

*This Thing Called*  
**the Future**

*A Novel*

*Akudlozi lingay' ekbaya.*

No spirit fails to go home.

Zulu proverb



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**the Future**

*A Novel*

*by J.L. Powers*



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*This Thing Called the Future*

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*So, what's so great about New York?*

For the Dubes—

Bukhosi, Bukekile, Dumisani, Leocardia, Phillip, and Tsepo.

*With love.*



**PART ONE**

THE WITCH

## CHAPTER ONE

### NIGHTMARE

A drumbeat wakes me. *Ba-Boom. Ba-Boom.* It is beating a funeral dirge.

When I was my little sister Zi's age, we rarely heard those drums. Now they wake me so many Saturdays. It seems somebody is dying all the time. These drums are calling our next-door neighbor, Umnumzana Dudu, to leave this place and join the ancestors where they live, in the earth, the land of the shadows.

I get up and walk to the window, peeking through the curtain at the Dudus' house in the faint pink light of dawn. Their house is small like ours, government built—a matchbox house made of crumbling cement and peeling peach-colored paint. It is partially obscured by the huge billboard the government put up some few weeks ago between our houses. This is what it announces in bold white lettering against a black background:

**THIS YEAR, 100,000 CHILDREN  
WILL BE BORN WITH HIV!**

Gogo, my grandmother, fretted like mad when that billboard went up. "People who can't read, they will just see that symbol for AIDS right over our house, and they will say, 'Those people, they are the ones spreading it.'"

I tried to soothe her. "People know better than that. Those billboards are everywhere." It's true, the government wants everyone to know about the disease of these days before we all die from it.

But Gogo shook her head. “You watch, we will have bad luck from this thing,” she predicted.

*Ba-Boom. Ba-Boom.* The drums next door continue and a dog across the street howls in response.

I look for movement in the Dudus’ yard but see nothing.

Like us, they have wrapped thick barbed wire around the top of their fence in order to keep *tsotsis* away. Only some few of us have anything that *tsotsis* would steal. But these days, things are so hard those gangsters will hold a gun to your head and steal crumbs of *phuthu* right out of your mouth even as you are chewing and swallowing.

*Ba-Boom. Ba-Boom.* Two women, walking down the dirt road that runs in front of our house and balancing heavy bags of mealie-meal on their heads, pause to stare at the Dudus’ house.

I look back at my sleeping family. Zi and Gogo share one bed, low snores erupting from Gogo’s open mouth, revealing reddened gums where her teeth have rotted and fallen out over the years. Mama looks peaceful in the bed that she and I share when she comes home.

During the week, Mama lives in Greytown, where she works as a schoolteacher. She doesn’t make enough money for us to live with her, so she rents a very tiny room there and sends the rest of the money home, which supplements Gogo’s government pension. My *baba* lives with his mother in Durban, another city an hour away. Unlike Mama, he doesn’t have a good job; there is hardly ever enough money to go see him.

All over South Africa, people struggle. *Nobody* has enough money. Anyway, we *blacks* don’t have money. Whites—maybe they are rich, but the rest of us suffer. There are poor whites, it’s true, but not so many as poor blacks.

Even the next door neighbor, Inkosikazi Dudu, she will suffer now that her husband has died. This week, Mama came home from her job some few days early to help with her husband’s insurance settlement. “Yo! it is sad, he left her very little money,” Mama said.

“What is she going to do?” I asked. “How is she going to live?”

“She has six grown children,” Mama said. “They will help her.”

“How?” Gogo asked. “They don’t have any education so they don’t even have good jobs.”

“She is old. She has a government pension,” Mama said.

Gogo clucked her tongue. “It is not enough. I don’t know how we would manage if you did not work. We will have to be very good to her and help her if she needs it.”

Gogo is always generous with what little we have. “If we don’t help others, what will happen to us when we are the ones needing help?” she asks.

*Ba-boom. Ba-boom.* I can’t believe my family is sleeping through the racket.

To me, the drumbeat is foreboding. After my uncle Jabulani died, my *baba’s* family was almost torn apart by the accusations until they called a *sangoma* in. She consulted the ancestors and told them that in this case, there had been no witchcraft, only the disease of these days. “It is just the sadness of today,” she said, “that the young people are dying and leaving their children without parents.”

“Leave the curtain and come back to bed, Khosi,” Mama murmurs. She pulls back the covers and pats the space beside her.

“The beating of the drums woke me,” I say. “Can’t you hear it?”

“It’s too much early,” Mama replies, yawning loud.

“It’s a funeral and you know what that means,” I say. “Trouble.”

“He was an old man and ready to die, Khosi,” she says. “Nobody is going to say his death was this thing of witchcraft. It isn’t like all these young people dying before it is their time. *That* is what worries everybody.”

It’s true, what she says. When a young person dies, it is because their spirit was taken from them. But an old man’s death is natural and nothing to fear. He has lived his life and it is time for him to become an ancestor, to help his descendants through life.

“*Wozza*, Khosi,” Mama says again.

So I let the curtain fall and crawl back into bed. Mama puts her arm around me and I cuddle up into her fat cocoa-brown warmth.

Her orange headscarf tickles my forehead as I drift back into the world of dreams, the drumbeat troubling me even in sleep. This one is a

white dream, the color of the moon in the afternoon sky, so I know the ancestors sent it to me.

