

# **In the House of a Sangoma**

**by**

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I've returned to Namibia to visit some of the old healer friends I made when I was conducting research for my PhD in anthropology here seven years ago. Getting out of the taxi in front of Naomi's house, I smell the charcoal cooking fires. Where I'm staying, on the other side of town in Klein Windhoek, there are no cooking fires, but here in the township of Katatura their haze sits low over the city. Naomi's yard is bare and dusty; there is a drought plaguing southern Africa.

She's already at her door, staring at me. "I was just telling myself that Tara would be coming today," she says. "I saw it." Naomi always greets me this way: she sees me coming before I arrive, or so she claims.

"After seven years, you still could see me coming?" I tease.

She laughs. "Of course. I am sangoma."

A sangoma is a diviner-priestess in the tradition of the Nguni-speaking peoples of southern Africa. Naomi finds lost objects, cures illness, and predicts the future. If you could convince her, she might even bewitch someone for you, though she claims not to dabble in that sort of thing.

There are doilies on her coffee table, a symbolic vestige of the Germans who first colonized this country. Golden light falls through the living room window. I used to gather with her family on the nights they brewed beer for the ancestors in a large plastic tub. We would celebrate and dance.

"You dance like a white woman," they'd laugh, pointing at me. I danced anyway.

After we chitchat, Naomi proposes a divination. We sit on the floor. I stare at the fly whisk in her hand; it smells of salt. The leather handle is about nine inches long and attached to a fifteen-inch dark black wildebeest tail. Naomi touches the red beads she wears round her neck. They also wrap her wrists and ankles. Like the fly whisk, they are a symbol of being sangoma.

I hand Naomi twenty rand and snuff, the normal divination fee, blow into the cowhide sack that holds the divining "bones," shake them, and toss them from the sack. They land in a gluey clump.

Naomi is in a light trance. She pokes a large cowry shell with the end of her wildebeest-tail fly whisk. "This shell is your home," she says, flipping it over like a turtle, separating it from a coin it has come to rest against. She pushes aside a small, round, gray stone, nudges a lion's tooth, and gently touches what looks like part of a dik-dik jaw, all the while peering intently at

how the bones are assembled. She narrows her eyes, raises a pinch of snuff to each nostril, inhales deeply, then blows her nose into a red bandanna.

“My dear, my dear.” Naomi clucks her tongue and shakes her head. “It is no good, no good. Your mother’s ancestors are weak. She is very ill. She will die. There is nothing I can do. No treatment for this illness. No one can heal her, not me, not the hospital doctors.”

“Are you sure?” I ask. This can’t be. My mother is sixty-three and in robust good health. An avid horsewoman, she rides almost every day. She remarried a year and a half ago. She travels, gardens, goes to the theater and movies. She’s fitter than most of her friends. How could she be sick?

Naomi strokes my hand. “You are very strong. You will be fine, but difficult times lie ahead.”

A snake coils in my stomach. I believe in Naomi’s skills. I’ve seen her work.

“There is no medicine for your mother,” Naomi says, gathering the bones and putting them back in the cowhide sack.

This is unusual. Generally, there is medicine for everything. The divination is merely the first step to discovering the source, or root, of the illness or misfortune. Then treatment begins. And it is the treatment that can be expensive.

Naomi goes to the kitchen and puts on the kettle. When it whistles she brings out tea and biscuits. I’ve hardly said a word. The snake in my belly is squirming. No theory among my clan can explain divination, but I feel the power behind her words. Often I forget which reality belongs to me and which belongs to her. I’m an anthropologist; she’s sangoma. The lines blur.

“Don’t worry, you are very strong. You will be fine,” she repeats.

I wonder if this too is true.

After tea, we hug. Naomi promises to call me with her sister’s telephone number in Cape Town before I leave Namibia in a few days. Naomi has sold her house in Katatura and is leaving within the year. This could be the last time I see her. But she believes that nothing is random or unknowable. And, despite my training in objectivity, I’m inclined to agree with her.

Eighteen months later, when my mother dies of cancer, I call Naomi to tell her, but the number is no longer in service. So now we communicate in dreams. This is the way of the sangoma. There is no need to telephone or email. And I am strong. I have survived.

—The End—