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A Humble Warning to the Residents of Ol Kalou

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An abstract of  
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## Abstract

### A Humble Warning to the Residents of Ol Kalou By Tania Wabari Ndirangu

This project is a composite novel consisting of three stories and a prologue, through which the narrator, a man named Hilary Emanuel, traces (what he regards as) the ethical decline of a small town in central Kenya called Ol Kalou. Through the idiosyncratic lens of Hilary Emanuel, I explore the themes of faith, colonialism, and existence for the people of this village. Although Hilary tries to use these stories to teach a larger ethical lesson about the village, it was important to me that he fails. Meaning, he undermines his own authority along the way, so that the reader feels free to disagree with him. Thus, there is enough substance within each story so that the reader can discern an emotional “excess” beyond Hilary’s interpretations, partially so they can draw their own conclusions, and partially to preserve the sense of ambivalence and complexity that is a central part of all human stories.

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## Table of Contents

Prologue	3
Kimani and the Milk Cow	5
The Story of Eliza	16
The Story of Anne	27

A Humble Warning to the Residents of Ol Kalou



“Write my answer plainly on tablets,  
So that a runner can carry the correct message  
to others.

This vision is for a future time.

It describes the end, and it will be fulfilled.

If it seems slow in coming, wait patiently,

For it will surely take place.

It will not be delayed.”

(*AKJV*, Habakkuk 2.2-3)

## Prologue

I, Hilary Emanuel, first son of dead crook Gitari, am only one man with one voice and body to speak from, but—and I cross my heart—my full interest is in the safety and wellbeing of this town. Like everyone else, I have worked the land—spent long days on pyrethrum fields, ploughing the soil with my *jembe*, felling trees, and digging up their huge stumps (look for yourself, my hands and my feet are properly calloused!). But reader, I would do all this times a hundred if it lifted Ol Kalou even one inch out of the spiritual muck we are in. Why, you ask, should a young man as myself, a humble farmer without so much as an acre to my name, concern myself with big-big questions? Well, isn't it only a man like me, with a father like mine, so close to the source of the malady, who could be such a messenger of truth? Who could truly understand how moral decay withers the soul? Heed my warning, people. Our spirit has shriveled like an old plum and the pit is rotting!

But before we begin let me say that nothing happens in Ol Kalou that I don't know about (I admit I am a gossip, but only for the greater good!). And if, like me, you pay attention, then you will have noticed that as a town we have lost our good heart. You will have seen that each man has pulled himself away from the next, that half the women have turned loose, and that the children have developed a rebellious streak. It is true, more people have finished secondary school and more have been to Nairobi, but what do we have to show for it but a generation of drunkards and single-mother households? Isn't it only recently that grown men began to fear their neighbors? That wary mothers began to clutch their daughters' wrists in public, that young boys have learned to carry knives, and worst of all, that even the elders have forgotten God? We have thrown off His divine protection like a tattered coat, and instead we put our faith in any pot-bellied fellow with a badge and a shining uniform, in the county jail, in the slimy hands of the prosecutors.

But let me say one thing to defend myself if my hostility towards the police comes off as unreasonable, or if you think it is a personal antagonism which I have against one Police Chief Kamau (this suspicion is not entirely untrue, I commend you)—but my point is larger: have we forgotten that not long ago Ol Kalou was a safe town, and that once we did not need these protections? Yes, before all this “progress” (for this is the popular parlance) we dwelt cozily in an age of innocence, though I admit, at the expense of our—how to put this—*proceeding into the future*. Would individual lives have been much improved if we had smooth tarmacked roads upon which many private cars could glide forth *into the future* and return, as smoothly, for rest in the evenings? Maybe. I can see as well as anybody that our slant-wheeled bicycles have long struggled in pathetic s-shapes against these knobby dirt paths, and our retro motorbikes do nothing but stir up a dust cloud. Sure, I concede, while we walk and walk and wear our shoes, we are still no match for those cruising automatons, whizzing into tomorrow—you point your fingers rightly. And indeed, I am not so stupid as to argue that progress is not good. It is better than stagnancy, better to move collectively, and if we die, to die in this collective motion, than to remain the same on a still and dark continent. Yes, yes, I see your point.

But listen: when the white men came we let go of Mumbi and Gikyuyu, now see, we have abandoned even Christ! We have built our homes upon the shifting sands, let go of what was steady, and now we gasp that the walls have come crumbling down. Heh, if this is progress then respectfully sir/madam, I must return my ticket. Granted, there is no halting fate, that brown raging river which crushes everything and never gives a chance of escape. And yes, maybe *every* town has such a story. But it is not every town where someone steps up to tell it. So here, if I may put it so grandly, are the documents of our decline.

## 1

**Kimani And the Milk Cow**

I am not sure what circumstances but unGodly ones would lead a man to fall in love with a cow. You will think I have made this up, *poof*, out of thin air, but reader, think otherwise. The man (but he was really a boy) is named Kimani, the cow is brown Naeku, and the story, I'm afraid, has a funny shape. Nonetheless, I have tried to approach the whole thing systematically, with *method*, which means to eliminate the impossible, which in turn means looking at the wide berth of apparent possibilities, even those which appear ridiculous. So let us start with a few concessions: the incident might have been a problem of security or poor precautions—as a town we are not so experienced with crime or punishment—so it was only a matter of time. Sure, maybe the boss-man should have built a stronger fence and the whole thing could have been avoided. Now you must understand that I am not trying to usurp the police investigation into some of these small-small questions—they can keep sniffing, for all I care. Yet my point remains: a police investigation will not do the trick. Secondly, it will not solve the problem for parents in a panic to go finish the school fees on a rick-rack fence. Instead, as a town we must observe this as a warning and change our collective inner attitude. Now listen, I am not saying we go call a Lagos pastor—I am not that kind of a fool—but this is a spiritual crisis, my friends, *spiritual*.

Kimani, eyes bloodshot, tapped his thumb incessantly against the single wooden bartop of *High Spirit* bar—one of the countless *chang'aa* taverns that (among other perversities) have appeared, seemingly overnight, and filled up our once-good village with evil things. I tell you, by nine O'clock all our upstanding men have left their wives at home to come here and drink away

the school fees, to cradle the waists of hip-shaking *mischanas* in shining wigs, to stumble after whores through the doors of whore-houses which glow murkily in the night like many poorly-lit tombs.

Kimani sat on the far end of the bar, hunched in his usual place and in his usual solitary manner when I arrived there to hear his story. The smell of sweat and spirit hung in the air like a smog, mingling with the stench of shit and rotting orange-peels wafting in from a sewage trench that passed just behind the flimsy canopy of the bar (you see the places I must come to for all our sake?). As soon as I sat, Kimani lifted a bottle of *chang'aa* to his mouth, then replaced the red cap without looking. This spirit, which our women once brewed in their huts from seeds and grain, was now produced on a mass scale and lorried in endless crates from the city to meet the growing demands of the villagers. The commotion of noise emerging from nearby kiosks and passing *matatu* drivers, from the drunken men and the whores, from the crying children hitched on the backs of fruit-sellers—all of this did not disturb Kimani's quiet. He sat with his head down and his eyes averted, an un-ashed cigarette glowing between the idle knuckles of his left hand. His shirt and trousers were both worn to threads and his hair and beard were long and matted. I could not recognize anything of his former self. He was the sort of degraded figure one cannot imagine had ever been a child, though of course he must have been. Really, just by looking at him it was easy to say "ah, but this one has walked himself to the slaughterhouse. *He is good as dead!*" Only his voice, mild and low-toned, had remained the same. He did not entertain my polite inquiries into his wellbeing and that of his parents—he only produced a sort of strangled noise, then began to recount, in a steady stream, the story I had gone there to hear.