I'm sitting in hospital with Mama. Her skin is weeping underneath a white bandage. "They're going to remove the burnt skin," she explains when I wonder why we're here, especially when I see all the bodies of dead people piled up in the corner.

We wait for a long time and finally they call her into a small room. The nurse comes to remove Mama's bandages, her gloves bloody from the last patient.

Mama jerks her arm away. "No, Sisi, I do not want you to do this until you change your gloves."

The nurse crosses her arms. "Listen here, I have been working at this hospital for fifteen years. Are you going to tell me how to do my job?"

"That last man you treated could have AIDS," Mama says.

The nurse storms out of the room. Mama takes the nurse's instruments and begins to scrape the dead skin off. "You see, this is why we need good nurses in South Africa," she tells me. "Otherwise, they just do this thing of spreading HIV."

The dream changes and now we're sitting in church as the collection plate is being passed around. When it reaches us, Zi carefully places the five *rands* that Gogo gave her in the plate, looking proud and happy that she's giving to the church.

I pass the collection plate to Mama and watch as she starts to put a twenty *rand* note inside, then stops, clutching the money before passing the plate on by.

"Mama?" I whisper, surprised. Mama always gives to the church. *It is our duty and obligation as Christians*, she has always said. *If we fail to give to the church, which feeds our souls, it is stealing from God.*

"Hush, Khosi, we need it to pay the medical bills," Mama says, and I notice that her bandage is bloody and weeping a thick yellow substance. She sees the look on my face. "It is just a little thing, Khosi," she says. "God understands we need the money."

I wake, a taste in my mouth that comes only after dreaming. And my shoulders ache, like I have been lifting heavy bags all night long.

I know that dreams are not exactly what they seem. But I also know that to dream is to see the truth at night. You may think one thing during the day, but find out it's a lie when you dream. *Sangomas* hear the voices of the ancestors all the time, but night is when their spirits speak to all of us, even we regular folks.

What are the ancestors trying to tell me?

## CHAPTER TWO

### ENCOUNTER

Gogo leaves the house for two things only: church and funerals. Today it's Umnumzana Dudu's funeral. While I cook *phuthu* for breakfast, she clucks around the house, grumbling. "Every Saturday, another funeral," she says. "It is too much sadness."

"Yes, another funeral and another day of listening to lies," Mama says, as if she is agreeing with Gogo.

"What do you mean, Mama?" I am busy wiping the counter, even the parts where chunks are missing. When I'm done, I start to sweep the floor. It's a difficult job. The floor is uneven, with ridges that make it hard to sweep dirt away.

"You watch, at the funeral, they will make Umnumzana Dudu out to be such a kind man," Mama says. "But he'd get his paycheck, go to the *shebeen*, and come home drunk. Then he would beat his children and wife. We could hear the cries, every month. You remember? It is always that way at funerals, we say what we wish had been, not what really was. At *my* funeral—"

"Elizabeth!" Gogo hushes her, quick quick. "You are just talk talk talk. Don't speak of your death; it's bad luck."

Mama laughs. "God already knows the day and hour of my death, Mama," she says. "There is nothing *anyone* can do about it."

Gogo shakes her head at Mama's foolishness. "Witches might hear you," she says. "They have the power to steal life before it is your time."

“But that doesn’t bother me, hey,” Mama says. “I’m a Christian.” She sounds almost smug when she says this.

Mama and Gogo argue about this all the time. Mama believes in the things of white men, science and God only. She says the only power witches have over us is our fear. But Gogo says there is *African* science too, and the white man’s science knows nothing about these things.

*Na mina?* I agree with Gogo. All my life, I have seen and heard things I can’t explain. Like the dream the ancestors sent me last night.

“I’m a Christian too,” Gogo mumbles as Mama disappears into the bathroom to get ready for the funeral. “There are witches in the Bible,” she reminds me. “It is not only because I’m an old woman and foolish that I believe these things.”

“I know, Gogo,” I say, soothing her as I button her black funeral dress. She doesn’t like being helpless, as though she is just Zi’s age. She tries to help, fumbling with each button until I reach it. But her fingers are too gnarled and weak from arthritis.

When Mama and Gogo are dressed in their funeral finery, we set out to walk up the hill to the Zionist church where the Dudus worship. Mama looks so amazing in a lacy black dress and a black hat with roses attached, her bosom spilling out of her dress. I hope I am as beautiful as Mama when I dress up!

We walk up the dirt road, dodging chickens and *kbumbis* that roar past, trickling loud *kwaito* music, the side door open and the fare collector looking at us with a question in his eyes. *Do you need a ride?* We shake our heads and each *kbumbi* zooms by, seeking other customers, beats blaring—*doof doof doof*—through the township.

Ahead of us, Zi clings to Mama’s hand and looks up at her as she chatters away, wanting her attention one hundred percent.

I walk beside Gogo, towering over her. I’m not a tall girl but Gogo’s so short and bent over, the top of her head only reaches my chest. I put my arm around her as we walk, to help her up the hill.

“It is too much hard, this hill,” she puffs.

“Why don’t you rest just now?” I say. “There is no hurry.”

Gogo smiles, revealing her missing front teeth. She leans against a tree stump, catching her breath.

