The Witch

These days they call me by name: Hope. By “they,” I mean the people in our small dusty town, Masaka, where everyone knows everyone. When I was a little girl living with my grandmother, all I wanted was to be known by my name, but no, they’d call me Little Girl. I’d be on my way from the borehole, where I often went several times a day for water, a heavy plastic jerrycan balanced on my head. The sun was so hot my eyes hurt from looking at it, the heat burned through my skin, and I’d hear them whisper, “Little Girl.”

I walked by the women who sat on mats, their legs splayed out, peeling *matoke* and sweet potatoes, or pounding groundnuts as they caught up on the day’s gossip. Men sat on low stools on their verandas drinking locally brewed alcohol through long yellow bamboo pipes dipped in clay pots. Children skipped ropes and played football. I walked along the winding brown dirt path in my short denim skirt and blue flip-flops with semi-circles in the rubber soles dug by my heels, which I continued to wear because they were the only thing that protected my feet from stones and thorns.

“There, Little Girl goes,” they’d point as they whispered. Their whispers were loud enough for me to hear, and for their children to repeat when I tried to play with them. Whispers about my denim skirt which I wore every day, about my pantie visible beneath the skirt, whispers about grandmother.

I knew from the way they whispered that I didn’t belong. This was no surprise. If you knew my story, you too would avoid my eyes that were always begging for help. My parents died when I was two. A car accident. I was left behind with my grandmother, who they said was a witch.

“Witch, witch,” they’d shout when she ventured out of our

iron-roofed house to check on her cassava, sweet potatoes, beans, and banana garden, and the two cows which were left to meander during the day, and tied with ropes to the mango trees behind our house in the evenings.

Grandmother did the best she could for me under the circumstances. The circumstances being: She was eighty years old, her health was failing, and she was thought to be a witch. Our neighbors accused her of killing several people in the town. I say accused, because I never saw any evidence. Fine, I didn't ask for proof, but I never saw any of it, not the cowry shells, dry goat skins, drums, or a shrine. I never saw any of the things said to belong to witches.

"Look at her lion eyes," they'd whisper, "those eyes can't be human. Just look at her eyes, that's all you have to do."

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One case involved our neighbor, Namu. The fights with grandmother about their cows destroying each other's crops started the moment Namu married her husband. Namu, in her early twenties, had also had several miscarriages. The day she had her fourth miscarriage, she and grandmother had quarreled. Namu's cow had come into our compound and grandmother told me to tie it to one of the mango trees. When Namu came to collect the big milk-white beautiful cow with large kind eyes that watered when it was sad, grandmother chased her away.

"You devil incarnate. The devil lives in you, and sucks blood out of your babies. The devil kills them. This one too is going to die. You hear?" she shouted, her voice carrying throughout the town. Her eyes were bright orange. They got that way when she was very angry. She continued to murmur to herself as she spread ash around her homestead to keep the devil out.

It was a cold Saturday morning and a mist hung in the sky. A small crowd of people had gathered and silently watched. They

were like flies on a pile of bananas. Many of them draped blankets around themselves. The sun had taken longer than it normally did to come out. They were waiting for something to happen the way people in small towns wait for things to happen. Nothing transpired that morning. Namu left, but grandmother continued to curse and cast the devil out of our home.

“Grandma, is Namu possessed by a devil?” I asked as soon as she came back inside the house.

“What nonsense? Of course not!”

“But you said…”

“I know what I said child,” she chuckled. “There’s no devil. Just greedy, nasty people. Remember that. Now, I am tired and cold,” she said, and went back to bed.

That evening, Namu had another miscarriage. This time the clan elders decided to find the killer, and nothing would stop them. You see, in our town, no one died from natural causes. Someone was always responsible. If you were run over by a car, someone must have made the driver drive badly. If you fell from a tree and died, someone must have made you climb the tree. Accidents didn’t happen. There was always someone who willed them. The elders ruled over the village like gods. They were in charge of the traditional courts that resolved civil matters, land, and family disputes. They weren’t supposed to have anything to do with criminal cases, but they did, and their word was final.