Upon their first meeting, Kimani explained, Naeku was standing at the back of the shed, facing down the central passage towards the doors where he stood. For a moment, he did not let his eyes wander, but stared back, unmoving, where Naeku had fixed him with her eyes. His gaze moved over her quickly, and in the dingy light he could discern only a few vague features: a big head with taut ears hanging like young leaves, a tail whipping and slashing flies with confidence, a huge pregnant belly. In Naeku's eyes (and he told me this with no hint of shame!) Kimani saw the perfect mirror of himself. (Now, can you imagine that any man would have such feelings for a cow? A cow! Well enough, let us continue). He stood there, gripped, as if by some genie, when at last Naeku blinked and his body loosened. The bright look in her eyes retreated so that the line of her gaze no longer reached him, but stopped just a few meters in front of her snout. She had better things to do than stir a revelation. For example, chew her cud.

Starved of that spiritual climax, Kimani thought he might help the situation by moving closer. Slowly, he placed his stick on the floor then took one step and she did not move. Inching forward, he came within three meters. But now all he could see was a cow, not black as he had assumed, but dark brown and glistening dimly like a coffee bean. And one surprise: a triangle of white fur, a milky drop on her forehead, pointing down her slender muzzle like an arrow, and in its center a pinkish spot, where her hairs made a flat outward swirl, like a shell.

Now Naeku nodded her head once then twice and began to step about, so Kimani crept backwards to the front of the shed, where he had been. Comparatively deflated, and more receptive to the prosaic details of his environment, he made a general survey of the inside of the shed. Though it was a little smaller than he had expected, it was quite ordinary and filled with the ordinary things you would find in a shed. The wooden walls were old and had turned a grayish color. Along the farthest wall, behind Naeku, were huge bales of hay piled to the ceiling, and to

the right of the door was more hay arranged in a small hill. In a corner someone had left a plastic jerrycan half-full with a clear liquid. There was one square window on the front wall and below it was a pile of milk buckets and some gum boots.

With this sobering mind also came a recollection of the storm he had just narrowly escaped by running into the shed, and he grew suddenly aware of the wet and the cold still blasting through the open doors. He hurried to shut the doors and latch them, then sat in the small pile of hay, then he stood up again to look out of the window. The rain was heavy and was sounding violently on the shed's iron roof. Through the window he saw a grey sky and low, rolling clouds which seemed to pulse with energy. The distant rows of eucalyptus and patulla pines were being pulled to a taut left slant by the wind. Looking out, he felt as though he had wandered into a dream. Then he heard the thunder boom, then he saw a woman running.

In retrospect, he should have taken at least one aspect of that scene as a warning, or the whole thing as a collection of warnings compounding in one big alarm: RUN. But then again, that wouldn't have been a feasible instruction, given the circumstances. She was running towards the shed, and seeing Kimani's face in the window, managed to look even more distraught. With the mud, it was more like half-trudging, but at an impressive speed. Fighting on, she regained a determined look, making it to the door before Kimani even thought to open it. He only stumbled over once he heard her banging against it and shouting. As she entered the thunder boomed and boomed again, like drums to welcome or banish her there, into the shed. You might think an awkward situation cannot arise amidst a serious and celestial storm, but an awkward situation can. Firstly, who the hell was he and what was he doing in her father's shed? Stupidly, Kimani thought he would put a question back at her: what was *she* doing outdoors, in heavy rain, and so far from the house?

Outside, the rain beat and beat against the earth like a punishment. A shock of white light came across the sky. In his head Kimani was thinking they should stop all this bickering and be silent before this natural display—what a humiliation, trying to talk over the thunder! But in reality, in his body, in the hold of this woman’s disdainful eyes, he had no confidence. Though her face was small and round—childish, even—something in her bearing and in her firm attitude told Kimani she was several years his senior, and that this fact better soak into his head, and quick. By this point, their small argument had devolved into Kimani answering all of her questions: “I am called Kimani Njogo. I am in your father’s shed to hide from the rain.” She looked at him sternly, then took on an amused expression. How old are you? Twenty years old. Where are you from? Nakuru. And your family? Nakuru. Who do you know here? My uncle Ngotho. The butcher? Yes, and his son Benny. And school? I finished form four, so my uncle brought me here to work at the butchery.

I guess his visible (and certainly audible) wobbling did not inspire her to continue either the argument or the interrogation, because soon after this exchange she had pushed past him to sit on the little pile of hay. Her eyes had an almond shape, like a Tutsi girl he had seen once on the television. She was staring, in a slight daze, at the window. Then she took off her thin cotton scarf and closed her eyes. There was a white mark, the approximate shape and size of a handprint, which stretched around her neck. Her skirt, straight, dark green and soaked, reached just below her knees, and the sleeves of her brown sweater were long enough that Kimani couldn’t see any part of her arms. He considered if he should ask her about the mark but felt self-conscious.

She reminded him of a mean schoolteacher. She did not exactly invite one to ask stupid and useless questions, but rather, she had an air which made every question sound stupid and useless, but which, at the same time, compelled the other party to ask another question, and another



one—each an attempt to prove that, *actually*, I'm not as stupid as my previous question might have led you to believe etc. Now, Kimani was a shy boy, but he was intelligent, this he knew. And yet this woman, why was she—

BOOM.

Thunder shook the earth, and for an instant, a white light flooded in through the window. The woman had jumped slightly, and then begun to mumble under her breath. Kimani had the mysterious feeling that this was not an ordinary storm, and this fact seemed as clear to her as it was to him. Looking at her, he knew she was praying but he couldn't understand what she was praying *for*. He did not say anything but sat near her and absently played with a piece of hay: now making it into a loop, now cutting an end and fashioning a small cross. Her muttering became louder and more circular, as if all this had happened before. What he didn't know at the time was, for her, thunder and lightning were no light matters. It was as serious as if Jesus himself came down to strike the door with His palm and uncover her dirty secrets with his light. The way she shook there, you'd think she'd seen Him herself once before.

Kimani's eyes eventually drifted to Naeku, who was laying down on the hay with a restful expression. The sparse white whiskers that fringed her nose quivered as her jaw cut its regular circle. Occasionally, a long, pink tongue reached up from her mouth and into the wet cave of one nostril, then into the other, then around in a slow circle lick. It was a while before Kimani realized that the woman was not praying anymore but staring at him. Suddenly she asked, "where is your mother's family from?" She gave a little surprised frown when he told her, "so she is a Maasai?" Yes. "So, you are half Maasai?" Yes. Kimani was about to explain that he had never lived in Maasailand, but then she said, "No wonder. Instead of praying you are looking at that cow like you want to marry it! But anyways, those are the sides of the country the English didn't colonize

properly.” For a moment Kimani was terrified but then she laughed, then he laughed, relieved, though she hadn’t seemed completely unserious. “Watch out,” he said, and raised his stick like a cartoon warrior, “or I will run away with your cow.” It was an old myth among the Maasais that cows fell down from heaven specially for them. Kimani had always found this ridiculous—until now, after seeing Naeku. Wambui continued to laugh, and pretending not to care, Kimani laughed along with her.

But suddenly: GRRRRRRRR—the loud and labored groan of a cow entering said labor.