Halfway up the hill, we can look out over the dirt roads running up and down through Imbali's hills. Smoke rises from thousands of small houses and shacks crowded together, as far as the eye can see. Just beyond is the city of Pietermaritzburg, shrouded in early morning smog. Imbali was created for we blacks by the government, during the time of apartheid. Only whites could live in the city during those days, so we lived in these sprawling townships hidden off the main roads and just outside the city limits. Now, of course, we can live wherever we want—but most of us can't afford to live anywhere else.

When Gogo has stopped breathing so hard we start walking again. I try to talk so that Gogo doesn't feel like she has to. I just let words fall out of my mouth while Gogo struggles the rest of the way up the hill.

But I fall silent as soon as we reach the witch's house, a big house at the top of the hill. Gogo leans heavily on my arm. We both look at the dirt, hoping we won't accidentally make eye contact with the old woman who lives there.

Ever since I was a child, Gogo has warned me about her. "Khosi, there are women in this world who want to hurt you," she would say. And the woman who lived in this house was one of those women. "She is *too* much powerful. You must watch out, hey!"

Gogo always spoke in hushed tones when she talked about her. The dog lying in the sun, the chicken pecking in the dirt, the fly buzzing around your head—*they could be her spies*. And who knew what she would do if she heard you talking about her?

"She has a maze of tunnels underneath her house," Gogo would whisper. "They lead to gigantic gold mines. She kidnaps people on the street—men, women, even children. She turns those people into zombies. At night, she makes her zombies go deep into those tunnels to look for gold. *That* is how she makes all her money."

Gogo had always warned me that you couldn't recognize a witch by the way she dressed or even the way she behaved. *Anybody* can be a witch. Your own mother can be a witch and you won't even know it!

Now that I am fourteen, I sometimes wonder if Gogo is right about everything she says. But I do know she's right about this old woman. Whenever I've passed her on the streets, she cackles like she knows all my secrets. I don't dare look at her, afraid if I do, I'll be sucked in by her power and become one of her zombies.

Today as we hurry by, we're both startled by a sudden rattling sound. Looking up, I see that old woman grabbing hold of her fence and shaking it to get our attention.

"Nomkhosi Zulu," she calls.

*How does she know my name?* We look at each other. Her eyes grip and hold me firm, the way her fingers clutch the metal fence. There are gold flecks deep in her eyes, and a large gold tooth glints as she spreads her lips into a thin grin.

"I've been watching you, Nomkhosi Zulu." Her voice is honey sweet. "Ever since you were a little girl."

There's a strange rhythm to her words. They echo in my mind, a song playing over and over—and oh, how I *want* to dance.

"Hey, *wena Ntombi!* Come here, sweet thing." There's something about her voice...Why, she sounds like she has stolen Gogo's voice.

Gogo sucks in her breath and grabs my elbow, her wordless plea, *Masihambe, Khosi. We must run.*

But I'm drawn to the fence, an ant marching to sugar. The old woman reaches through the wire, seizing my arm in her wrinkled fingers, her grasp rough, her fingernails digging in until I gasp.

"This one's spirit is strong," she says.

"Khosi." Gogo's voice is low but strong. "We must go now."

But I'm like a doll in this old woman's hands.

"Khosi," Gogo says, now more urgent.

The old woman lets go suddenly, almost shoving me backwards. "*Yebo, bamba.*" Her mouth breaks open into a wide grin. "Yes, go now with your weak old *gogo*. But I will come for you just now, Nomkhosi Zulu. Soon, I will come for you." Her laughter twists and coils, snake-like and cold. "And nothing on *this* earth can stop me."

I stumble against Gogo, who puts her arm around me. She is shaking,

even more badly than I am. We hurry away, not daring to look back.

It isn't until we're around the curve and out of the old woman's sight that we stop to look at my arm, bleeding from where her fingernails dug in.

"Oh, no," I moan. If a witch is able to get some of your body dirt from your clothing or your skin, she has the power to harm you.

I breathe deep before asking the burning question. "Do you think that old woman will really come for me? Is she really a witch, like you say, Gogo?"

"*Angaz'*, Khosi," Gogo says. She looks as worried as I feel. "We will ask the *sangoma* to make some *muthi* to protect you."

The right *muthi* can protect you from all sorts of evil. But in the wrong hands, that same *muthi* can be used against you. You have to be vigilant—and hope and pray that both God and the spirits of your ancestors are strong with you.

"What will Mama say?"

"Eh-he, I don't know." Gogo's hands still tremble as she holds onto me, her energy dwindling as if the old woman has already consumed her strength. That's what witches do, after all. They suck the life out of people, to make themselves rich or to make themselves live longer. "She is not believing in the old ways. It will be difficult even now to convince her that we must go to the *sangoma* about this problem."

"Mama is never here," I point out.

Gogo nods and we silently agree to keep Mama in the dark about this. We walk, quiet and tired. The whole world looks washed out, like a grainy black and white photo—the kind of photo published in history textbooks that shows early missionaries to Natal, as this part of South Africa was known then, with the first Zulu converts, formal and stiff in their European clothes.

I sneak a sideways glance at Gogo. "I wish that woman didn't know my name."

"*Yebo, impela*," Gogo agrees.

Your name is all a witch needs to have power over you.

"Gogo, how can that woman have so much power when she is so evil?"

