Visitations

Martha Ndakalako

I keep coming here to you, and I don't know why. I have long-since stopped caring about the 'how', though.

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When I pass through the open corrugated metal-and-wood gate, I hear the sounds of women in exuberant conversation. But you are alone in the yard, as you always are when I arrive. I make my way over and sit, elbows-on-knees, on the bricks lining the planted section. Closing my eyes, I turn my face up and let the sun darken me with its welcome heat. I listen as you sing in time to the rhythms of your labours and follow the now-familiar strains of your voice around the garden. As I hum along – sporadically, tunelessly – I wish you could hear me. But it's enough that I am here, at home, and can rest for the moment.

It is much colder where I am from.

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Zora had had to learn to accept some things when she moved here, and when she did, she was happier. A taxi-driver was going to fill his vehicle with passengers before leaving the mall, so she learned to wait. And when a friend said they'd be there 'now-now' it still meant they would get there when they got there. It was the coming that was important. This was her mother's country – hers, too, a long time ago. She had travelled her life in a large, unexpected circle. This life was her Aunt Kleo's dream, not hers. Still, she had come to love this hamlet on the outskirts of Ongwediva's sprawl. Living with other women, raising children, working at the clinic.

Sometimes it became difficult for her, having lived so long with her solitude, choosing when she would allow visitors, deciding when she would accompany others. Here, it frequently felt like these choices were made for her, and on especially busy days, it became too much. On these days when, along with the sing-song sounds of children's lessons, the varied voices of women from outside would fill the compound as they congregated in the shady olupale, sipping tea, Zora would excuse herself and go and work in the garden. It had

begun as a coping mechanism and had turned into a hobby. But they let her have this space – the garden and chickens had become *her* garden and *her* chickens. They accepted her. They indulged her small rudenesses, tut-tutting at corrupting American influences, and continued their meetings without her. She would return to them when she was ready.

The weekly afternoon gatherings were popular in their neighbourhood. They were Cousin Lina's idea: an hour when the women discussed the works of their literary 'foremothers' – they went on for much longer than an hour! They frequently returned to old favourites: Meme Neshani's *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* and Meme Martha's 'The Solitaires'. The women shared their day-to-day, raised the past, debated the future and loudly, laughingly enjoyed their afternoons together.

Theirs was not the only house of women. And while women-run homes were nothing new, these had become a movement across the country. Women had grown tired of their sisters' and daughters' continued murders and abuses, their bloodshed testifying to women's unfreedom; their ghosts haunting the Namibian cityscapes. They had committed themselves to living free, living together, living unafraid, educating and raising feminist boys and girls in the hopes that one day such an education would be unnecessary. The afternoons of tea were called the Solitaire Hour.

It was the days after her long shift at the clinic that Zora really felt her age, and on such days when she returned to a house full of the sounds of the Solitaire Hour, she would feel ... unsettled. Longing for solitude, she would go out into the garden. The late afternoon was hot, but garden-work always unwound her.

Today, she moved slowly, watering and pruning, taking time to admire the growing desert roses she had planted. She raked away the chicken droppings and footprints and formed the sand into easy geometric patterns. She hummed and sang, finding her rhythm, losing herself in ritual.

The Ancestor visited on days like these, when Zora had retreated deeply into the peaceful mundanity of her garden chores. She could have been coming for years, because Zora had only begun to sense her gradually. At first, it had been like an instinct; like a quiet reverberation that tickled at her eardrums. This had grown into what Zora could only think of as a located, vibrating displacement of the air. It was difficult to look at. And although still uncomfortable, Zora found it easier to incline her ear. It was some time before she could discern in this acoustical aura a presence reverberating just beyond sight. Eventually, Zora had been able to detect a shuffling of sand that seemed to follow her as she moved around the compound's garden, the sound growing ever more distinct. Afraid, Zora would retreat into the house, and later, when she had

calmed herself, would cautiously return to the yard and stare senselessly at the footmarks tracing the brick border and disturbing the patterned sand.

When time passed, and nothing untoward happened, Zora decided – half-joking to herself – that if this was a spirit, hers was a benevolent haunting. The aural dissonance only sporadically pulled at her awareness anyway. But the effect grew and gradually, she came to expect it. It had become ... familiar.

She finally mentioned it to Lina, embarrassed to even say anything. She was a medical doctor and a pragmatist, after all. Lina had shrugged and said, “greet them. Maybe an ancestor is visiting.”

As Zora moved slowly through her gardening, she became aware of the accompanying rustle of movement – the shifting of sand-beneath-feet, the soft humming – quietly reverberating at the edges of her hearing and vision, drawing her mind out of the rhythms of ritual and into her present. As her heart pounded, Zora made a decision, and without letting herself worry about consequences, Zora spoke the words quickly, respectfully, the Oshiwambo clumsy on her tongue: “Wauhala po, Omukwamhunghu.” And then, in case her English was more coherent for the ancestors, Zora repeated herself in the language. Hello, Ancestor.

