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A GIRL IS A BODY OF WATER

JENNIFER NANSUBUGA MAKUMBI

TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon

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To my grandmothers

Rakeli, Yeeko, Abisaagi, and Milly on Father's side, and on Mother's side, Batanda and Kaamida, all of them sisters to my "real" grandmothers. For that thick traditional love, which would not allow me to see that my "real" grandmothers had passed when my parents were very young. Not until all of you had passed.

•

To Catherine Makumbi Kulubya whose fierce independence, sheer tenacity, and quiet intelligence first inspired me.

THE WITCH

1

Nattetta, Bugerere, Uganda

May 1975

Until that night, Kirabo had not cared about her. She was curious on occasion (*Where is she? What does she look like? How does it feel to have a mother?*, that sort of thing), but whenever she asked about her and family said, "No one knows about her," in that never-mind way of large families, she dropped it. After all, she was with family and she was loved. But then recently her second self, the one who did mad things, had started to fly out of her body, and she had linked the two.

On this occasion, when she asked about her mother and family fobbed her off again with "Don't think about her; think about your grandparents and your father," something tore. It must have been the new suspicion (*Maybe she does not want me because I am . . .*) that cut like razors.

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A mosquito came zwinging. It must have gorged itself on someone because its song was slow and deep, unlike the skinny, high-pitched hungry ones that flew as if crazed. Kirabo's eyes found it and followed it, followed it and, rising to her knees, she clapped it so hard her palms burned. She brought her hands to the candle to check her prize. Black blood: yesterday's. There is no satisfaction like clapping a bloated mosquito out of existence mid-air. She wiped mosquito mash on a stray piece of paper and sat back and waited again.

Kirabo wanted storytelling, but the teenagers were engrossed in gossip. They lounged on three bunk beds in the girls' bedroom. Some lay, some sat, legs dangling, others cross-legged, squeezed cosily, two or three to a bed. They had gathered as usual, after supper, to chatter before going off to sleep. Kirabo was not welcome.

For a while she had watched them, waiting to catch a pause, a breath, a tick of silence in their babble, to wedge in her call to storytelling—nothing. Finally, she gritted her teeth and called, "Once, a day came . . ." but her voice carried too far above the teenagers' heads and rang impatient in the rafters.

The hush that fell could have brought down trees. Teenagers' heads turned, eyes glaring (*But who does this child think she is?*), some seething (*What makes you think we want to hear your stories?*). None answered her call.

Another twelve-year-old would have been intimidated—there were ten teenagers in the room—but not Kirabo. Not visibly, anyway. She stared straight ahead, lips pouting. She was the *kabejja* of her grandparents, which meant that all the love in the house belonged to her, and whether they liked it or not, the teenagers,

her aunts and uncles, would sit quietly and suffer her story. But Kirabo's eyes—the first thing you saw on her skinny frame, with eyelids darker than shadows and lashes as long as brush bristles—betrayed her. They blinked rapidly, a sign that she was not immune to the angry silence.

Unfortunately, tradition was that she could not start her story until the audience granted her permission, but she had begun by annoying them.

•

On the floor in front of Kirabo was a kerosene candle. The *tadooba* only partially lit the room, throwing her shadow, elongated like a mural and twitchy like a spectre, against the wall. She looked down at the candle's flame. A slender column of smoke rose off it and streamed up to the beams. A savage thought occurred to her: she could blow the flame out and turn the room blind-dark. And to annoy the teenagers properly, she would scamper off to Grandfather's bedroom with the matchbox. Instead, Kirabo cradled the fragile flame between her palms to protect it from her breath. Her evil self, the one who quickened her breath and brought vengeful thoughts, retreated.

Still no response to her call. The teenagers' rejection of her story gripped the room like a sly fart. Why were there so many of them in her home, anyway? They came uninvited, usually at the beginning of the year, and crowded the place as if it was a hostel. The sheer number of them made her feel like a calf in a herd.