They turned their heads simultaneously to the cow, then to each other, then to the cow, then Kimani began to breathe heavily, not understanding what was wrong with the animal. “She is giving birth,” Wambui exclaimed and jumped to her feet. For a moment Kimani was paralyzed, then he began to shout at Wambui angrily, “so why are you standing there? Go and help her, go and help her!” Wambui hurried over to the end of the shed where Naeku lay, then she turned around and look at him crossly, “and you? What kind of a man are you? Will you just sit there and watch a woman do all the work?” Kimani looked at her with pleading eyes and began to defend himself: his family was poor, they had never herded cows, only sheep and goats. And anyways it was only once that a goat gave birth in front of him, and he had fainted! And soon after that he was in boarding school and not with the goats. And soon after that he forgot everything he knew about animals. He wouldn’t be of any use, he insisted. And anyways, he said, *don’t you have any womanly instincts?*

In point of fact, none of this was entirely true. By that point Kimani had some considerable experience with cows, as any village boy must have, for he spent nearly every morning of his early teenage years milking his neighbor's cows outside Nakuru for five shillings pay. The thing is, up to this point, he had never particularly liked cows. It is not a disputable fact that many cows have

a streak of rebellion. He could attest, for instance, that the fattest of his neighbor's cows once chewed up his own personal uniform which he had hung upon the line to dry. Was it greed, a lack of self-control, that it could not resist the lure of the soap-sudsy water dripping from those trouser legs? On that day he was late for school, for he had spent a good part of the morning pulling his trouser out of the cow's mouth by the one visible cotton leg. The thing came out whole, but he was forced to walk into his standard five classroom with the telltale wrinkles for which every Michael and Mushina (not unfamiliar with the plight) could discern a bovine origin.

But now, hearing Naeku's groans, he was gripped with a genuine alarm which he could not himself explain nor fully believe. He willed his legs to move, but they were stuck in place. He tried to reason with himself: surely, none of his cow-experience was relevant, or sufficient to, the matter at hand. What if he made a mess of things? What did *he* know about birth-giving? It was a man's outer limit, so to speak, and the threshold onto the woman's domain. She alone was made to handle it. As for him, he was weak at the knees and the stomach even to picture that scene. Naeku groaned again and his stomach lurched about from left to right, and turning to face her, was overcome with an anxious, impossible desire to take away her pain.

It was morning by the time the thing was over. Of course, Wambui did not allow Kimani to cower, as was his plan, but hoisted him up and gave him constant tasks. Let us not go into the slimy details, but just know Kimani came out a changed man: strong kneed, strong stomached, and indebted, in all this, to a beautiful brown cow.

When they stepped outside it was to a chicken sitting pertly in a cone of sunlight. Unbeknownst to them, the rain had stopped some hours ago and the small animals had come outside. They spotted a man approaching from the direction of the house, whom Kimani assumed to be the Wambui's father. When the man reached the shed, Wambui said "Naeku has given birth."

The man did not look at Kimani but entered the shed and was there for some moments. Then she went after them and they spoke in low voices so Kimani couldn't tell what was said. Then the man came out. Who are you? He said "I am called Kimani Njogo. I was in your shed to hide from the rain." How old are you? Twenty years old. Where are you from? Nakuru. And your family? Nakuru. Who do you know here? My uncle Ngotho. The butcher? Yes, and Benny. And school? I finished form four but my uncle brought me here to work at the butchery.

Then he asked if Kimani could milk a cow. Wambui seemed about to interject, but then Kimani explained that he certainly *could* milk a cow, and had done it his whole childhood, and had grown up around them. In the corner of his eye, he could see the expression of shock and the ice of betrayal in her eyes (you lied!), and he strained to look away and to keep a placid and impervious face.

That, according to Kimani, is how he got hired to milk cows at the farm in the first place. He described the intense feelings that came over him each time he led Naeku into the squelchy mud of the milking shed, guiding her head into the curve of the plank where it hung over a trough full of cabbage and maize husks and spirals of orange peel. As she chewed, he latched her in, and she never complained. He cleaned her udders and jellied them. He pulled, and warm, steady, spears of her milk shot into his metal bucket ("I say, not a drop on my gumboots, not a drop in the brown mush!"). And, he confessed to me, that first night he had dreamed of her, Naeku, and the moment of her own birth. Yes, he saw her whole slippery, luminous body come out of her mother, saw her forehead catch the light, *zoop*, and trap it in that white triangle shape. When she opened her eyes, those black polished stones, he knew, even in his dream, that she was special. *My Naeku, my light*

*catcher, my born-in-the-morning flower, a mountain beautifully, dungfully brown, with a snow peak!*

When, many months later, the cow was found dead in his boss-man's farm, flayed, the meat taken (I presume to be sold) and the huge bony carcass left there—a bloody hide and an enormous set of ribs, everyone was aghast. I remember walking up to the boss' farm and seeing the scene myself. There was Naeku's hide, there was her dead head, with its white diamond shape. I will spare you any further description of this scene. I caught a glimpse of Kimani, who was standing apart from the crowd that had gathered there to gawk. A film had settled over his eyes and he observed the scene with a certain remove, as though he could recognize nothing and no one there anymore.

At the time I did not understand why the boy was so distraught, but looking in his eyes, I had a bad feeling in my heart. Kimani came looking for me early the next morning and asked that I take him to the police to file a report. Reader, I took him up with energy! We arrived at the police station to find the chief inspector reclined in his chair, eating a *mandazi* and slurping on a cup of tea. Kimani began to shake, and when he tried to speak his voice came out in a feeble, frustrated stutter: "I am sure you have heard the story mister inspector, sir. And you know it is not right. I have come to demand that you take immediate action."

The chief inspector sneered in Kimani's face, and not bothering to put down his tea, he said "heh, do we not kill cows every day to fill our bellies? This is petty theft," he waved one hand about, "if we catch the thief, we catch him. If we don't, I'm afraid I don't have time to waste."

I decided to intervene. "Officer, I urge that we take this seriously. If you do not address this at the root, who knows what will happen next? Don't you know that every crime is a symptom

of a larger corruption? I know this just as if *Yesu* had whispered it in my ear! The devil, after all, is a vigilant enemy and, officer, he does not doze!”

“Ah Hilary, always going on about corruption! Yes, the world is corrupt, there is corruption even in the highest office of the land. Even in America there is corruption. America! You hear? These things cannot be helped, my friend, they cannot be helped. Where there is money to be had, the ends will always justify the means. Between you and me it is good anyways that the poor wretch who did this can stuff his pockets and feed his child, *au sio*?”

“He may fill his pockets, but he empties out his soul—” I began.

“Please, no sermons today,” the officer took another noisy slurp. “This is not the old village you are still dreaming about, my brother. *Jamani*, the rules have changed! That is why me and my men are here, isn’t it? And let me tell you, there are bigger problems here than the cows. Go tell that boss to hire a watchman, eh? That is my advice,” he concluded, standing up. “As for me, I only wish I could be eating meat for Christmas like our good fellow. Ha! Ha! Ha!” Here Kimani, the stupid boy, burst into a fit of tears and we were promptly ushered out.

I left the police station with my fists curled into tight bundles. It was all I could do not to knock that man in the side of the head and step on his hat. My sleep was fitful that night and for many nights after. I told myself: what will come will come. Haven’t I done my part? And come it did, the devil knows his way around the human heart, I have said this. I heard from a paper-boy some weeks later that the thief had been killed, hunted down like a dog and knocked down with a *panga*. Immediately, I knew who had done it. I went to the farm to inquire about the boy’s whereabouts, and Wambui, understanding what I was insinuating, said “no, he couldn’t have done it. Not Kimani. He couldn’t have done it. He is only a boy!”