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We miss each other, Ndahafa and I, as we do on particularly busy days, but that's okay. I am looking forward to some alone-time tonight. I let myself into Ndahafa's apartment and head to the bedroom to check on Zora, whom Ndahafa put to bed before leaving. I kiss her sweaty four-year-old forehead – she always sweats so much in her sleep! – and head to the kitchen to put the kettle on. It is late and I have homework. I also need sleep, if I'm going to make it through my shifts tomorrow, but I am too restless to do any focused intellectual work. Or sleep, for that matter. I check the time-difference and it's too late to call home; they will be leaving for work. I sigh, feeling ... adrift.

So after I curl up in Ndahafa's bed with my cellphone, I pull up Facebook, and scroll through my favourite storytellers, but none of them eases my restlessness. And right then, I decide to join their ranks, to tell my own story. I can't though, spin into fiction the tales of what is really going on in today's Namibian locales, as they do. My stories will have to be different. I will weave again the past, my past, conjure up its spirits and have them speak in fiction. My tiny coastal town. I want to remember, so I close my eyes to summon the cold windy beach and for a moment, I'm there, with my as-yet unnamed protagonist, sitting on the chilly beach, watching the relentless waves break. I feel the Atlantic coast's sunbaked sands beneath my bare feet and quickly wriggle my toes past the heated layer to the cool, moist earth beneath.

And this, when I am lost in memory, is when I come to you. I am captured, listening to the long-remembered sound of the surf and awaiting the spectre of long-forgotten and yet familiar apparitions to inspire me ... I am disoriented.

I rub my eyes, willing the weariness away, and when I open them, I am suddenly beneath a sun so hot that I feel dizzy. The sand's heat stings my naked feet. Shading my eyes, I quickly look around and find that behind me is a wide, lush Eembe tree shading a high, corrugated iron gate ... this is familiar. I stumble towards the tree, and as I step into its shade, the temperature change is a stark, palpable relief. I know this place, that compound. This tree!

How am I here?

Shoeless, and with no options, I enter the compound.

The gate is ajar, and when I slip through, the nostalgia is so sharp I gasp. The long driveway, the sprawling structure, the olupale, and the garden of desert roses disappearing around the side of the house – my mother's house.

But how?

The patio's cool shade beckons and through the semi-opening I hear people inside, and so once I feel the sharp tears loosen their hold on my throat, I announce myself: "Meumbo!" No response. I walk to the entrance, and peering inside at the women lounging on the old sectional and chairs, sipping their tea, I say "kokoo," rapping my knuckles against the door jamb. The conversation hushes for an instant, but then continues. I stand uncertainly at the door before deciding to enter. I pick my way past the women into the main house, down the hall, hoping for my mother's presence in her bedroom in the back.

Her furniture is gone. And it is as I stand here – perplexed and struggling to find the meaning in this – that I hear you for the first time.

I go to the open window, hoping that the singing I hear is my mother's, but knowing that it is not. This voice is unfamiliar. But as I watch the old woman working in the garden, I realize I know her. The recollection comes slowly, and when it does, I am surprised that it is you, Meme Nangula. I had met you twice before, when you came to visit Zora and Ndahafa. I will meet you a few more times over the years, before you pass on. But why are you here now, working with slow familiarity in my mother's garden?

This will be the only time I ever enter the house. I will come to accept that this is not my mother's house, not anymore. And I understand that I come here for you.

The bedroom door behind me slams shut, abruptly and loudly. I startle, spinning in that direction, to find that I am in Ndahafa's kitchen, and Zora is looking up at me. "Hi Auntie," she says in her sing-song, too-loud four-year-old voice. "Hi Zora," I answer, realizing that it is morning. The disturbing, loud banging continues, and I finally recognize it. I peek through the kitchen blinds that give me a view of the apartments across the parking lot.

The usual team of men in dark clothing, terse acronym stretched across the backs of their uniforms. I close the blinds, turn back to the little girl still watching me, and hope the people in the apartment are not home.

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It is the end of one of those fall days that I have come to love, when the air is so crisp that the bright, brittle leaves whip by on a liquid breeze you can almost see. I am leaving the sprawling campus, and as I scroll through my texts I find Ndahafa's message, begging me to come up to her floor in post-surgery recovery for a few minutes before beginning my shift in the hospital flower shop downstairs. Ndahafa's night classes had paid off. She has been a nurse for years now; I am still a student. But at least the flower shop pays well.

The message is about Zora, as usual. These messages had become more frequent after Zora turned thirteen, old enough that I didn't need to watch her anymore. And then I did not see either of them nearly as much, so regularly, I find myself meeting Ndahafa in the break room on the sixteenth floor and WhatsApping Zora.

But tonight, we miss each other. Ndahafa works through her break and decides instead to stop by my apartment on her way home later that night.

I am immersed in a Facebook narrative of my own weaving, when my front door opens, and I almost drop the laptop perched on my knees. I had long since joined the Namibian storytellers. It was a way for me to bring home here, and to take myself there. I had not forgotten the magic of that cold beach, that first time I visited you; I have frequently written about ghostly encounters, but I can never bring myself to write about you.

Ndahafa closes the front door, and I sit up. I hadn't even heard her key in the lock.

"So what happened?" I ask as Ndahafa sets her purse down.