Kirabo blinked the spite away. Most of the teenagers were Grandmother's relatives. They came because her grandfather was

good at keeping children in school. Also, Great-Grand Luutu had built the schools and churches, and Grandfather was on the board of governors for all schools—Catholic and Protestant, primary and secondary—in the area. When he asked for a place in any of the schools, he got it. His house was so close by they did not have to walk a long way to school. Grandfather's mantra was "A girl uneducated is an oppressed wife in the making." Grandmother was renowned for keeping girls safe from pregnancy. All the girls that passed through her hands finished their studies. Still, Kirabo wanted to tell the teenagers to go back where they came from if they didn't want to hear her stories, but some were her father's siblings. Unfortunately, she didn't know who was who, since everyone seemed to come and go during school breaks, and they all called Grandmother "Maama" and Grandfather "Taata." To ask *By the way, who are my grandparents' real children?* would earn her a smacking.

"Kin, you were our eyes." Grandfather's voice leapt over the wall from the room next door, granting her permission to tell her story.

Kirabo perked up, her face a beam of triumph. She glanced sideways at the teenagers; their eyes were slaughter. She bit back a smirk. She had worked hard at this story. Told it to Giibwa—her best friend when they were not fighting—and Giibwa was awed. Grandmother, not disposed to wasting words on empty compliments, had said, "Your skill is growing." The day before, when Kirabo took the goats to graze, she stood on top of an anthill and told it to the plain. The story came out so perfectly the goats stood in awe.

*

"Once, a day came when a man—his name was Luzze—married his woman—"

"Would he marry your woman instead?" a boy sneered under his breath. Kirabo ignored him.

"They had many children, but they were all girls—"

A girl snorted as if Kirabo's story was already predictable.

"Luzze became sad, as every time the woman had another girl. At first, he thought it was bad luck that girl babies kept coming. But then the woman made it a habit; every time, girl-girl, girl-girl, eh. One day, Luzze called her: 'I have been patient,' he said, puffing on his pipe, 'but I have decided to bring someone else to help you.'"

Kirabo took a breath to gauge her audience's attention; the teenagers were silent, but their ire was still stiff in the air.

"That year, Luzze married another woman. Through time they had many children, but they were all girls. Luzze despaired. Why were girl-bearing women not labelled, so he could avoid them? Still, he married a third woman. She bore him many children, but they too were girls. One day, Luzze called his three wives into the house and gave them an ultimatum. 'From today onwards, if you, or you or you'—he jabbed a finger at each woman—'bear me another girl, don't bring her home.'

"That year, the women worked harder. They fell pregnant. The first one to deliver had a daughter. One look at the baby and she was packing. The second delivered. It was a girl. She too left. When the third delivered, it was a boy. She lifted her breasts to the sky. But wait; there was something left in her stomach. She

pushed, and out came a girl. The woman despaired. She looked first at her son and then at the daughter, at the son again and then the daughter. She made up her mind.

"Next to her was an anthill. You know, in those days babies were delivered in *matooke* plantations. The anthill had a big hole that opened into the ground. The woman picked up the baby girl and stuffed her inside the hole. Then, she carried the baby boy home and presented him to Luzze.

"The celebration! The jubilation!"

Kirabo was so lost in her story, waving her arms about, making faces, making Luzze's voice, that she did not care whether her audience was engrossed.

"Luzze named the boy Mulinde because he had waited a long time for him to be born. Meanwhile, every day, the woman crept back to the plantation and nursed her daughter. As she stuffed her back into the hole, she would shush, 'Stay quiet.' But as the daughter grew, she devised songs to keep herself company and to make the darkness bearable. Meanwhile, Mulinde explored the villages, fields, hills, swamps, until one day he walked past the anthill and heard a sweet but sad song:

We were born multiple like twins—Wasswa.
But Father had dropped a weighty word—Wasswa.
You bear a girl, don't bother bringing her home—Wasswa.
But a boy, bring the boy home—Wasswa.
I keep my own company with song—Wasswa.
Oh, Wasswa, you are a lie—Wasswa.
Oh, Wasswa, you are a lie—Wasswa.