Of course, it is not for me to say what any person can or cannot do. But one thing I know is that there is no petty crime here. Dear reader, this was a crime of passion! Not only, please note, has a man avenged a cow as if it were a lover, but at every step our people have turned a blind eye. Really, I am not surprised that we have since fallen so far into hedonism. Sitting in *High Spirits* bar, in front of a free but ruined Kimani, and listening to all his perverted tale, I only wondered what slinky corruptions (who had been paid off and how much—this is how things go now) so that our good fellow was still walking free.

## 2

### The Story of Eliza

Eliza Kuria (nee Elizabeth M. Wainana) was not, on the whole, an unhappy woman. She had a strong enterprising streak, which, when times were tough, propped her up like a second spine so that her mind was set, with a narrow focus, on the practical details of life: to find a missing sheep, to put up a short fence for the chickens, to get a parcel delivered to some far-off relative in Nairobi. If it needed to get done, Eliza would do it. When she was in these moods, a certain reckless courage took over her and she would work her nimble, confident fingers through any knot life threw her way. On the rare occasion she found that a task was beyond her means, she could get on her bicycle and travel to the nearest person who, by dint of a good job or a well-connected cousin, could get the job done for her.

I must admit I admired the woman. She was a central part of the group that most helped shape the little settlement around Ol Kalou into something resembling a village. In her slightly bullying, proficient way, she urged and supervised the clearing of large swathes of bush, the digging up and establishment of communal cattle dips, and—no surprise—she was one of the first lot that marched up the road with large metal buckets full of fresh milk to take to the cooperative

society. For herself Eliza carved out a little shop at the front of the house she lived in with her husband, Kuria, where she sold sugar, salt, margarine, rice, paraffin, and so forth. Even when the better stocked Indian shops began to crop up around town, and when eventually she had to close her shop, Eliza found ways to continue. Soon she had opened three large stalls at the market, hired two employees, and was making even more than before.

But for many weeks Eliza could sense in her spirit that something was not right with her husband. Though she refused to name this feeling, it persisted as a stone in her stomach whose heaviness she felt every time she sat alone. *What is this?* She wondered to herself, *God, what is this feeling?* One evening, as if to challenge this sensation, she decided to prepare herself for Kuria. She took a longer bath than usual and then oiled her body and her hair, which she parted in the middle and braided into a crescent shape like a young girl. Then she wrapped her softest *leso* underneath her armpits and made a tight knot at the back. Early in their marriage she would prepare herself for him in this way and it would drive him mad with wanting. Now she observed herself in the mirror with a certain remove: she had grown thinner over the years and her hips no longer filled up the cloth no matter how tautly she pulled the knot, so she took it off entirely and lay on the bed naked.

It was two more hours before Kuria came home, and by the time he arrived, Eliza was staring absently at the patterning on the lace sheet that curtained their bedroom window. He greeted her in his usual way and began to hang up his coat and drape his clothing over the wicker chair in the corner of the room. He made no comment on her gleaming naked appearance and did not take up the challenge in her eye. When he entered the bed, she noticed a slight scent of oranges. She moved closer to him, but when she touched his arm, he sighed and said, "I am tired today," and



then absently, "I am worn out." Immediately these words left his mouth Eliza saw that he had told on himself: "but what has worn you out, my love?" she asked, with an acrid sweetness in her voice, and Kuria knew by this she meant *who*. "Ah, ah," he said, "work is hard." Eliza held his gaze for a moment longer and recognized, clear as day, the glint of an unspoken confession. She knew. He knew she knew. In fact, it grew very obvious to Eliza that she had *always* known, but that each time her mind veered in this direction she had steered it away at the last moment, so that she never followed the feeling to its conclusion. She had simply refused to think the thought. Every time he had come home late and smelling of someone else, she had found every explanation in his favor and when there was none, she had and invented one.

Suddenly she rose and walked up to the chest of drawers, she pulled his coat off the hook and brought it to her nose. Oranges. Then she turned around and found his vest among the little pile of clothing and brought it up to her nose. Oranges. Methodically, she smelled every article of clothing he had worn that day. When she was done, she faced him again, her eyes firm with expectation, challenging him to speak. Searching, searching, his face for an explanation. When he did not say anything, she bent to pick up the *leso*, wrapped it around herself, and entered at the farthest end of the bed. Lying there she tried to find the words to express her anger, but nothing came. Only the stone in her stomach seemed to triple in size, and that dull gray pain in her seemed to bloom freshly with every breath.

The next morning, Wanja, Eliza's neighbor, heard her call out "my dear Wanja!" with a pained crack in her voice. Wanja had looked up from the plot of earth she was digging up, and shading her eyes, made out Eliza's slim figure by the row of bushes dividing their farmsteads. Wanja trudged her way up to the shady area where Eliza stood.

“What is it, my sister?”

“I think my husband is seeing another woman,” Eliza muttered, her gaze severe yet somewhat distracted.

Wanja gasped, dropping the hoe she held in her fist and bringing her hands up to hide her shock. Of course, Wanja was not really surprised because Kuria was just the type, and it was true that he had once offered himself to her as well.

“Yes,” Eliza continued, “and can you believe he lies to my face. Last week I asked him why he returned home so late, and he said he was catching up with Thuo, but I know very well that Thuo was not in town because his brother was getting married.”

“Ehhh...men can lie!” Wanja said, shaking her head in sympathy. “Eliza, my dearest, it is almost as if we women were made to suffer. Imagine, it is not very long ago that my own husband was doing such foolishness. It is only God who brought him back to his senses.”

“Wanja please advise me. What can I do? I pray about it every night, but this thing is eating up my heart. Really, it is,” Eliza said, her voice breaking softly as the thought of her unborn baby floated to the fore of her mind. Wanja fixed her with a look of admonition.

“I advise you to leave it alone. Don’t let that idiot upset you. Just bite your tongue and be his fool, my dear, it is not only men who can have some fun,” Wanja said, with a playful grin. Eliza sighed, wishing that Wanja’s jokes could uplift her now as much as they had when they were young. Seeing that her friend was not amused, Wanja’s face grew suddenly serious.

“Eliza,” she said, “but you know there are other ways around these things. There are ways to get a man back and there are ways to keep him.” She said all of this in a whisper, aware of the risk in what she was suggesting.

“Wanja, I hope to God you are not saying what I think you are saying. I am not so desperate as to turn to evil methods. If he wants to leave then he will leave, but Wanja I will not dirty my hands.”

“Eliza, you are a good woman. I am not saying you should do ungodly things *ovyoo ovyoo*. I am only saying that if you can live with this man’s behavior then live with it. If you cannot then something must be done, isn’t it?”

“Wanja, I cannot do that sort of thing. Those are the behaviors of bad women and of women who don’t know Christ. If there is one good thing the white people did it is deliver us from that dirty business of witchdoctors and evil medicines.”

“—I hear you well Eliza, don’t misunderstand,” Wanja interrupted, “but men are men, and they will always think from the loins rather than from the head. If you don’t want to dirty your hands then don’t dirty your hands. But then you must accept the fool for what he is. But first tell me, do you know the woman?”

Eliza hesitated. “Yes, I know her,” she said, staring ahead at the yellow sun. In truth Eliza did not know who it was, she only suspected. Yet in her experience, these things might as well be equal: when one felt something so strongly in the stomach, it was just as good as knowing it in the head, as good as seeing it with one’s two eyes. “I know the woman,” she repeated, pulling her gaze back into focus and looking her friend in the eye.

“Alright,” Wanja said, as though this knowledge should speak for itself. She picked up her *Jembe*. “The right answer will come to you. I wish you strength, my sister, and peace of mind. These things are not easy.”