Gogo's eyes grow dark, and I can see within them the memory of growing up in the shadow of the white man, when their power over

Africans was absolute. “At the end of time, God will defeat all evil,” she says. “But in the meantime, we must suffer. Perhaps this suffering is cleansing us from our sins.”

“What did she mean when she said, ‘This one’s spirit is strong?’”

“Yo, Khosi! I have always known that,” Gogo says. “You were born the same day your grandfather Babamkhulu died. I believe he gave you part of his spirit as he departed. Even then, I told your mother, ‘*Isithunzi sake* is strong, you watch. Khosi won’t be like us. Her spirit won’t stay the same all her life—it’ll grow with time.’ And up to this day, you look just like Babamkhulu. This to me says I am not wrong.”

In the picture we have above the mantelpiece, Babamkhulu looks like an old black bird, shrewd with very dark skin, small eyes, and a beaky nose. Do I really look like him? I’ve always wanted to look like Mama, beautiful with smooth brown skin and wide, full lips, a big bosom and hips that sway like a tree when she dances.

“Maybe Babamkhulu’s spirit will keep you safe now,” Gogo says. She clasps my arm and rubs the spot where the witch dug in with her claws.

“Maybe,” I say. I don’t feel like my *isithunzi* is strong. I don’t feel like there is anything of Babamkhulu about me. I’m just a teenage girl, vulnerable like anybody to the evil spirits that are invisible but hovering in the air all around us.

## CHAPTER THREE

### MAD CRUSH

After Gogo and Mama disappear into the Zionist church, I almost turn around and run home. But I could never outrun a witch. All she needs to do is hop on her baboon and come racing after me. So I keep my pace slow and deliberate, like I'm not afraid of anything.

Zi is like a tiny bolt of lightning, bristling energy as she skips ahead of me down the dirt road, whirling back and forth from house to house, going right up to each fence. Dogs bound out, hurtling toward her, barking furiously.

"Khosi! Khosi! They're coming to get me!" she screeches as they slam against the fence, the thin wire trembling under their weight. Zi throws her arms around me, thrilled with terror, her black eyes happy-scared as she looks up at me.

The people smile indulgently at us as we pass.

"What will you do if one of these dogs escapes?" I ask, scolding her a little. Because Mama is gone throughout the week, and because Gogo is so old, I can't help but be Zi's second mother. Besides, it takes my mind off everything else. "What if it comes running out and tries to bite you?"

"Then I'll make friends with it," she says.

I laugh. That is exactly what Zi would do too. She makes friends with everybody and everything. When Zi settles down and stays beside me, clinging to my hand, I ask her something that's bothering me. "Zi, do you think I look like Babamkhulu?"

“How do I know? I’ve never met Babamkhulu,” she says.

“You’ve seen his picture on the mantel.”

She screws up her little face as if she’s trying to remember. “*You* look like Khosi,” she decides. “*Babamkhulu* looks like *you!*”

Maybe I should have known better than to ask a little girl to reassure me that I’m beautiful.

We reach the tuck shop, a small shack built in front of the owner’s house and stocked with small items—biscuits, bread, milk, oranges, cool drinks. When I see the man sitting on a red bucket in front of the shop, tipped back and leaning against its tin wall, looking as though he’s been enjoying too much beer at Mama Thambo’s *shebeen*, I look around to see if other people are nearby. But the street is empty.

It’s true, drunk men are everywhere in Imbali. You can’t avoid them but you must steer away from them as best you can. When men are drunk, evil enters them and who knows what they will do?

His eyes are just tiny slits in his swollen face and he slurs his words as he looks at me. He looks like he’s in his late forties. “Girl,” he says, “you are toooo much beautiful.”

My heart beats just a little bit faster.

“Thank you, Baba,” I murmur, calling him “father” to emphasize his age, to remind him how young I am. Anyway, what does he care that I’m only fourteen? Lots of fourteen-year-old girls in Imbali go out with men his age. Even my friend Thandi dates older men.

Zi stands close behind me as I step up to the little window and ask the man for some bread, a box of milk, and Coca-Cola.

The man in the tuck shop looks me up and down. “He’s right,” he says. “You’re becoming a beautiful young woman.”

I know why they’re noticing me. Lately my entire body is rebelling against clothes. I’m finally becoming a woman and it’s obvious I’ll be curvy, like Mama. If only I had Mama’s small nose and big eyes! *Oh, Babamkhulu*, I think, *why was I born the same day you died? Couldn’t you have waited and passed your spirit into one of your other descendants?*

I pass my money through the hole in the wire netting, taking my things and turning away.

“Why don’t you sit with me for awhile? *Lapha!*” The drunk man pats a stone step next to his bucket. He tilts forward, expectant, and almost falls off.

“Gogo’s expecting me home,” I lie, juggling the milk, bread, and Coca-Cola in my arms. I glance down the empty street towards our house, calculating how long it will be before Gogo and Mama will be home. If he were so bold as to follow us, I’d still have to wait some few hours before they returned.

“Your grandmother will wait. I’m sure she is a patient woman.”

“No, Gogo expects me home *now* now.” I tilt my head at Zi. “Besides, she’s only five. She can’t walk home by herself.”

“She can stay.” He grins, showing off his front teeth, yellowed and bleeding at the gums. His dry mouth makes a soft sound, *pah pah*, as he smacks his lips together. “But it’s you I want to know better.”