"The song tugged at Mulinde's heart. When he went home, the song followed him. The following day it hauled him back to the anthill. And the day after. And every day. At mealtimes, he kept some of his food, and when he got a chance, he crept to the anthill and threw the food down the hole. Still the song came.

"Luzze noticed that Mulinde was growing cheerless. When he asked what was wrong, Mulinde had no words. Luzze was so troubled he kept an eye on his son. In time, he noted that Mulinde kept some of his food and after lunch disappeared into the plantation. One day he followed him.

"What he saw almost blinded him. The anthill in the plantation started to sing, but instead of fleeing, Mulinde trotted, *titi-titi*, *titi-titi*, up to it and fed it his food. Luzze grabbed his son, ran home, and sounded the alarm drums—*gwanga mujje*, *gwanga mujje*, *gwanga mujje*.

"All men, wherever they were, whatever they were doing, picked up their weapons and converged in Luzze's courtyard. Luzze addressed them:

'Brothers, this is not for shivering cowards. Something beyond words is in my plantation, inside an anthill. We must approach with caution. If you are liquid-hearted, stay here with the women and children.'

"Real men—warriors, hunters, trackers, smiths, and medicine men—tightened their girdles and surrounded the plantation. Then they proceeded, muscles straining as they crouched, palms sweating around weapons. They trod softly, as if the earth would crumble, hardly breathing. Finally, they had the anthill surrounded. It started to sing. Luzze put his spear down and carefully dug the anthill. After a while, a girl child emerged. She

was fully formed, totally human, only crumpled. The men threw their weapons down and wiped away their sweat.

“Even though the sun blinded her and she had to shield her eyes with her hand to look up at the huge men, even though she was as pale as a queen termite from the lack of sunshine, even though she was surrounded by a vast world she did not understand, the girl sang:

We were born multiple like twins—Wasswa.
But father had dropped a heavy word—Wasswa.
You bear a girl, don't bother bringing her home—Wasswa.
But a boy, bring the boy home—Wasswa.
Oh, Wasswa, you are a lie—Wasswa . . .

“Luzze looked at his son, then at the girl, at the son again, then the girl. Finally, it dawned. He lodged his spear so forcefully into the earth it quivered. ‘Where is she? Today she will see—’ He did not complete the threat. The misnaming of his family—a Wasswa called Mulinde? And poor Nnakato denied sunshine? Then there was himself, Ssalongo, ultra-virile, called plain Luzze, like ordinary men.

“For some time, nothing stirred. Just this long hush that fell over the gallants and over the matooke plantation and stretched to where the women and the cowards stood. Now and again, the real men shook their heads and sucked their teeth, but no words. Their spears lay useless on the ground. You see, in the face of a singing child, the weapons accused them.

‘Women,’ one of the heroes finally sighed, ‘the way they seem so weak and helpless and you feel sorry for them. But I am telling you,

beneath that helplessness they are deep; a dangerous depth without a bottom.' He nailed the words into a fist with an open palm. 'You live with them, love them, and have children with them, thinking they are fellow humans, but I am telling you, you know nothing.'

'*Kdto*. Even then'—another shook his head—'this one is a woman and a half.'

'Me, I gave up on women a long time ago,' another said. 'You expect them to do this, they do that. You think they are here, but they are there. Today they are this, tomorrow they are that. A woman will kill you with your eyes open like this'—he opened his eyes wide—'but you will not see it coming.'

"But it was the women who were most enraged. You know what they say: no wrath like moral women against a wicked one. At the sight of the child, the good women of the community lacerated themselves with fury.

'A whole woman—hmm? With breasts—hmm? To bury her own child in an anthill?'

'She is no woman, that one—she is an animal.'

'It is such women who make us all look bad.'

'And you wonder why the world thinks we are all evil.'

'Where is she? Let her come and explain.'

"The women so incensed themselves that had they got their hands on Luzze's woman, they would have ripped her to shreds. As for me, Kirabo Nnamiiro, I could not wait for retribution. I hurried home to Nattetta on these feet"—Kirabo pointed to her feet—"to tell the tale of a woman who buried her daughter in an anthill to remain in marriage."