“They are not easy,” Eliza agreed and picked up her own *jembe*. When, at sunset, they each returned to their homes to prepare for the evening, Eliza could feel the stone in her heart no lighter than it was that morning.

And so, distressed and humiliated, Eliza tied and retied her *leso* by the door and waited for her husband to return. Her eyes danced about furiously, slipping from object to object but finding no safe place to land. Everywhere she looked she spotted some surface that needed to be dusted, some cloth that she had set aside to be bleached or re-hemmed, some stray doodad that needed to be put in its place. In the spirit of rebellion, she tried to restrain herself from doing any housework that day, resolving that if Kuria did not respect her as his wife, then she was not obliged to behave like one. In the end she swept a little, cleaned a little, and cooked a little—so at least the children could eat—but she prepared no meal for Kuria to come home to. Instead, Eliza huffed and puffed by the ledge of the door, aware in the periphery of her mind that this business of not-doing-anything-for-one’s-husband was costing her just as much, if not more, effort than if she had done everything as normal, times two. “Heh,” she murmured, “it is really no good for a woman to be idle.”

In the end (she could only hold out for so long) Eliza wandered into the kitchen and plucked up a sisal basket into which, assuming her place by the door, she continued to shell the last of the castor seeds that she was to sell the next day at the market. Though the familiar motions: cracking the pods, slipping out the dark beans, dropping them, with a smooth rattle, into the basket, curbed some of her physical agitation, she did not allow her mind to rest.

Blessed. That was the woman’s name. Eliza had seen her around the market, and they had even greeted each other a few times. Several times while at her own stall Eliza found herself staring

disdainfully at this woman with her cart of oranges, a secret anger in her heart, and all the while unable to admit its source. But now she had said it aloud. Blessed. A crude picture flashed in Eliza's mind of Blessed stepping out of the river, her buttocks jiggling this way and that, as though they were filled up with cooking oil. Blessed with her tight, girlish smile and her big body. Is that what Kuria wanted? A woman that was round, and not angular, like Eliza was? A woman who did not do work that would roughen up her palms or toughen the flesh of her thighs?

“Ah!” Eliza exclaimed, disgusted at the dirty places her mind had wandered into. For several weeks now these thoughts had been snaking in and out of her mind. In fact, she had not been eating well and had been spending more and more time working the farm to distract herself. Even when there was no more crop to be planted and nothing left to weed or prune, Eliza sought compulsively for more to do. She built a new hatch for the rabbits, she replaced some rotting planks on the gate that led into the orchard, and she borrowed a ladder from Karanja across the road so she could repaint the back wall of the house which had grown discolored with damp. But no matter how she busied herself, the woman's face would flash before her at every still moment, and she felt her stomach tighten and release, then lurch this way and that so that she was suddenly gripped with a dizzy feeling.

Sitting there, some memories returned to her of the home where she had lived with her father before she married Kuria and before he brought her here, to the new lands. She longed to touch the earth of her ancestral home, which was red and not brown, and which during the harvest, when the tea plants grew to her hip, turned into a sea of green. She stood and looked out of the window, staring across the dark, fog-shrouded hills before her and felt, like a pin in her chest, the loss of her old home and village, as one might experience the loss of a friend. She had lost an entire world of affection, and now everything before her turned into a torture. How was it that her own

husband could not love her after she had left the entire world for him? She wept, despite herself, letting out a grief that endured and reproduced against her will.

Kuria returned just after midnight and found Eliza waiting at the door. As he drew closer, he could feel, as a sensible experience, her gaze gathering onto his face with a hot intensity. Then he was up the hill, and had made his way to the door, but Eliza neither moved nor spoke. He looked around her, at the shallow basket on the floor, at the few stray castor seeds that had landed on the grass, and which now shone at him like the furtive, accusatory eyes of small animals. He tugged nervously at his ear, his round, dark face filled with the open desperation of a child that wanted to be forgiven for some small blunder. She held his gaze for some moments then she shook her head and looked past him.

“There it is again. You smell like her, Kuria, you even smell like her. Are you not ashamed?” He looked at her with a genuine apology in his eye, then he said “Eliza, my dear, you know that I treasure you above all.”

“But not enough to keep that thing inside your trousers?”

“Eliza listen—”

“And do you know that I must see that woman every day at the market?”

“Eliza, it is not even anything to worry about.”

“Really? But I know you will do it again and again. You think I don’t know? You think I haven’t heard what people are saying?” In fact, Eliza herself had not heard what people were saying, if they were saying anything, but she continued with this line of questioning because it was all she could do not to burst into tears. It was all she could do to keep him fixed there before her, so that he wouldn’t leave, so that he wouldn’t slip away forever as she feared he longed do.

Later that night Eliza lay in bed with her eyes open, facing the wall. Kuria took off his clothes and went near her. At first, in a fit of jealous anger, she pulled herself away. Then she turned to face him and shifted her body so it brushed softly against his. Then, with a tender expectancy in her eyes, she said “I am pregnant.”

“He!” Kuria said, “for how long have you known this?”

Something in Eliza cracked. She had hoped he would be excited, as he had been for the other children. She had hoped he would light up and say, “but that is good news,” or jump up from the bed and exclaim, “that is a miracle, my love!” She had hoped, in short, that this child would return Kuria to her and her to him, and their love would be as it had been at the beginning. Kuria saw this drop in her expression, so he took her hand and said, “don’t worry, I would never leave you.” There it is, Eliza thought. This is his best assurance. She saw that she was kidding herself; Kuria could not love her, he could only offer her the feeble promise that he would not run away.

Despite the ache in her heart, Eliza knew firmly that in times of struggle it was not available to her to wallow. Accordingly, no concept of a “void of despair” ever entered her mind. When she cried out that night, and for many nights after, it was not into the abyss. Eliza Kuria cried out to God. She muttered prayers under her breath, and she kept the Bible as a mast in the center of her world. When everything seemed to go against her will, she responded by willing anyways, by willing for a stronger faith. That night, with Kuria asleep beside her, she let her palm settle on her stomach, which was bulging slightly beneath her night dress. She traced idle circles with her fingers against the taut skin, whispering the same prayers she always did: over the child, over her home and her husband, over the new lands and every horizon therein contained.

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Eliza turned in bed. The conversation she had with Wanja some weeks before had not left her mind, and on this night worries pried into her from all directions. Wanja's words about there being "other ways" echoed shrilly in her ear, and she whispered "I cannot do it" in a flat tone, unconvincing, even to herself. Where was Kuria? He must be with the woman. He must be. She turned again and looked up at the ceiling. If it meant seeing a fetish man to get her own husband to stay, then surely, Kuria didn't love her, and he never would. Love must be given freely, mustn't it? And first of all, what would her father say if he saw what depths she sunk to for the sake of a foolish man like Kuria? Even Kuria himself had said many times that these things never worked—that they were only native superstitions. "Ha!" she imagined him exclaiming at the idea. "I cannot do it," she repeated. And even if she did, and even if it worked, she wondered, could she look at him again and feel peace in her heart? Could she look at *herself* and feel peace in her heart?

Then Kuria stumbled into the room and collapsed on the bed. He let out a heaving, hungry yawn, interrupting the tangle of thoughts that had begun to web, like mosquito netting, around Eliza and behind which she was beginning to lose her breath. And now, he had so easily lifted up this net and tossed it aside—it was to be kept away, forgotten under the routine proceedings of the day, to be returned to only at night, when Kuria had settled into his early slumber and Eliza was left alone to turn and tangle in the darkness.