“No no no, my friend, leave her alone,” the tuck shop owner says. “She’s just a child. Let her grow a bit more, eh, *Ndoda?*”

“What are you talking about?” He’s so drunk, he can’t even stop squinting as he looks at me, greed pooling in his dark eyes. “She’s young and look at her—hey hey! So fat!” He leers at me. “She’s probably a virgin.”

These older men are always obsessed with virginity. A virgin can’t spread the disease of these days. But a virgin isn’t protected from HIV—she can get it from one of these old men, if they are already infected. That’s why I’m always telling Thandi to be careful with the men she dates.

“Sis, man, you’re pathetic,” the tuck shop owner says, turning away and going back inside his house.

Left alone with the drunk man, I look up and down the street again. It’s still quiet, but now one or two young men are loitering at the end of the street, smoking cigarettes and glancing our way. *They* will not offer to help. No.

“Come on, Zi, let’s run.” I grab her hand, peeking back at the man, and at the red bucket, tilted forward like it’s about to topple. “Quick quick.”

But the drunk man is fast, whipping his hand out, grasping my leg, pulling me toward him, whirling me around, his fingers streaking across

my thighs, his swollen eyes bugging out as I fall towards him. The milk tumbles in the dust at his feet.

“Ouch!” I screech.

“Come on, girl, give me some sugar,” he whispers, one hand gripping me, the other crawling up my leg, fingers like little spiders.

I try to wrench my leg free but he has a strong grip, that man, and even as I jerk away, he rears back and I stumble towards him. A flash of blue from his shirt as I crash beside him in the dirt. A sudden stinging pain as the ground peels away layers of skin. My lips kiss the earth and I roll away, scrambling through the dust, tasting rust, smelling the metallic scent of blood.

“Khosi!” Zi shrieks.

On my hands and knees, I look at the drunken man, my vision blurring. His features haze over until they resemble a crocodile’s, with a long snout and big hungry teeth.

The crocodile opens its mouth, ready to swallow me.

“Hey, man! Leave her alone!”

I glance up and see Little Man Ncobo standing between me and my attacker. A flash and the crocodile is gone, the drunk man glaring at me through Little Man’s legs. He creeps back to his bucket, spit and vomit drooling out of his mouth onto the dirt.

What just happened? Did I imagine that man turning into a crocodile?

I push myself off the ground and brush dirt off my skirt. My knee is bloody.

“Did he hurt you, Khosi?” Little Man asks, his voice low, like we’re having a private conversation. I’ve known Little Man all my life and we’re even in the same class at school. He’s a scrawny guy, short and skinny, but for now, he’s like some hero in the movies, rescuing me.

“I’m okay,” I whisper, ignoring the throbbing in my knee and trying not to limp.

He smiles at me and I can’t help smiling back, suddenly noticing that his lips are the same blue-black color as his skin. In fact, I’m seeing all sorts of things about Little Man that I never noticed before. Like the way he leans toward me as he talks, close, his arm almost touching mine.

We have such different color skin—he’s so dark in comparison. Like my *babamkbulu*. Like my *baba*.

My skin prickles. How is it you can know somebody all your life and only start seeing them some few minutes ago?

“You’re all covered in dirt,” he says, reaching out and brushing my arm.

His fingers are so gentle as they graze against my skin. I quiver, my heart beating fast. I’m not sure if it’s racing because of the drunk man or because of Little Man touching me. Maybe it’s both.

“What about the milk, Khosi?” Zi worries.

“Forget about it.” I feel bruised where each of the drunk man’s fingers wrapped around my thigh.

“But we need it for Gogo’s tea,” she protests.

“I’ll get it,” Little Man says.

As he trots over to retrieve the box of milk, the drunk man begins to shout at me. “I’ll be here when you change your mind, little girl,” he yells. “I’ll be your sugar daddy! I’ll buy you whatever you want! See? I have so much money!”

He reaches into his pocket and silver coins slip from his fingers into the dirt. He begins to comb the dust, searching for them.

Zi laughs. “Oh, you have too much money!” she calls.

“Don’t be rude, Zi. Just ignore him.” Even as I chide her, I wish I had her courage. And she’s only five!

*The next time an older man attacks me like that, I promise myself, I won’t be so helpless. They’ll know just who they’re dealing with.*

But even as I make that promise, I wonder if I’ll have the courage to keep it.

“Catch it if you can, Zi,” Little Man calls, throwing the box of milk into her outstretched hands. “Good catch.” He grins at her and she grins back.

“I’ll walk you home, Khosi,” he says.

“Thank you.” I’m glad Gogo is at the funeral. I can hear her voice grumbling in my head if she saw me with Little Man: *You can’t even walk home for some few minutes without meeting some boy? What am I going to do*

*with you? Don't you become one of those bad girls, always chasing after men.*

“Hey, it is not a problem,” he says, his arm stroking against mine for some few seconds. It makes me shiver. “Cold?”

I nod, even though it's not true, and keep my arm near his, hoping we'll accidentally touch again.

He glances at Zi, who's watching us, curious. “You feel warm to me,” he whispers, so low she can't hear.

It suddenly feels like a dozen monkeys are dancing in my stomach.

That's when it hits me. I have a *mad* mad crush on Little Man.

