava-sprinkled Dida Galgalu. Green, beige doum palms at the water point a kilometer away to derelict Dida Gola. Dida Gola creased with sandy-stony *laggas* and sly *wadi*. A cyclone of memory. While I have been away the ferocity of life has amplified.

Our home used to be crammed with human and animal tones. Existence in song. Those restless gestures of life. A father's cough, the rattle of an ageing house, herders' whistling, the turning over of day into ensconcing nights, a mother's sudden sobs.

Now, there is only Galgalu who has been out all day with the remnant of our herds. There are talkative shadows, crumbling walls, assorted memory interspersed with echoes of a long-ago rattle of *ajua* stones being dropped into a carved wooden board of fourteen holes. There's also the moment of a flickering flame from a hurricane lantern that I wait to see from my night window before I go to sleep.

Lying on my mother's bed.

Inside the house, a water tank gurgles. Instinctive glance over my shoulder, like Lot's wife. Willing the sound to stop. Back of neck spiky cramp. And mourning winds. Oboe-like. Sustained chord to which everything with voice aspires. In the courtyard, my fingers roll the sand-dust-damp ball round and round. *What am I doing here?*

Outside tracks on the ground.

Memory prompt. Unwanted image of a mother's pointed gun. Its barrel glints. *Click-clack*. Ready to fire. *Grief*. A good excuse. *Yes*. I know about fleeting, sudden madness.

Fuck you, Ajany. My brother, my protector had said to my silence. After that I had switched off my cell phone. A cut off sound like a stutter that tripped over words. I had taken the phone apart until it was in forty-three pieces. I counted them, crushed them beneath my feet—a crunch. Kicked them away and swept the wreckage into a pan. Tossed brokenness down a chute.

Fragments of pasts and thought are a lullaby and I am swaying to the sound of one-time shared laughter. Like the flavors of tears—bitter,

watery and sweet, there are tangs to laughter. None silkier than memory trying to appease regret.

We were offspring of northern Kenya drylands, Odidi and I. Hemmed in by geography, a river—the Uaso Nyiro, and the unspoken things of parents’ fears. We mapped earth, wind, fire, sky, water and nothingness with light, piecing life-beyond from stones, counting footsteps etched into rocks, and peering through crevices to see the house of red rain. Watched the march of desert locusts and tried to join the tail end of their trek. We milked cows and goats, and when other herdsmen were not watching, drank down the hot liquid in audible mirthful gulps, sniffed the air for the stale reassurance of home. Flew home-made kites and refused to weep when one of our four visiting winds tore them to shreds.

He started it. Odidi did. Conjuring siblings, aunties, uncles, cousins and grandparents. We inserted longing-to-leave into the existence of dotting dream relations who never came to visit even though we waited for them to take us all away.

Baba dispatched us to a boarding school south of the Uaso Nyiro. Down country. Odidi whispered to me, his eyes shining, “We’re going to Kenya.”

I had grinned back. This was *far away*.

Going to Kenya.

We entered the world of grey stone edifices—distant and pathetic tributes to England’s public schools, demarcated by a massive black gate and a kai apple fence. Inside Odidi and I learned that school did not know what to do with us. How to talk to us. Words of teachers, hacking at us in that teeth-baring way of asking questions. Lips curled so that the mouth forms an other-sided question mark: “Ati, you’re from where?”

Classmates: “You people, is it true you eat dust?”

The headmistress, Mrs. Karai, Masters in Education. Calabash-shaped. Stumpy. Yellow-brown, thin on top, large at the bottom, faux-pearl necklace, bespectacled chilliness. After her new year, new student assembly speech, she summoned my brother and me to her office on the morning of our second day:

“Stand.”

We stood.

“No fighting, no stealing, no politics. Do you know how to use a toilet?”

I suppose we did. Said nothing.

“I warn you. I smell trouble . . . you’ll see. You’ll know who I am, you hear?”

The senses missing from her words were touch and instinct. Was reason a sense as well? No matter, I was quick to nod. Glancing at my brother, I noticed that his hands had curled into themselves and he was biting into his lips. I noticed we were the only ones the headmistress had summoned to her office.

In books, hints of the world imagined. Huskies in Alaska, pumpkins that became footmen, genteel princes, knights of round tables and agreeable kings who oversaw holy order in a world that operated according to schedule. Roadmaps to rainbow-guided mysteries. Atlases, my favorite form of literature; dreams inserted into lines and curves that lie between two destinations. Odidi found music. He was a grade three piano student within a year.

“Listen, listen, listen. Ajany!”

I focused on my brothers closed eyes, emotion-painted face, body swaying and falling into hands spreading across an out-of tune piano. I could see.