News of the miscarriage travelled throughout the town like lightning. Within minutes, people had gathered outside in small groups with lamps to discuss the death, and speculate on who was responsible. The elders too. And so, it was that they turned up at our home.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” grandma said as soon as she opened the

door, leaning on the stick that she used to support herself and holding a lamp in the other.

“We shall find out soon enough,” said the elder with missing front teeth. The others nodded.

“What is there to find out?”

“We’re going to slaughter a rooster. If it dies in front of you, then you did kill the baby. If it doesn’t, we shall leave you in peace,” said Missing Front Teeth and the others continued to nod.

“You’ve come to kill me.”

“No one has come to kill anyone,” said the elder who made me think of the cunning gray monkeys with small white faces that descended on our town to steal bananas.

“Then what are you doing here?”

They looked at each other.

“God gives and takes life. Not you,” Grandma muttered to herself and laughed her contemptuous laughter.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. If you’ve done no wrong, you’ll be proven innocent,” said the third elder.

“Ayaaa…,” she scoffed. “Innocent? You’ve come to kill me. Why don’t you just do it now? You don’t need a rooster to pronounce me guilty,” she said, looking beyond the elders to the people who had gathered to watch. “And you,” she curled her lips towards them, “have come to witness a murder.”

It was a clear night. There was a full moon. The sky was a bed of stars. Everywhere you looked there were stars. It was like they’d woken up to witness. Missing Front Teeth slit the rooster’s throat and released it. It jumped frantically in front of our house spraying blood on the elders and the people

gathered. Everyone except grandma watched the rooster as it fought for its life. I held my breath, expectant, but the rooster jumped further and further away from grandma. The rooster grew weaker and weaker. The silence deepened. The moonlight became brighter, and the stars grew larger. You could hear the sound of the wind. People who had blankets pulled them tighter around their shoulders. All eyes were fixed on the rooster, its white feathers soaked in blood. They waited. The rooster finally lay lifeless in front of the elders.

Missing Front Teeth bent down, picked it, stood up and pointed his finger at grandma. “Its head is pointing in your direction,” he declared.

Grandma burst into laughter. “You murderers. You touch me and I’II come for you from my grave,” she threatened before she retreated into our house and locked the door. They didn’t touch her. I think the elders were afraid of her. After all, she had just made a rooster die in front of them. They must have speculated on what else she was capable of. I saw it all through a tiny opening in one of the wooden windows of our house.

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Six months after the rooster incident Grandma died. Her health had rapidly deteriorated after the rooster business. It was especially horrible at night when we were the only ones awake in the town. The pain kept her awake and I stayed up to rub water boiled in herbs all over her body like she used to rub mine when I had fever. She’d scream out in pain and I’d cover my ears. Her cries travelled throughout the village, but they didn’t come to help. Can you believe it? She screamed all night and no one even asked after her health. People had a limited supply of compassion. It didn’t extend to a witch.

She died on the day I received my primary school results. I

got straight As. I was elated and couldn't wait to show her. I ran the twelve miles from school. I must have called and shaken her maybe a thousand times. She never woke up. She was dead.

Within a day, my relatives appeared from the neighboring towns. Everywhere I looked, in the house, outside, there were aunties and uncles, wanting to help me. Can you believe it? I couldn't. And this wasn't the end of it. They wanted the house grandma had left for me, but not me.

"What shall we do with her? We can't leave her here by herself," they whispered to one another.

"Marry her off. With her light skin, education and the grace of a giraffe, she will fetch a handsome dowry," my eldest uncle decided. And until my marriage, they agreed that whoever took me would take the house. No one intervened. Not even the elders. I stayed in grandmother's house until they found me a husband. I must say my uncle did well by me. He married me to the richest businessman in town, Tycoon.

Before the marriage, I was afraid of him, but my fear subsided the day I moved into his home as his wife and he took my hand, pulled me up from where I knelt to greet him, and said I shouldn't worry, everything would be fine.