All this warmth is leaking out like tears from my eyes as I smile at him. Maybe I'll regret it later, letting him see how much I like him, but I can't hide it just now.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DREAMS

I try to forget about what happened with the old woman and the drunk man, focusing instead on Little Man, my rescuer. But that night, nightmares flood my mind.

The worst is the one that finally wakes me, sweating and shivering and hot-cold all at the same time.

I'm flying high above Imbali, looking down through the smog at dozens of zigzag streets, twisting here and there, house after house after house crowded together, stair-stepping their way up and down hills and all the way to the city of Pietermaritzburg. An ambulance flashes its lights as it speeds around bends in the roads, goes down a wrong street and hits a dead end, backs up and turns around to try again to get out of the maze that is Imbali.

And then I see her. A witch—*my* witch, the woman who lives at the top of the hill—as she sneaks through the winding streets, as she passes each sleeping house, observing them all briefly until she comes to ours. And then she stops, staring right at the bedroom window where I sleep with Mama.

Though she doesn't say a word, I know she's daring me to come out and challenge her. I can hear her cackly voice speaking in my head: *Hab! So! You think good always defeats evil, eh? Well, why don't we find out, Nomkhosi Zulu?*

*Don't do it*, I whisper, but my body ignores my brain. It gets out of

bed even while I scold it, even as I shout *Stop!* It walks to the window, and there I am, looking outside, watching that witch walk around and around and around the perimeter of our house, digging small ditches, scattering a white powder on stones, placing the stones in the holes, re-filling each ditch with dirt, then stomping down until nobody can find the spot where she dug.

*Muthi.* She's scattering a potion around our house, one that will harm anybody who steps into our yard.

*No no no! Stop.* I try to speak the words out loud but my voice strangles against the muscles of my throat.

She pauses to look at the bedroom window again, spreads her lips into a thin grin, and provokes me with her wordless taunt. *What are you going to do about it? How are you going to protect your family from this muthi?*

*What did I do to deserve this?* I ask. *Why am I your target?*

She laughs. *You think you and your family are innocent? Ah, but there was an opening to evil. You invited me.*

*I didn't invite you,* I argue.

*Somebody in your household did. And now I'm daring you to come outside and we'll see who's stronger. You or me. Hab!*

Who invited evil into our lives? I can't imagine Mama or Gogo or Zi doing anything that would cause this attack. Did I do something? I think back back back, months back. Of course, there are always these things that we should do for the ancestors, to ensure their protection over us. My family is not as faithful as we should be. But surely, our omission isn't so big that it would open the door so a witch thinks she is perfectly welcome in our home.

Our eyes meet. My fear collides with her hatred, like two *khumbis* in a car accident. I start to shake and shiver.

There's no way I'm going outside and facing her, alone.

And she knows it. She knows I'm a coward. That's why she laughs, her mouth open wide, gold glinting on her front tooth. She laughs and laughs and laughs. At me. But it's the strangest thing. *There's no sound anywhere,* like God opened my eyes and plugged my ears.

She puts her fingers in her mouth and whistles until a baboon

lumbers over from the shadows and kneels. She climbs on and rides away, still laughing.

Mama shakes me awake. “Khosi,” she’s shouting, “*vuka!* Wake up!”

I’m standing next to the window, the same window in my dream.

“You must have been sleepwalking,” Gogo says. She looks like she wants to ask more, but respects my privacy too much.

Zi isn’t so respectful. She’s sucking her thumb, the scarf we managed to tie on her head last night clinging to a single knotted plait. “Were you having a nightmare?”

“No!” I deny it quick quick. But I know this much: dreams don’t come out of nowhere. They are signs, sent from the ancestors as warnings. They’ve bothered me for two nights in a row now. What *is* it they’re trying to tell me?

I close the door to the toilet and sit on the edge of the bathtub, looking down at my feet, following the cracks in the linoleum from one end of the room to the other, trying to forget what I saw.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### VISIT TO THE SANGOMA

Gogo has trouble getting out of bed the next morning, sore from her walk up the hill to go to Ummumzana Dudu's funeral.

"Why don't you stay in bed, Gogo?" I suggest. "God will understand if you miss church just once because you are so tired."

But no matter how tired she is, or how sick, Gogo always goes to church. "God never says, 'I'm too much tired, I don't think I'll forgive your sins today,'" she says now as she struggles to sit up.

I glance quickly down at her swollen knees. Gogo gasps as she tries to stand and I reach forward to give her support. We hobble into the dining room, where Gogo collapses on the sofa and Zi sits beside her, patting her arm. I pull a little table forward and lift Gogo's feet to help bring the circulation back.

"I'll go to the *sangoma* after church and get some *muthi* to bring the swelling down," I say. I need to see the *sangoma* myself—to talk to her about the dreams...about what happened yesterday...about the drunk man who looked like he turned into a crocodile...

Mama stands in the doorway of the kitchen. "She needs to go to the doctor, Khosi," she says.

"The *sangoma's* herbs always work, Mama." *Please, Mama, I need to go.*

"A doctor's medicine will work even better," Mama says.

"But when can she go to the doctor?" I ask. "She can't go alone and by the time I'm back from school, it's too late, the clinic is closed."

Mama closes her eyes at the impossibility of it all. She leaves early Monday morning and comes home late on Friday night. After helping Inkosikazi Dudu last week, she can't miss another day of work—we depend on her small salary for every last penny.