Beyond book pages and music notations, barriers in the gaze of others. We were not the strangest arrivals there, no. It was just that, as we later figured it out, we had come to this school from the place in Kenya that was a Troublesome Nowhere. And annihilation—erupting with the assassination of a politician with whom we shared one of our languages—was an infectious disease in the Kenya of our time. So we retreated. I lurked in the radius of my brother’s aura. Odidi placed both arms around me. Encircled. Shielded. Almost safe.

After every three-month school term, we would migrate. Latch onto a dilapidated school holiday bus shaped like a triangular loaf of bread.

Shuttled to Isiolo or Maralal. Then to Kalacha. Ramshackle rockets to *Wuoth Ogik*, where emphatic winds and kinder voices ushered us home: Baba, Nyipir Oganda; mama, Akai Lokorijem, and Galgalu who wheedled, plotted, munched and muttered into and between our lives. And then we would have to return to school when our month of reprieve was over.

Now. A quarter of a century later. Sweat beads down my breast. Unclasp bra clips. Distant muffled footsteps. Noises broadcast by the wind. Murmuring voices. Eastward bound travelers scouring the fringes of our one thousand eight hundred unfenced hectares that contain a perennial spring, sundry rocks, straggling grass, acacia and morengo trees, flat, orange-brown dust and palpable horizons. For a moment, I pretend baba is coming home as he always did in the past, bearing gifts of stolen livestock and assorted weapons like a fourth magus. Coming home with Odidi.

Flow of growing-up seasons.

The guns our father brought became more remarkable in size and shape. Cooler glint, smooth mechanisms. Good technology. Odidi mimicked the spit of silencers. I laughed. Moved by how gently silence supported the vehemence of fire.

Signatures of coming-home.

Baba's return made that other, the grey shadow named Ali Dida Hada who made my mother's fierce restlessness quiet—that other one left like a hyena who had stolen a goat's skin. Whenever Ali Dida Hada left, another tributary of the river of silence opened up in our home. We ignored it.

I first saw Ali Dida Hada when I was nine years old and thought his eyes were like Rasputin's. Those were the middle days, when he dared to let only his gaze stray towards and stay on my increasingly incoherent mother. Calculated adoration. I spied on Ali Dida Hada on a full moon night. Saw him insert a rolled aromatic stick between mama's lips. He struck a matchstick and held it close to her face. Heard him spout words as if mama were his favorite cow: "*Red-legged peace stick / Oh shepherd's truth / Enchanted word virgin.*" Stupid words. I had told Odidi of course.

We had sneaked out that night and let the air out of his car's tires. We also stuffed his exhaust pipe with grass and sand. In the morning Ali Dida Hada had to borrow a camel to return to his police post. Galgalu prepared bad-tempered Komondo who frothed green grass, growled and attempted to bite Ali Dida Hada after every fourth step.

But. Here is a truth. When Ali Dida Hada visited mama, the clouds her chaos created disappeared and we could bask in the incense of reprieve. We did not like Ali Dida Hada. We needed Ali Dida Hada. And since baba said nothing even when he saw them together, neither did we.

Dust in the eyes. *Where is Odidi?* Blink once. The petal blue nail varnish on my toes is warped. Humidity beneath paint. *What lasts?*

Wily memory inserts a paean. "A black leopard used to escort him home . . ." It suggests. A story plaque. A twinge zings, evokes baba. His tone as parched as the orange Chalbi desert splintering in the arid season heat, containing an ache that revealed distance from present existence. In the telling of the tale he had picked out sequences in disorder. Then he lined up the parts to retell them:

"A black leopard used to escort me home, weaving in and out of shrubs, darting behind trees. All nights of the world in silhouette. In golden eyes."

"What d-did it sound like?" I asked.

"Footsteps soft like air. It would walk with me until I went through the reed screen covering the entrance of my hut."

Struggle with *tb*. *Tb-tb-then?*

"The leopard disappeared." He chortled.

He said we must not call out the leopard's name. Must not say *kwach*. Could say *gini*. This thing. Or *gicha*. That thing. But never *kwach*.

"Why?"

"Ei! If you say *kwach*, you and the leopard would have to be cleansed."

Cleansing through *goyo dodo*. A music apology that sewed holes made in the covenant of silence.

"Why?"

"It is the way of life."

Baba had paused, his chin on my head.

“There was a time when some things and events existed but could not be named; some things and events could be named but only in a covered way; some things and events born would be oathed at once into eternal and dead silence.”

I did not know what he meant. I did understand that baba was omnipotent, like God. I was ten-years old; my arms were wrapped around his neck. Baba had invoked his leopard to hunt down inhabitants of my night dreams who, when they appeared while I slept, tried to suffocate me.

A black leopard used to escort him home . . . Memory offers again.

Salt wet on my lips. Tears and blood. Tongue bite. Wherever he is—baba, I hope he has a black leopard for company.

Done.

This is all the thought I will spare for baba today because it is for my brother, Odidi that I have returned home.