Four days later, Eliza woke up at dawn to find Kuria gone again, but this time she did not feel sad or lonely. Instead, something hot in her began to wind like a spring. She knew she had only to wait for him to return before the winding reached capacity, and not through any will or effort of her own, but through a purely physical mechanism, something in her would take charge. It was a feeling she had known before. After all, had she not travelled here with Kuria, barely



eighteen, and built up a life from nothing? Had she not endured the loss of her father and her entire family of friends? Had she not been the first woman in the village to open up a shop? And when it closed, had she not come back even stronger? Yes, she decided, perhaps other measures must be pursued. Eliza Kuria was, after all, a woman who got things done.

So, one evening Eliza Kuria bent. Crouching quietly at the foot of the bed, she took the hold of a parcel and undid the tight knot of plastic at the top. She shook the bundle of roots out onto the ground and pushed it hurriedly underneath the bed. Then she dusted off her hands and her *leso* and threw the plastic in the burning-heap before setting it aflame. After, she went back into the house and began to cut up the greens which she would boil and mash into the evening meal. That evening, she received Kuria peaceably, like a good wife, and as Wanja had advised, she was truly his fool. When he came near her in bed she was elated.

Things were the same for several nights but each time, when Kuria had finished and began to snore, Eliza fell into a fitful, melancholy sleep, desperately longing to wake up, but dragged, as if by clawing animals, back again into a dark and airless night. In the mornings, her mind still foggy with this feeling, she would sometimes watch Kuria shuffling around the house like someone in the shadows might voyeuristically—and not without envy—watch someone in the light. He would seem to her like a paper cut-out rather than a man—aware, in a simple way, of his successes, and brandishing them like a set of shining teeth. If he caught her looking, she knew, he would not see the cold mask of analysis that had settled over her face. He would only see his woman, whom he loved, and who had been a loyal and diligent wife to him.

Alas, I must come clean now and tell you, reader, that I have read the woman's private journal. (Halt your hows and whys, let me finish!). The title of her journal was "the day of great

sorrow,” —and how fitting, for isn’t this what her life has become, one long sorrowful day? And all of this because of what? A man? Wrong answer. Eliza lost the moment she allowed doubt to enter her mind instead of trusting God! For in the end that is what she did, isn’t it, when she took matters into her own hands? Perhaps, deep down she knew as well as anyone that the fetish man’s tricks would not work, that they were the nonsense of a previous age. But it is the doubt which is expressed in the act *itself* that tells all, my friend. See now, even our best women are falling for tricks and lowering themselves to the level of those who offend them. Really, one wonders, what hope remains for the rest?

### 3

#### **The Story of Anne**

Little Anne was home alone as she recounts it, and outside it was raining and storming and the winds were shaking the gum trees and the avocados were tumbling down and rolling against the iron roof of their house. Anne was standing in the kitchen when she heard a quick knocking at the door and a man’s voice asking over the noise of the rain for shelter. She did not open the door but carefully peeked through a crack in its wooden planks. Of course, she was very young, she would later explain, and had never seen a white man before, never mind one with a beard and a Bible, never mind one in the rain. And what didn’t help, she would add, was the bolts of lightning flaring in big zooms and whooshes behind him, and what didn’t help, was that she was at that moment engaged in sin.

Sin of what sort, you ask? Why, she was only, for the first time ever, tasting, and arguably also stealing, wine. In fact, her young tongue had only just discovered, having placed the bottle's puckered lips against her own and tipped the other end into the air, that wine was not (*not at all*) delicious. And now, mouth ballooned with sour liquid, now, red trickling down her chin, she peeps through the peeping hole, and who is here to witness her double-layered transgression but (she determined) the Light of the World Himself? Her teeth, tongue, lips, stained dark red and curved into a foolish grin began to take the shape of fear. She briefly considered running and then, deciding it futile (run where?), closed her mouth and made the eyes of innocence. *Was this to be the end?* Had He come to deliver that final dazzling blow which was to cast her into the fires of Hell?

This, the sticky heist, was the first of many thefts Anne conducted in her lifetime—what you might call her original sin. Her whole thing became that if Jesus was right there on the other side of a wooden door, on His side all the mighty rains of the world, all of its celestial electricities and its fearsome winds, and there *she* was: a sinner sinning center stage, almost caught-in-the-act (maybe not red-handed but red-lipped, red-teethed, red-tongued), and the lightning did not touch her? Surely, then, what couldn't she do?

But, of course, memory is a tricky thing. As per her older sister's account it was not Jesus but a missionary, it was not wine but prune juice, and Anne was never (*not ever*) home alone. I would so very much like to tell you that little Anne is not a liar, but, my friends, her sins did not stop at thieving. But if on one thing they came to a consensus it was that she did steal something, and though she was not struck dead by lightning, she did, at the hands of her vigilant and all-seeing mother, receive a bum-beating like nothing you have ever seen before. But despite her own

mother's wrath, little Anne had seen what she had seen and lived, and so she continued in her mischief for, alas, what more had she to fear?

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While little Anne was receiving her glorious bum-beating, a certain Thomas K. Mushina of a neighboring village town was crouched under a guava tree in his father's old farm committing the catechism of the Catholic Church to memory. Thomas, who was twenty-two at the time, had learned only that morning that he had been admitted to teach in a high school the next town over and was torn between going and staying to become a priest.

Kneeling down then drawing a wooden top from his pocket, he traced a little circle in the dirt with his finger and bisected it. On one side he marked "Y" for *yes, go!* And on the other side he marked "N" for *no*. Then he perched the little top in the middle and spun. Thomas watched carefully as it performed this dizzying dance upon which he had staked his future. When it fell at last it fell on the right, that is, on "N" for no. Then with whatever residual spin left in it, it lulled forward into the "Y" and then back again, and then it stopped at last on the old dividing line.

Thomas, who was in many ways a simple man, made of this conflicting set of signals the simplest determination he could. That is, he would be both. And so it was that he set off to our old village town of Ol Kalou a few weeks later with a cloth bag full of hand-me-downs, a book of hymns, and a new pair of black leather shoes, to be first and youngest teacher-slash-priest at Light Academy Girls High School.

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For all her life before her fifteenth birthday, Anne had great globs of wax in the canals of her ears. Though she could hear most things, quieter things were muffled and some things she could not hear at all. For a long time she lived like this, semi-hearing, semi-not, and she was getting along alright. The whole idea of the dewaxing was her mother's and was, for the most part, a gift of good intent. Indeed, Anne was excited by the idea on the walk to the village hospital, and was excited by the many sounds and the distances of sounds on the way back. Oh, how things were to change after that birthday, but how could she have known?

As the rumor goes, so long as she had the wax in her ears little Anne was a good girl. And indeed, the extents of her offensive action were limited to the petty and childish mischiefs of cheeky little girls. Only after the wax was out did the drastic and sacrilegious business of love affairs begin. And it makes sense, does it not, for it was only then that she could discern those lower frequencies in which such matters of love and romance were spoken. For how was she, with all that wax in, to have heard the many hot-breathed whispers of passing boys, the desperate cooings, the muffled, the muted, the hushed, indeed, how even to hear that soundless fluttering of her own insides? Oh, it was a whole new world, it must have been!