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My name became Mrs Tycoon and I adapted to life as Mrs Tycoon. I was sixteen, his youngest wife, and the cherished one. To be honest with you, I didn't treasure the position of being the favored one. Believe me, when you're the third wife of a husband who is hardly at home, getting along with your co-wives is more important than his favors. For a few weeks, my co-wives were nice to me. They felt we needed to stick together to make sure our husband didn't get a fourth wife. When he married wife number one, our husband had promised not to get a second wife without her permission, but then he had

turned up with wife number two, and now me. Still, as soon as he left the house, they'd sit in the living room with bread and flasks full of tea and watch Nollywood movies as I cleaned the house.

I didn't mind. I was glad to have a roof over my head. As it was, I could have ended up on the streets like so many other orphans. So I scrubbed the tiled floors of the triple-storied house. This took a big part of the morning. Once the cleaning was done I'd wash clothes and cook. By the time it was evening I'd be so exhausted my entire body ached.

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A few months into the marriage, I got pregnant. Twins followed. Simon and Michael. Our husband was over the moon. He finally had the boys he had longed for. Boys he already saw taking over his business. Boys he himself would groom for this. He loved their orange eyes inherited from their grandmother. He brought bags and bags of toys and clothes for them.

"Don't buy too many clothes," I'd say to him.

"What's the money for?"

"But they're outgrowing everything so fast."

"We shall buy more."

What could I do? He wanted to spoil his boys. He'd play with them, bathe them. "My children," he said as he threw them up in the air and basked in their delightful giggles. He'd look at their toothless gums and declare them the most beautiful babies. This should have been fine; a father should be proud of his children. The problem was that he had three daughters, and he acted as though they didn't exist. He never showed any interest in them and insisted they go to boarding schools. True, children need to get an education; the problem was that

they were still so young; four, five and six years old. My co-wives' arguments to keep the children at home fell on deaf ears. He insisted that boarding schools offered the best education, but this wasn't true. I had gone to a day school and I had learned to speak English and could add up numbers in seconds.

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The twins elevated my status in the household. And something else happened. With the money I had gathered by saving bits here and there, I went to a salon and had my hair straightened with a hot comb. The hairdresser convinced me to buy pink lipstick. Our husband couldn't stop looking and smiling at me when he came home. Although it wasn't my night, he invited me to his bedroom. That night, he was a wild and yet tame lion.

He sent me to a driving school and bought me a RAV 4. I couldn't believe my eyes when he gave me the car keys. By this time I was managing the finances of our home. When my co-wives needed to buy household items they had to come to me. I was a fast learner and he started to involve me in his business, providing loan services to people in the town. I didn't ask for any of this. I didn't. And do you know what all this meant? More resentment from my co-wives. Frankly, this wasn't fair. Even if our husband had wanted to involve them in the business, they wouldn't have managed. They had never gone to school, couldn't read, write or count. As soon as he asked me to work for him, his business tripled. But this didn't matter; they declared war on me.

Their plan was to drive me out of our home. When you have lived the life I have, you either crumble or become thick-skinned. I got tough. When they ignored me, I ignored them. If they attacked me, I fought like a cat and wife number one got scars from my scratches. But this was nothing compared to what they both did to me. I will give you one example: A few months into the marriage, wife number two pushed me down the stairs

and laughed as I tumbled down like a sack of potatoes. It's a miracle I didn't break a single bone that day. I think my grandmother's spirit was watching over me, but this isn't what saved me from my co-wives. I will tell you what did the trick.

Whatever my co-wives refused to do, I did. I'd remove our husband's shoes as soon as we got home and massage his feet, iron his shirts and trousers, made sure he had hot food even when he got back very late at night, and I sat with him as he ate. On the nights he was supposed to have sex with my co-wives, if they locked him out of their bedrooms, I welcomed him into mine. Do you know what happened? He invited me to move into his bedroom. Yes, he did.

Once I started spending more time with him he opened up and told me about his childhood. He was the youngest of thirty-one children. Can you imagine thirty-one children? His father had no money but married four women and had a lot of children. He believed children were wealth. Many of them ended up homeless on the streets of Kampala.

