

WHITE ELEPHANT: The Healer

Chapter 1, Part 1

I first met my grandparents when they were newly born.

My people say that the great mother was suffering. That one day she grew sad at what her children were doing to each other. She grew sad at what we had become and how we had forgotten who we were and how to listen to her breathing and her song. O we said, "Stop nagging us!" and we said, "Just forget about it, Grandma," But she kept loving us.

She decided to take the form of a white elephant and to come back to us to teach us again who we are and how to remember each other. She came to teach us this: that our children are our ancestors. That is how I first met my grandparents when they were newly born.

The Sun in the east, the moon in the west and all the stars dancing between help us to remember the beauty of her. No, I do not think my grandmother is vain, unless it is about her veins of gold and ruby or her ability to turn into a white elephant. If I could do that I would think I was pretty special.

We were doing the dance the older children do – stomping our feet and swinging our golden arms. We were pretending they were the trunks of a long line of elephants moving rhythmically together, laughing, singing, celebrating. Once more the ancestors had been born. We were doing this dance when I first saw her take the form of a cloud, a cloud that came up out of the earth.

She moved from the horizon and walked slowly across the grasses to the pond just beyond our village. And when I saw her --like all the others before me – I fell on my knees and praised her for her wisdom, her beauty... her long life among us.

I do not know what would have happened to me if I had not done so.

There is another story told by my people that there was once a man who was hungry and lean and went out to hunt for his family. They were very

very hungry and he vowed to come home with food for this family and the grumbling mouths of the village. He was not a bad man. He meant no harm.

So it was after a long day of finding nothing to eat at all, of missing all his targets and perhaps –in some versions— having been chased by dingos and having his antelope stolen by a pride of lions, he was on his way home when he saw a white elephant and he killed her for her meat.

O But when this poor man returned hauling his hunt, his wife threw herself off a cliff and died; his children were driven mad; and his poor shamed mother was run out of the village with only the clothes she had on her back. No one ever said what happened to him, but we always knew it wasn't going to be good news.

How can one live without the memories of those who go before us? How can one live without knowing there is something more powerful than hunger, more sacred than breath that dwells among us? This is what I think about this morning as I lie in the grass, looking up at the clouds, looking for a sign of her.

In the faces of the elephants the ancestors first appear and when you can't find any elephants, you look at the clouds. Either you believe me or you don't. But I don't have to tell you my story. I could just do my dance.

We do it. We dance. All the children that can. We become the elephants like her. We make a line of elephants dancing, swaying back and forth, hanging our arms down to the ground as if they were the trunks of elephants walking... It is in our dance that the ancestors reveal themselves.

We are the people of the White Elephant and I am her grand-daughter. I wear her image beaded in shells around my wrist, and my ankle sometimes. My grand-mother wears it hanging from around her neck, and on her heart. It is so big it goes down to her belly.

The Grandmother says we are born to find each other and we know we will keep taking care of each other and dreaming this dream until the song ends and the all the grasses lie silent. For now we dance a mystery, a living story. It's heart keeps our dance at our feet and leads us into the

mouth of the sun's awakening, into the drum sound of the antelope running and great winged flocks thrumming. It shows us pathways from moon rise to sun's birth out of the sea's deep womb.

I do not know how we always know we will find each other again. But she says so. It is our job to listen to the mother earth song, the timeless drumbeat of her heart and to understand -- somehow -- who we are and how we are to help our people.

The tall tongues of green grasses sing as the wind caresses them. They call to me and I am with them listening. Always I hear in their songs the messages of my ancestors: their stories, their laughter and their bone shaking lamentations.

Clouds move up from our sighs and the sighs of the earth's belly: elephant after white elephant. They walk trailing each other, holding a tail with their trunk, writing stories across the landscape and I lie still, watching, wondering how I can keep those bright clouds from telling all my secrets on me.

WE Story: The Healer

Chapter 1, Part 2

“Songi, Songi, come here. Now!” my mother calls, “hurry up, we have our work to do--” and I must leave the clouds behind. “Bring, me my bag of roots, my rattle and the plant bodies... Chumahwa is in labor. You must learn to make yourself useful! . I can not do everything.”

I gather her things and run to her. She looks me over and shakes her head. “You spent too much time dreaming,” she says, “What is wrong with you? You must go to Whan, -- it is his day to die, and help him remember his path, take your drum, and hurry -- or he will be all alone in his passing.”

I hate this job. Born into a clan of healers, each one seeming to know exactly what to do and when. Each one having the memories of the healer that went before them and I without a single sign that it is this plant body, this stone, this song with my rattle that will comfort the old gasping man who lies there in his pool of urine, muttering furiously, asking for my mother, my sister, anyone but me, here in his sacred time of leaving.

I say , “do not worry. Be at peace. I am here with you,” and he laughs, truly laughs. I take his hand in mine and begin to sing, a song of creation and he pulls his hand away. “that is a birthing song, Songi,” he says,. “I do know enough to know that I am not in labor...call your mother, you do me no good...”