When Thomas arrived in Ol Kalou he moved into a rented room in town with a young, very dark and very short fellow named Clinton. Thomas immediately found him strange. His head was large and of a funny shape, which seemed almost banal. Clinton's impressions of Thomas took quite a different route. On learning of Thomas's budding ventures into academic instruction, Clinton seized on him immediately with that awful thing of a nickname: Professor Calcoolos. It was many months later, and quite by accident, that Thomas discovered it was stolen from a picture book, and that this picture book read *Professor Calculus*. It was by an even greater unlikelihood

that Thomas found out Clinton himself was not Clinton at all but Moustafa, and that, again, he had taken the fake name from a book. But, Thomas found, this liberality of Clinton's with names, fake-, nick-, pseudo-, did not extend to any other matter of life. By Clinton's instruction, the room was kept sparse, with no furniture and only two narrow mattresses set on the floor on either side. At night they used kerosene lamps so as not to pay for electricity, and for the same reason cooked on a small gas stove. But all this was to be tolerated on account of the fact that Clinton owned a small radio which, in its sputtering toil, produced a crackling but steady stream of Bach and Chopin and Mozart. Thomas, who had never heard anything of the sort his whole life, secretly abandoned his previous ambitions for priesthood and set his eye on a shining new aspiration to be the conductor of a great orchestra in Europe.

But what a great coincidence, the simultaneous aural revelations of the soon-to-be love birds! And, when one morning, they happened upon each other on the road, it was like something out of a film. The girl was like nothing our young priest had ever seen before: long-legged, brown-skinned, neat-waisted, devil-eyed. He looked up at her and wobbled. She glared at him, and then at his socks, which were pulled over his knees, and then said you look like a colonial master. He loved her instantly. As for the girl, she sensed some dark cloud in the future, some certain yet formless thing which was to change everything. He explained quickly that he was a junior priest, and twenty-four, that he taught at the school nearby. Ah, she thought, a forbidden man, a Holy man, and nine years her senior?

Her calculations were concise and foolish: she was the great transgressor, this was to be her epic move, and she was to keep her cool. Looking at his eyes she saw how drenched they were with adoration, how kindly they looked upon her, as if they too had seen that dark thing coming and had forgiven already, had forgotten, had absolved her for any part she might come to play in

this pending destruction. Yes, she determined, it was certainly cause for what might be called a *secret love affair*, a perfect scandal, and she was to be at the dazzling and treacherous center of it.

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For a priest, even a budding one, *especially* a budding one, Thomas had few beliefs. His attachment to the Bible could best be described as exactly that: an attachment, or perhaps a preoccupation. He was certainly a Christian, he had decided long ago, because he believed with no doubt that Jesus died on the cross and rose again. This fact sat firmly in his repertoire of convictions, yet it had little company. *If I wanted* he thought, *I could count all the things I believe in on my ten fingers. On one hand, even. And if we're really pushing it,* he went on, *but, no...no* and changed his mental topic. Thomas did this often, convinced that if his mind was a book, he didn't have to read to the end of the page, didn't have to see the chapter through. And anyways, he knew something more important, which is that it isn't a book at all but more like a deep well.

It was late in the afternoon, and Thomas was stretched out under the shade of a Cedar tree. The hot pulse of sunlight which had lulled him into slumber had vanished, leaving a dull cast over everything. The clouds stretched in a huge pale froth across the sky, and looking up, Thomas got the sense that it would rain. The image of the girl flitted in and out of his vision like a bird. There was her brown face. There was the small white mark on her neck. He propped himself up on his elbows, staring off at the purple outline of the mountain in the distance and tried to forget her, tried to invoke the feeling of indifference that he had long cultivated about such things. But he couldn't help it. No matter how much he tried to steer his mind away, it slipped and returned to her. What was she doing? Would he really see her again?

On the long walk home, he strained to remember the verses of the important sermon he planned to deliver the coming Sunday on the question of free will in the writings of the Apostle Paul. By the time he returned home, the dusk was setting in and their little room was darkening. Clinton was not back, and Thomas didn't expect him until around nine o'clock, when he usually returned from football. Thomas shook off his shoes by the door and stood facing the room, feeling suddenly tired and slow. He stared blankly around him. He wondered how the room would look to the girl, Anne, though of course she would never see it. He was suddenly self-conscious. Would she find it too dark and cold? Or was it too plain?

He looked over the room. There was only one window. It was on Thomas' side of the room and the bars which cut across it (one vertically, one horizontally) cast a cross-shaped shadow on his bed. In the area to the right of the entrance there was a low shelf on top of which they had arranged some loose kitchenware: a big pot, a small one, two chipped plates, two steel cups, two spoons. Then on top there was half a loaf of bread in its orange plastic package, a tin of margarine, a tin of tea leaves, a small bag of sugar. On the floor by the shelf was a ten-kilogram sack of maize flour and beside it a full jug of water. In the middle of this little area there was their small gas stove with an orange cylinder. He found himself reviewing many features of his life and his home, trying to see how they measured up against her. Anne.

He went to his bed and fell backwards upon it with his fingers intertwined and perched on his stomach. He tried again to put her away, to take her off, fold her in a square, and place her on the shelf so that he might catch a little rest. But still her name and high voice buzzed about his mind, pestering him like a fly. He flung his arm out to strike her away, and she wound around smartly, with a wicked laugh, and landed again on his ear. Bzzz. Nice try.



He had seen her again in the town, where, with her back turned, she had been sorting through a large heap of sweaters at the second-hand market. He became suddenly awkward there in the street, stumbled quickly across the main road, and hid himself among the bus stop crowd, like a child in his mother's skirts. But just when he thought he had slipped off and lost her, there she was beside him saying "hello teacher-pastor, I am going this way too." She had spoken constantly, without taking a breath, explaining how she had spent her day at the market, how she had saved up money from picking pyrethrum, and how she now wanted a new sweater before Easter came around. Thomas did not speak much and had hardly looked at her, he nodded politely at appropriate intervals and kept his gaze ahead.

He was conscious of other people watching them and did his best to remain at a distance from her, to retreat away from the glow of her eagerness. She spoke about the weather, expressed concerns about the progress of her father's oat fields, and spoke excitedly about the birth of a new calf just that morning. In this commotion of words she suddenly said something small and shocking: "when I see you tomorrow I will show you the dam on our land which was built by the whites." Tomorrow? She put the idea in the air but didn't dwell on it—she let it rise and hang back like a kite, trailing lightly above where they walked. Thomas, as usual, didn't know what to say (*tomorrow?*) so he said nothing. He began to feel something close around him—a certain definite future beginning to take shape in his mind. It would be a lie to suggest that he didn't know what he was doing. That he didn't know, by saying nothing, that he said everything she needed to hear: yes, tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that. Yes, yes, yes!

When Clinton arrived, he found Thomas asleep in a seated position, with his chin on his chest. Clinton took off his shoes and walked over, then squatted down in front of Thomas and said

“hey man, wake up!” shaking Thomas’s shoulder. Thomas jerked awake, blinking confusedly. “You fell asleep. You should get in the bed, it is cold today.” When Clinton stood up he said “I’m going to have a bath first,” and stretched his arms, squinting, “and then I’ll go to bed early.” He went to the stove and turned it on, then put a pot of water on to boil. *Early?* Thomas thought, then murmured “what time is it?” rubbing his eyes and feeling some amount of shame. “A quarter past nine.” The glare of the little lamp’s flame seemed very bright to Thomas and he wished he could turn it off and lie down, melt back into nothingness. Instead, he rubbed his eyes and stood up and said, “I’ll wash too.” Clinton nodded, then walked out to prepare the things for his bath. Thomas wondered what he should do in the meanwhile. When Clinton came back, he was holding a towel he had picked from the clothesline. He shook off his clothes, tied the towel around his waist, then stood over the pot of simmering water. They stood there separately; each man encased in his own silence.