He told me about endless days and nights without food, the fear of going to bed hungry and hearing his little siblings cry till their voices were grasshopper whispers. Their thin cries of hunger would stop only after they were fed. On many days, they were too weak to cry. He could never say which was worse. He talked to me about the hopelessness in his mother's eyes and the pact he made with himself to make a better life for them. When he was ten, he started to look for money, finding odd jobs here and there, but his passion was trade. At the age of fifteen he got his first stall, a tiny space given to him by one of his father's acquaintances, to sell sweets.

Because he had to work before running to school, he missed tests and exams, but he persisted and finished high school. Armed with a certificate and the ability to read, write English, and add numbers, he didn't see the use of further education. Besides, he was convinced that his knowledge of

street life was the essential ingredient for a successful business. By then, his tiny space had expanded into a big grocery shop and some of his siblings worked there. He tried several business ventures but his big break came when he became a loan shark.

It was during these nights that I realized we both came from poor families. I also learned that his heart was tender and kind. It didn't stop there. He started to ask me about my life. One night, I told him how I longed to feel silk on my skin and the following day, he bought me the most beautiful silk gown, the color of the sun.

But the people of this town had no ounce of compassion left for me. Jealousy and hatred is all they had. My co-wives didn't help matters. They spread rumors of what an awful person I was. Can you imagine? I, who couldn't even harm a mosquito! All because I was now driving a car and working in an office. Do you know what I was doing in that office? Managing the list of people who owed Tycoon money. Some of them would call me to re-schedule payments. I could have bought them more time. To be honest, I didn't mind my co-wives hating me. I was away all day and came home late in the evenings. But they started to say I and my sons were witches. Their evidence was that our husband was no longer thinking straight. Why else would he allow me to work, buy me a car, and neglect them?

This was dangerous. People had been stoned to death in this town because they were suspected of being witches. It reminded me of my grandmother. They had failed to prove she was a witch, and now they were after me. They stopped talking to me. My greetings were met with silence. "Why do you allow a witch into your shop?" the people of the town would ask the shopkeepers, shopkeepers who were interested in making money. "She's a witch, a witch," people I had never met would shout as I walked out with my groceries.

I wanted to remind them of when I was Little Girl, and when they didn't help with my grandmother and all of that. But I didn't do this. Instead, I let our husband send his goons to beat up people who owed him money. That's how he made sure he got paid. His bodyguards would either beat up the debtor until he produced cash or *visit* his family home. They'd turn up at the debtor's house at dinner time, join him at the dining table, and set down their pistols. They wouldn't say anything. They didn't have to. The debtor would send a brown envelope full of cash the following day. Our husband also took several properties of those who failed to pay him. In the small town where news travelled like waves, everyone knew what our husband was capable of. I did talk to him about making too many enemies, begged him not to send the goons to the police commissioner. Nothing good would come out of becoming enemies with the police commissioner even though he owed him a lot of money. Our husband simply said business wasn't for the thin-skinned.

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Sunday started as it always did. My co-wives prepared breakfast. They had fried eggs, made tilapia stew, rice, *matoke* and *chapattis*. I came down to make sure everything was as it should be for our husband. It was my job to make sure everything was perfect for him. His toast had to be brown and crisp. The pineapples, mangoes, and papaya cut neatly into small squares and placed in fruit bowls. The tea had to be mixed with a lot of milk, sugar, ginger and lemon grass, and brewed in the clay pot to give it an earthy scent. I wore a white dress and tied my hair with a cloth the color of tomatoes. We were going to church after breakfast.

Our husband came down as I paced around the dining table, adding a pinch of salt, sugar, cinnamon, coriander or red chili to the different dishes. I thought he was handsome in his white sparkling *kanzu* that looked like a dress, with his head full of white and black tiny curls. The *kanzu* fell on his

belly. The twins followed me around.

“My stomach hurts,” he said as he sat down, “and I’ve got a fever.”

I touched his forehead and noticed he was struggling to keep his eyes open. Just then, he vomited, struggled to breathe, and clutched his throat. His eyes bulged, and he fell off his chair.