“I can stay home from school and take Gogo to the clinic this week,” I offer, sinking inside.

Mama shakes her head. “School is too important.”

Anyway, if I stay home from school, Zi has to stay home from school, too. She is too young to walk through Imbali by herself or to catch a *khumbi* to go into the city, where we are lucky enough to go to a private school because we have scholarships.

“Then let me go to the *sangoma* and get some herbs. It's brought the swelling down in the past, Mama.”

Mama sighs. “It's the best way. For now.”

I sit down beside Gogo and put my arm around her. “There are people from the parish who will come and let you celebrate mass here at home,” I say. “I'll ask them to come this afternoon. You stay here and rest. Next week you'll feel better.”

So Gogo stays home from church, for the first time I can remember. While Mama is in the toilet getting ready, Gogo calls me to her side. I lean in close. “Don't forget, tell the *sangoma* about the witch,” she whispers.

“That will be expensive, Gogo,” I say.

She fiddles around in her pockets and hands me fifty *rand*. “If you can only pay for one thing, forget my *muthi*. It is not so important as blocking that old woman's evil.”

Mama locks the gate behind us, and we start walking up the hill toward our church, the Catholic one, which is just behind the water tank covered in bright, bold graffiti. Zi dances ahead of us, calling hello to the people we pass.

We walk past house after house, past the tall buildings of flats, *tsotsis* hanging out on the top floors, smoking *dagga*, shaking their dreadlocks, and shouting insults at us.

“Yah, *Ntombi*,” they scream at me. “Come have a good time!”

Mama shakes her fist at them but they just laugh and stare at us. At me. “I don't like the way men are looking at you, Khosi,” she says.

“I never come this way alone,” I say. I’ve already learned to avoid the places where *tsotsis* hang out. I don’t like the way they approach, slow, like they have all the time in the world. They pass by me, staring, their faces a mask but their eyes lit up with—with what? Something I don’t want to see. I’ve never seen a *tsotsi* smile, though surely they must, somewhere, sometime...right? Maybe they smile at their mothers.

But Mama isn’t done fretting. “No, you need to be very careful.”

It’s like Mama thinks I don’t know what those men could do to me. I may be young but I have friends all over Imbali and they tell me just what happens if you flirt with danger. Even one of them, Sibub, told me it can happen with men you know. Her own uncle crawled into bed with her one night! She didn’t dare tell her parents.

I’m glad my mother’s brother Richard is nothing like that. When he comes home on the weekend—*hayibo!*—the only thing I have to worry about is his dirty socks. He has never tried what what what with me. No, he is just like Gogo and Mama, always telling me not to be like other young women. “*Wena uzibloniphe,*” they say, over and over. “Respect yourself. Protect your virtue.” Though I agree with what they say, I don’t understand how you are responsible for protecting your virtue if a man attacks and overpowers you.

“I don’t need a bodyguard,” I say, impatient.

But of course, Mama isn’t comforted by my words. So I try again. “Mama, the farthest I go alone is to the *sangoma’s* house to pick up herbs for Gogo. That’s only some few streets away.”

“I wish you didn’t ever have to leave the house, *mntwana wam’*,” she says finally, smiling.

“That is impossible,” I say, treating her comment like a joke. But horror clamps around my heart. My world is small enough as it is—Gogo only lets me go from home to school, the tuck shop near our house, the vegetable market, or the *sangoma’s*. If I am gone even some few minutes longer than she thinks I should be, she gets so worried. One time last year, I lost our *khumbi* money. So after school, Zi and I had to walk from the city all the way back to Imbali. It took an hour. By the time we arrived, she was sending an entire *impi* of neighbors all over Imbali, looking for us.

Still, Gogo doesn't have a choice. She is too old to go with us everywhere and she depends on me to buy food and run other small errands while Mama is gone. Like Mama, my uncle Richard works far away, and he comes home even less often than she does.

"Mama, don't worry about Khosi," Zi says. She has stopped dancing around in front of us and is holding Mama's hand. "I'm *always* with her. I'll protect her. Just yesterday..."

I look at Zi and shake my head slightly. *Don't tell Mama about that man that grabbed my leg yesterday.*

But Mama's laughing. "You're right, Zi, why am I so worried? You'll take care of her." And she reaches out to smooth Zi's hair.

Families file inside the sanctuary and sit in the pews. Some women are dressed in our church uniform, a white and purple gown. They prance down the aisle, looking special, like they belong more than the rest of us who just sit here in our ordinary Sunday clothes. We can't afford the uniform. Some of these women can't afford it either, but they scraped and saved for weeks, maybe months, to buy it.

Mama starts singing beside me and I join in, Zi dancing and whirling beside us, as the priests walk down the aisle holding high the cross with the crucified Jesus Christ. *Alleluia. Alleluia. Amen.* We stand as they pass, make the sign of the cross, then sit when they reach the front of the sanctuary.

When I was younger, I used to have trouble putting together all the different things we believe. There's God, the ancestors, the saints, and Jesus. Who should I pray to?

"Pray to all of them," Gogo told me. "The spirits of the ancestors are like the saints. When we are in trouble, we can call on them. The Lord-of-the-Sky is in heaven but the departed are still here with us on earth."