When they were both clean and in their separate beds, and Thomas had turned off the little lamp, he found he was not very sleepy anymore. Or rather, his mind was tired, and longed to rest, but his body would not settle into slumber. Thomas turned on his narrow mat and observed the shadows which his body cast upon the wall. He tightened his arm into a fist and held it up so a huge but indistinct shadow fell upon the other bed. Then he unfurled it, tightened it again, then unfurled it, and tightened it. This was the form of his worry. A clenching. A release. A clenching. A release.

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When he first moved to Ol Kalou Thomas had enjoyed a certain picture of himself as a neutral man. He was not yet *local*, not yet known by everyone, and there was no fixed idea of who

he was floating about the town. He liked to imagine that when people looked at him, instead of a face they saw a question mark. He had known, of course, that word had spread around the village about a new teacher, but this sort of gossip was apart from him, unrelated to his character. Of course, this initial distance can never be a permanent state and these days he was starting to feel the oppressive weight that comes from people knowing who you are. His last meeting with Anne had added to this pressure, and a part of him never wanted to see her again.

But here he was. Here she was. Nothing could be done about it.

They met in the evening, at the edge of town, in the place where they had left each other yesterday. Anne picked up her chatter where she had left off, as if there had never been any interruption. She walked at a brisk and steady pace, so different Thomas' meandering style that always made him look like he didn't know where he was going. In this way, Thomas and Anne went on and on. There were several meetings, and over them several miles were skirted. Thomas felt a certain fullness of Love awaken in his heart. When she was away, the world was dark and soundless.

But this all was undercut by a certain terror which, at some points, especially in the night, he could feel welling up in his spirit. It was a feeling Thomas had felt before, and he remembered it well from when he was a boy. It was the Friday before school was to open for the second term. The sky was dull, with low, heavy clouds, the air warm. His mother had finished pruning and was now picking the pumpkin greens she would use to prepare their dinner. The sun was setting, and Thomas was on the far end of the farm, bent among the undergrowth of the gooseberry bushes, squinting for beads of yellow in the gray-green light. Deep in this act his mind would turn singular, prodding leaves around methodically, careful for thorns, careful not to snap the branches, not to pick anything that wasn't ready.

“Kairu!” he heard his mother shout.

He looked up. Before he could register the sound, he spotted, in the corner of his eye, a purple globe in a shady spot of a passion vine. He approached it slowly as if not to scare it away. There it was: a purple so deep it was almost brown. It stood out like a bruise among the yellow-green shrouding. An ugly fruit, wrinkled and heavy on the vine. This would be the best. He pulled; it fell into his palm. He held it, then drawing it near his face, tore into its skin with his thumbs and opened it so its juice and seed poured into his mouth like little orange tadpoles.

The memory disturbed Thomas, though he could not understand why. He thought about his childhood often enough but always avoided this scene: somehow, it made him feel guilty. He had been seven, or thereabouts. Everyone called him Kairu, “small and black,” a nickname given to him by a friend’s father when he had visited them. In the several years between then and now, Thomas had lengthened and filled out his frame so that now he was slender and tall. Handsome, with large, kind eyes. And still dark, not yellow-brown like his mother and his brother. Nobody in his adult life called him “Kairu,” but privately, Thomas continued to recall his younger self this way—as “Kairu,” small, with black, shining skin. And there was the picture in his head. There was the figure of a little boy, suckling a passion fruit that had almost made him cry.

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One day, as he and Anne moved through the steady, familiar, scenery at the outskirts of the village, and walked on through the surrounding valleys, Thomas felt the world around them dissolve. It was the feeling of jointness, of moving through the world in one’s most natural way, with one’s most natural partner. And there they were: a river of two people, not understanding their destination nor the drives that led them there. They wandered off the road and onto a wide

grassy field that seemed to have no outer edge. Anne, who knew every inch of these lands, walked on in her sure way. They came to a low wire fence and Anne lifted her skirt to her knees so she could jump over it. Not out of stupidity but a certain internal hesitation and self-consciousness which refused him to say no, Thomas followed the girl.

As you and I both know, the question now was how to pronounce those four words. But before the words were pronounced, the indecent action took place. Oh yes, in a fit of passion, Anne and Thomas were joined at the waist in the pre-marital bed. Afterwards, Anne was in a panic. And my mother? What will my mother say? What have I done? Thomas saw when she was washing herself, that once lathered and rinsed, she would lather again and rinse again and so on. She scrubbed between her toes, between her fingers, behind her ears. She would then pause randomly and look at him as if she didn't know who he was, and then she was scrubbing frantically again, her bony elbows clanking against the sides of the iron tub.

In her head she repeated that it was alright, this was the plan to begin with, no? This is what secret love affairs were like. But in her heart, she felt as though something inside her was wilting slowly and painfully. It was as though she found herself suspended in the air, being pulled at either arm by two forces which she could not control. On the one hand she felt so ashamed, and underneath all this shame, as though something had been taken from her. She wanted her mother, she wanted her own bed, her own body again.

I suppose it was her suspicion that her mother, were she to find out (and as she most certainly would) would not stop at the tar and the feathers. In all other respects Eliza had a soft spot in her heart for Anne. But on this matter, the matter of the coochie and the cock, well, it was suddenly crime of crimes, sin of sins, oh the *misbehavior* the *dirty deed!* Her good daughter was

now a soiled soil in which nothing good nor Godly would ever grow! And with a priest? Oh, brother. It was to Eliza's great relief when Thomas made a vanishing act soon after. He went off to start another life, she told Anne coldly, In this world a man can start himself a new life but little foolish girls cannot. Indeed, when Anne saw him last, he was across the dirt road with a cloth bag and a small black radio pressed against his ear.

But tugging at Anne's other arm was a wrath. Yes, little Anne emerged out of the burning embers of her heartbreak with a new red-hot wrath. This, she called her *fire*. Little Anne, who was so beautiful and so big, burned and burned, was hateful and spiteful, she became truly like a flame and devoured. When it was discovered that alongside this new wrath, Anne had also become of child, all hell broke loose. Then she fell unexpectedly ill, and it was blood in the toilet and, everyone assumed, baby bye-bye. Anne prayed and asked that God would save her and take away her pain. This was not like that dark cloud which she had sensed so long ago, but something far, far, worse.

Of those eight months in between her running away and when she stepped back into the house bulging at the belly (for her baby had not died but lived), I know very little. All I know is if before, she was a blooming carnation, a flower flowering out of itself, then after she was like a tulip, folding endlessly inwards as if seeking that first tender bud at the center. When the baby was born, all Anne could do was hold him and cry *My little baby, My little baby, My little baby*. As for Thomas, Anne never saw him again. In the first months of their separation, before the baby was born, she had scribbled endless words and prayers in her journals asking *why, why*. And for many years after she felt that ache, that strange sadness of trying to know a thing that does not want to be known. I have heard people say that she could have been smarter from the start—not so stubborn and not so brash. And as others have remarked, there are easier ways to deal with questions of

love. Such as, perhaps, to pick a daisy from the compound, and like the child she was, find her answer at the end of a steady and tear shaped stream of he-loves-me, he-loves-me-nots.

As for me I have stopped feeling sorry and I have ceased to be surprised. Our fear of God is lost, even—to take Anne’s astounding case— when He comes knock-knocking at the door. I will leave you with these tales to consider the comedy-tragedy-farce that Ol Kalou has become. And if you think I have compromised myself in any part of this document then, I insist, follow my example, and go tell it on the mountain!

Works Cited

*The Bible*. Authorized King James Version, Oxford UP, 1998.