“Oh oh oh oh no no no no no,” one of my co-wives cried. I fainted. When I opened my eyes, I lay on the floor in the dining room. His eyes stared at me from one of the portraits we had taken on our wedding day and I was told the words that I didn’t want to hear. After five years of marriage, he had left me. I cried until there were no tears left.

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As soon as he was deep in the soil, they started to look for his murderer. The elders and the police commissioner were in and out of our home. They talked to my co-wives and stopped talking as soon as they saw me. I was the suspect. Can you believe it? I couldn’t. I was going to be tried for killing the man who had saved me, the only person who had ever talked to me, who knew my name, the father of my children. Do you know what I was thinking as I sat before them? That I must have been cursed. First my parents, then grandma, my husband, and now this.

My trial was conducted by the same elders who had turned up at grandmother’s house. This time, they had a white goat with them, having dispensed with roosters. After grandmother, they had declared them unreliable. The sun woke up very early in the morning, initially soft and pleasant, growing in intensity by the hour, and now it was intolerable. There were people everywhere; under the muvule trees and in the branches, at the town primary school compound, on the roofs, and in the classrooms. They had left their jobs and farms to watch.

Frail Little Elder cleared his throat to signal the commencement of the trial. All the murmuring stopped, hands fell on laps or at their sides, conversations halted mid-way, eyes shifted away from whoever they had been talking to and focused on the three elders, dressed in long white robes, sitting on the only furniture, three wooden chairs, in front of the crowd. Frail Little Elder explained that the trial would take a few hours. Everyone who wanted to say something would be allowed to do so. He spoke very slowly and regularly paused to breathe and replenish his energy. The act of talking seemed to deplete his limited reserve of strength.

There were only six witnesses; my co-wives, the doctor, the police commissioner, and my children. It was supposed to be a straight-forward case. My husband had been poisoned. But the twins had told me they had seen the police commissioner give their father boiled maize that morning. With his large debt, the police commissioner had reason to want him dead.

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My co-wives avoided looking at me as they testified. They said I was the one who had spent the night with him and served him breakfast. They said he was a healthy man, never fell sick, not even a headache. In the wildest accusation, they accused me of not caring about his death. Do you know why they said this? I will tell you why. Because I went back to the office a week after his death.

“His body isn’t even cold and she’s already back in the office,” said wife number one.

“She wants to steal his business,” said wife number two.

I hope you’re thinking this is crazy. This is what I certainly thought. I mourned our husband, did nothing except cry and pray, and most nights I lay awake because I wanted to be alert when he came back to me. You see, I was still hoping it was all a bad dream; he had gone to Dubai to conduct business and

would return. But someone had to keep the business going and I was sure this is what he'd have wanted.

"She's the only one who stood to gain from his death," said wife number two.

"And her sons," said wife number one.

This was true if all you thought about was money. Our husband had a will that left everything he owned to us. I hadn't known about the will until his death, but no one believed me. There was no doubt in my mind what they were up to; they wanted me out of the way so they could take all the money, the property, the business.

The doctor who conducted the post mortem confirmed that our husband had been poisoned. This corroborated what the twins had told me. The police commissioner said he knew the deceased and the accused. No, he didn't know the cause of death. No, he couldn't prove I had killed him. No, he wasn't investigating, he knew I had something to do with it. Of course I did. You remember her grandmother. We all knew she was a witch. You all know how many people she killed. The Witch had started early. Imagine how many people she'll kill by the time she's done. People are already reporting how she's transformed them into ghosts and made them weed her husband's plantations at night. No, he hadn't seen this, but so many people in the town had told him.

I stared at the police commissioner. If eyes could kill, mine would have killed him. I tried to speak out, to tell the truth, but the elders wouldn't let me. Accused people had no right to speak. And now the police commissioner was sowing the seeds that'd lead to my death.

The twins were the last to testify. It was Monkey Face who asked them to state their names, hold the Bible, and swear to tell the truth. Monkey Face talked to them slowly and explained what was going on. He told them they needed to find

out who had killed their father. He asked them if there was anything they had seen or heard that could help to find his killer. Simon, the older twin, did the talking and his brother Michael, nodded in agreement. I knelt and held their hands.