•

For a moment, the house was silent. Kirabo had begun to revel in the success of her storytelling when she sensed an anxiety in the air. As if she had stumbled on to something she should not know. But then Grandfather broke out: "Oh, ho ho ho. Is this child a griot or is she something else? Ah, ah, this I have never seen. Just like my grandmother. When my grandmother raised her voice in a tale, even the mice fell silent."

"*Dala dala*," Grandmother agreed.

But the teenagers did not congratulate her. Girls stood up and threw the boys off their beds. The boys slid down, yawned, and ambled towards their bedroom. The teenagers' rejection of her story stung. Kirabo's head dropped, her eyes welling up. That was when she whispered, "Where is my mother?" making sure her grandparents did not hear.

The teenagers stopped, exchanged looks.

"I want to go to my mother," Kirabo mumbled. She was sure her mother would love her story.

"Ha," a boy clapped in belated awe. "Did you hear Kirabo's story?"

"Me, I told you a long time ago—that child is gifted."

"Too gifted. I couldn't tell stories at her age."

"I still couldn't, even if you paid me." That was Gayi, one of the big girls.

The teenagers were working hard at their awe because if Grandfather found out Kirabo had been made to long for her mother, someone was going to cry. Kirabo had to be consoled before she went to bed.

"Oh, Kirabo"—Gayi's crooning would melt a stone—"is sleep troubling you? Let me take you outside to relieve yourself." She

held Kirabo's hand and led her into the *diiro*, the living and dining room, picked up the hurricane lamp on the coffee table, and stepped outside. Normally, Kirabo enjoyed their mawkish attention after she threatened the teenagers, but not this time. No one had answered her question about her mother. She slumped into self-pity.

"My mother does not want me."

The teenagers stiffened.

"Because I am a witch."

Kirabo did not see them relax. She had never confessed about her two selves, let alone flying, but that day the pain was intense.

"That is silly, Kirabo." Gayi rubbed the back of her neck. "How can you be a witch?"

"Then where is she?"

"We don't know. No one does."

The other teenagers, who had also come out to use the toilet, remained quiet; a desperate quiet, as if Kirabo had opened the doorway to where a monster was chained.

"Don't think about her." Gayi pulled Kirabo close to herself. "Think about Tom and how he loves you."

"Indeed," the teenagers agreed.

"And you know your grandparents would give the world for you."

"Too true," a boy said. "I tell you, Kirabo, if you died today, those two would offer to be buried instead."

Kirabo smiled despite her pain. It was true, although Grandmother loved her carefully because loving her too much could be tragic. But Grandfather was brazen. He did not care that she might get spoilt. And Kirabo wielded his love ruthlessly over

the teenagers and the villages. As for Tom, her father, his love was in a hurry. He came briefly from the city and wrapped it around her for an hour or two. Nonetheless, that night Kirabo felt that once again the family had avoided telling her about her mother. Yet to ask her grandparents would be to say their love was not enough.

As she waited for the teenagers taking turns to use the toilet, she looked around. The night was solid. The moon was mean and remote, the stars thin and scanty. A shooting star fell out of the sky, but as Kirabo gasped, it vanished. *My mother is somewhere under that sky. Perhaps she found out her baby had a split self and abandoned me. Perhaps I started flying out of my body as soon as I was born.* Perhaps and perhaps swirled, stirring a pain she could not take to Grandfather or Grandmother and say *Jjajja, it hurts here.*

This is when Kirabo decided to consult Nsuuta, the blind witch down the road. Though Nsuuta was practically blind, behind her blindness she could see. But Nsuuta was not just a witch—she was Grandmother's foe. Their feud was Mount Kilimanjaro. Apparently, Nsuuta had stolen love from the family. Tom, Kirabo's father, loved Nsuuta as much as Grandmother, his own mother. Some said he loved Nsuuta more. If that is not witchery, then there is no witchery in the world. Thus Kirabo consulting Nsuuta meant betraying Grandmother in the most despicable way. But that night, with none of her family offering to help find her mother, Kirabo saw no other option.