"That child of yours!" Ndahafa begins, waking her agitation. Zora is always my child when she misbehaves. "Do you know what she said to me? I told her I think we should move back home, and she refused. Just refused!"

Ndahafa's anxious energy annoys and then tires me. She forgets how easily she can talk of leaving when I can't. I watch her march circles around my tiny living room, recounting the argument she'd had with her headstrong daughter, and for a moment, I see you. Ndahafa is a younger version of you – just as tall and soft-eyed, except for her smooth dark skin.

I am not listening to Ndahafa anymore, drawn in recollection to you; and then I find myself at the gate, the ebullient voices of women drifting towards me. It is immediately too hot for my heavy sweater, so I take it off as I make my

way around the house, eager for the quiet sounds of you at work. Finding you, I perch on a brick and, warmed by the sun, I let my mind drift, stirring only to shift closer to you as you move the length of the garden.

Gradually I become aware that I am not hearing you anymore and I open my eyes. You are across the courtyard, standing in strange posture. Bodily you are facing me, but your head is turned away.

You mumble something I don't catch, and then hastily add: "Hello, Ancestor."

I'm so surprised that I fall off the brick border and land bottom-first in an undignified heap in the sand. You have never spoken to me before. Never even registered my presence.

You gasp and step back, startled, and I stumble to my feet, composing myself and brushing sand from my pyjama shorts.

Unsure what to say, I allow the ritual of greeting to take me. "Hello, Meme Nangula," I reply, feeling the awkwardness of the greeting, but following your lead. To cover my discomfort I add, "You can see me." It is all I can think of to say.

You are quiet and I start to think you won't reply, but then you do.

"Well, sort of. I can hear you. It's strange."

I am not sure what to make of this, and at my silence you add, "But I have had time to get used to you, Ancestor."

I am surprised again. I had become accustomed to coming here, comfortably invisible so that it never occurred to me that you were growing aware of me. That you could.

Wondering at your use of "ancestor", I decide it must be because of your sight, otherwise you would recognize me; so, I introduce myself.

"Meme Nangula," I say formally, as someone my age would address an elder. "You may not remember me, but we've met before. I'm a friend of your daughter, Ndahafa."

I expect you to ask for my name, but instead you turn your head to me quickly and then away, awkwardly inclining your ear. "Nangula was my grandmother, Ancestor," you say. "I am Zora. You say you ... *know* my mother?"

"Kleo, are you even listening? You need to talk to your child."

I am disoriented. You are Zora? You! This old woman here with me! My mind struggles to assimilate this information, to make sense of it, but now I am on the couch, and Ndahafa is glaring down at me.

All these years. I had been wrong. I thought I was with you, when all the while I was visiting Zora.

For a moment I struggle to remember what Ndahafa is upset about. It seems so long ago, but it comes to me.

My answer is thoughtless, distracted, but easy; I have said similar words to her before.

"But Ndahafa, what can I say to her? She's not Namibian. She's American. You brought her here when she was three. How can she love a home she doesn't remember?"

But even as I say the words, I regret them. How can I be sure of your future, Zora, when I had been so wrong about mine? How do I even begin to see how you become the woman I have visited all these years?

Ndahafa is downcast at my response.

"I have to go home. My mother needs me," she says, forlorn. "but how can I leave my child to live here without me."

"Your child won't be a child for much longer," I say consolingly. "She'll visit."

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She, and her unnamed Ancestor, sat in companionable silence. Zora would work in the garden until she gradually became aware of her visitor, at which point she would join her, perching on the bricks as close to the apparition as she could stand to be. The silence was easier. It was a disturbing experience, to hear the visiting woman speak. But sometimes, they would talk haltingly of the compound, its women, and the Solitaire Hour. Zora was hesitant to ask her visitor about her "ancestral" world.

But I am burning with questions. About her life. And Ndahafa's. And mine. But I don't ask. Later, when I am alone I will spend hours revisiting our stilted conversations, mentally reconstructing her turned-away face, painstakingly eking what I can out of its expressions, and of what went said and unsaid. I long to discuss the buffeted route that brings us together now, but we never do.

I have grown accustomed to this compound full of women and children – my mother's house. When we aren't talking, I spend my time there staring at her, and if my rudeness bothers her, she doesn't show it. I keep looking for the little girl I used to watch, or the headstrong young Zora I know now. Sometimes I see Ndahafa, a shadow emerging in the similarities of Zora's movements to her mother's; there in the tiny shifts of her body, she is both. And then she is only herself. But the woman I continue to see most clearly in her weathered features is you, Meme Nangula. She could be you.

I have been talking to you so long that I don't know how to stop. So I tell myself you can hear me. You are, after all, Zora's Ancestor. So maybe we both visit her.

She always greets me "Hello, Ancestor," when she finally grows aware of me, and I have long-since stopped trying to correct her. After all, so much is uncertain.

Instead, I reply formally to her greetings, as you would to an elder, the ritual allowing me a semblance of my unasked questions: "Opo uli, Meme?"

"I'm here, Ancestor," she responds. "And you?"

I smile. "Naame opo ndili."