“I can help,” Simon said. “I saw him,” he pointed at the police commissioner, “the morning father died. We were playing in the garden when he came by. Father joined him. They talked. He was eating boiled maize. He shared it with Taata.”

Silence fell upon the town as he talked. Nothing moved. Not the houseflies, the birds, or the wind. No one blinked. It was as though people were glued to the red soil. They held their breath. It was the kind of silence pregnant with anticipation. The twins sat on my lap. I was relieved. It had all come to an end. The silence was broken by a gust of wind that covered us all in dust.

As soon as the air cleared, the police commissioner was up in a flash. He licked his index finger, rubbed it on the soil and swore on the grave of his mother that he hadn’t seen our husband that day, the twins were lying. He raised both his hands up into the air and declared that God was his witness, he hadn’t killed anyone, and if he was lying, may lightning strike him.

“Yes you did,” I shouted.

“Why would I kill your husband?”

“You owed him money.”

“Slaughter the goat,” he demanded, “it’ll die in front of the killer.”

“What do the people say?” Missing Front Teeth shouted.

“The goat. Kill the goat. The goat must be slaughtered. The goat will be the judge,” the people shouted back. All eyes turned towards the goat that immediately stood up and started

going *baa baa baa*. It was untied from the *muvule* tree but it refused to move. Two men pulled the rope around its neck. The goat stood still until another group of men pushed it forward.

Our destiny had come down to this frightened goat that was fighting for its life. The men overpowered it, and held its head down. It must have known it was futile to fight, for it lay still. Our tear-fear filled eyes stared at each other. I wished it didn't have to die so I could live. Missing Front Teeth's cut was swift and clean. Blood gushed out. The goat squirmed and shook its whole body violently, fighting death as I willed it to die far away from me. They released it, and it ran around in small circles away from me, its head dangling from its neck. My eyes were glued to it as it gave up the will to live. I sat straight as it suddenly turned around and faced me. It collapsed and started to crawl towards me. It had changed its mind. A few minutes later the goat succumbed right in front of me. It did. Can you imagine my shock?

I was up on my feet immediately. "I didn't kill him," I shouted

"The goat has spoken," the people shouted.

Straightaway, the sky darkened, puffs of winds started, and rain poured out of the skies in buckets. The sound of thunder and lightning petrified us all and we scrambled away in different directions.

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Back at home, I moved into my children's room, locked it, pushed their bed against the door and waited for them to come for us. No one came. I spent the night calling my grandmother's spirit to protect us. In the morning, I told the twins to remain quiet and we huddled in a corner until there was a knock on the door. I jumped up, the twins screamed, and in a flash, I was back on the floor, my hands covering their mouths.

“Sh-sh-sh,” I put a finger on my mouth.

“It’s us,” wife number one said, “please open the door.”

“No,” I said. “Come in here and I will kill you.”

“Hope, please open the door. We need to talk to you,” wife number two said.

“Am not opening the door. Talk.”

“We just got news that the police commissioner and one of the elders died last night.”

“What? If you’re lying to me!”

“We’re not lying. It’s true. They found them dead, and no one can tell what caused their death,” wife number two said.

It had rained cats and dogs, trees fell and houses were swept away, and lightning struck people. The sky must have been angry and had decided to unleash its vengeance on the town.

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The people of this town now believe I am a witch. “Like grandmother, like granddaughter,” they mumble. They mumble because they don’t want me to hear, afraid I’ll not help them out when they come to borrow money. I do not blame them though. Lightning striking people like that and the mysterious deaths of the police commissioner and the elder; surely I must have some powers. Every time I hear their mutters, I smile, knowing we’re safe with our money and properties. They will never dream of touching us again.

Do you know what else happened? My co-wives have become our zealous defenders, telling anyone who cares to listen that we’re not witches. Can you believe it? Truth be told, they’re more frightened of being thrown out of the family home. Even though my fortunes have changed, I could never do such a

thing, however, I enjoy watching them cater to my needs when I return from work. But when I ponder the whole thing, I actually believe in this witchcraft business. Surely, someone must have made me the richest woman in the town, otherwise how do you explain that?