“And you, old man, you are not dying. You are too stubborn to die! You know too much to die. You haven’t forgotten anything at all. Your pain is not the pain of spirit letting go – it is the pain of an old dog who lies at the side of his hut barking too much at anyone who ventures near enough to smell...a dog who needs to run about and find the old bones he buried and dig them up!

You cough because you are afraid to breath without thinking about it!

You are afraid to learn new things...that will kill you eventually, but not now. You grieve the death of your maleness- - that is all... it is useless and limp, so what? It is a good day to go swimming. I will find the bowl maker and we will walk or drag you to the river.... Do Not convince yourself that it is time to die while I am gone.”

So I run for my friend Odo who is not happy making pots and bowls anyway...He would like to be a healer. He talks so often of marrying me so that he could join my family and do the work that I dread to do. He seems to have greater patience with the dying and the sick than I do.

He is my friend, my best friend and we have been friends for as long as I can remember but I do not want to marry him. He has skinny legs and his spirit is softer than mine. If I married him, I would have to make all the hard decisions and that would make people laugh at him.

No he needs a softer woman than me...one who will look at him with admiration in their eyes. One that will want to make him happy in bed. I do not feel those things. But I do laugh and laugh with him and he is more than a mate, he is a friend who would not try to master me. No he does what will please me because he knows that my kind of trouble is also his kind of trouble.

Odo is part Cheetah, his ribs show and he runs faster than anyone in our tribe. He runs so fast that he can run and get some water from the river and return before you have started the fire to boil the water for the plant bodies to make into river medicine. Why bother making medicine, I tell him, when the river is so close?

Why not just dunk the old man in it...Certainly that is as healing as having him drink it...And besides, the river has many other gifts. It will clean his stinking body up for one thing. Odo shakes his head in agreement. We know how bad death can smell. We have been there enough times.

I made my bird sound as I approached his hut and then kneeled down to listen before I asked his grandfather if he could serve my clan for the rest of the day. A healing clan has a certain amount of power over the trade clans but I did not like to hurt his grandfather as his grandfather was without a woman for a very long time and yet managed to be bright and

kind to all the children of our tribe.

Sometimes the women said it was because he was unsure which were his. At one time or another we all pretended he was our real father. The women and children had never asked him to leave the village -- even for a moontide – to clear or clean his heart.

Perhaps, Odo was a lot like his grandfather. He was making his grandfather's walking stick talk back to him when I found him. "Walking stick," he was saying, "don't you think Grandfather has had enough of teaching this one to sit still and listen to his lecture on what makes one bowl sacred and more useful than another?"

And the stick was responding, "well, yes, little brother, I think that grandfather has a sacred dream about to come to him and if he would only lie down now, I would walk with him into the dream world at full sun-tide and he could go fishing for a story to tell at the campfires at midsummer."

"Grandfather, " I called from outside the door, lowering my head, and looking at the dirt in respect for his years..." Grandfather, Maker of Small and useful things, Whan is very sick and mother is attending a childbirth, my older sisters are still out gathering, Can Odo come and help? Whan is in need of ..."

"Oh, the two of you, always dreaming up mischief," Grandfather growled before laughing.

"It is true, I do not trick you, Grandfather, please, we will bring you river flowers for your pot, if—"

"Oh, go Odo, be of use, goddess knows you are not focused here today...besides I have something else in mind for myself. Teaching slow hands has a way of making me want to fall asleep. But first" he says. "you should know this about Whan," and draws my head down to his lips whispering a few words that makes my heart lighter.

So we run. We run back to Whan and wrap him in his bundle and Odo picks him up and carries him across his shoulder. We take him down to the river bank and we lie him on the flats of clay.

He is grumpy and becoming more physical in his protests. "Be careful,

you will kill me!” he mutters at us. So I say, “old man, it is a good day. You want to die, so we will bury you here where the sun can bake your bones and the birds can sing your lament.” Then we begin to bury him in the warm, forgiving clay.

By mid day we are done and the clay has formed a moist seal around his body. His forehead is beaded with sweat, but he is still alive and becoming more and more peaceful. I bring him water to drink and he takes it all in, asking for more. Then I follow Grandfather Maker’s instructions. I tell Odo that Whan has lost his penis and that we need to make a bigger and better one for him.

So we gather wet clay in our hands and begin to build a big phallus on top of the clay where his own penis lie dormant below.. At first he protests, but the sight of his huge phallus, wet and brown and slippery makes him laugh....We tell him we are giving him back the power of the bull elephant now. And he laughs and laughs until the clay that grew hard in the sun begins to crack and break...and he is able to sit up and have the shards of mud fall away.

Then we take him into the river and bath him, and pull his body in and out of the tides...until he says, “enough, enough, I feel much better. I am not ready to die. Take me out of this sun and give me something good to eat again.”