"Why don't we just pray to the Lord-of-the-Sky?" I asked. "He's the most powerful."

"Sho!" she exclaimed. "God is too busy to be doing what what what every time we pray. With all the thousands of people praying all at the same time asking for *everything*, do you think that God can hear all of us at once? I do not think so. We worship God only but we are grateful for

the people who can help us on earth. Your ancestors are the people who gave you *life*, Khosi. They will trouble you when you have misbehaved. They will help you when you do what's right."

Mama, Zi, and I stand as we join in collective prayer. I wonder if it makes a difference when thousands of us—millions even—are all praying to God for the same thing, all at once? Does he hear us then?

"For all those suffering from AIDS, tuberculosis, and cancer, we pray to the Lord," the priest says.

I peek around the congregation. Everybody here—*everybody*—has a relative who has died or is dying of AIDS. But we never talk about it. No. Not in public.

"Lord, hear our prayer," we murmur.

After church, my friend Thandi nearly knocks me down with her hug. "I have so much to tell you," she squeals.

Thandi always has so much to tell me, even though I saw her in school just two days ago. Thandi is not what Gogo would call a "good girl." She has had more boyfriends than I can remember, and most of them are sugar daddies, older men who buy her things. I think she has gone all the way with them, and she's my age! One of these days, she will fall pregnant. One of these days, she may get sick from what they give her. I hope not, but it is a common problem. Two of my uncles died from HIV already. How does anybody think they will be the lucky ones to be spared?

"You have a new boyfriend?" I guess. Thandi can meet a man on the short walk from the *khumbi* stop to her house and by the time she's reached her front door, he's already proposed.

I'm not disappointed. She flips open her cell phone and shows me his picture. "He owns a jewelry shop downtown," she boasts, holding out her hand to show me the slender gold band on her right index finger. "He's already given me *so* much cellphone airtime, I can talk whenever I want."

"Thandi, he looks way too old for you," I say. Not that Thandi cares. She likes older men. *And* their money.

"He's not *that* old." Thandi frowns, grabbing the cell phone back. She inspects his picture.

"He has a beard," I point out. "And it's gray."

“I don’t care. Girl, he has *so much* money.”

This thing isn’t worth the argument. “Anyway, is your grandmother working today?” Gogo and I like Thandi’s grandmother because she is honest. Some *sangomas*, they are just trying to make money and what what. But if Inkosikazi Nene thinks you need to go to the doctor, or that she can’t help you, she’ll say so.

“Yo, she had such a long line waiting for her when we woke up this morning,” Thandi says. “That is why she isn’t in church.”

“Can I walk home with you? I need to get some *mutshi* for Gogo.” I’m not about to tell Thandi about the witch.

“*Yebo*, let me tell Baba.”

I don’t want to be like Thandi, but I’m jealous of one thing: she lives with her father. I will never live with Baba. When I was Zi’s age, I wished Mama and Baba would get married. I didn’t understand then how expensive is this thing of *lobolo*. In order to marry my mother, my *baba* has to give Gogo a lot of money. Back when Gogo was a girl, men gave cows to the bride’s family. These days, they just give money instead. But still, it’s too expensive. That’s why not many people get married.

Baba is one of those men who can’t afford it. When he was a young man, younger even than me, he left school and joined the struggle against apartheid, training as a soldier in Mozambique. He came home after the government released Nelson Mandela and they started negotiating to become a democracy, so blacks could have the vote for the first time ever in our own country. But then he was too old to finish school and now he struggles to find a good job. Sometimes he works for a day here or a day there. But paying *lobolo* to marry Mama? It is *too much* money.

So Thandi is lucky, living with her *baba*, seeing him every day. I only see mine some few times a year.

Thandi runs off to find her father and I find Mama among all the people lingering at the door. She gives me permission to go. I watch as she and Zi begin the long walk down the hill, past all the tiny houses and the tall buildings, all the way to our little house, set on the edge of Imbali, where the houses bleed into Edendale, another township. There

are so many of us, sometimes it seems like the houses go on and on forever, all the way across South Africa.

I sigh when I see the long queue stretching all the way from the round hut in the back to the neighbor's yard. Weekends are a popular time to visit the *sangoma*.

As I wait in the queue, I finger the fifty *rands* Gogo gave me to pay for the medicine, winding the paper around my index finger. Mama thinks *sangoma* medicine—honoring the ancestors—is silly, maybe even wrong, but here I am. And so are all these other people. Why? Because we know something Mama doesn't. She's the smartest woman I know... but she hasn't figured out that science doesn't explain *everything*.

When it's my turn to enter the round hut, I take off my shoes, smiling at the *sangoma's* apprentice. I wish I could help people the way she will when she's done with her training and working as a healer. But you don't choose to become a *sangoma* the way you choose to become a doctor or nurse; you're selected by the spirits of your ancestors. If they want you, they'll make your life miserable until you say yes.

She gestures for me to enter the hut. "*Ngena*," she says.

I squat down on my haunches to crawl through the small hole near the ground.

The entire hut smells pungent, bittersweet like strong incense. A small fire smolders in the corner, belching short billows of smoke. The ceiling is black with burnt ash. Bunches of dried herbs and a beaded cow's tail hang from the ceiling, while an orange cloth sags across the wall. The floors are mud, smeared with cow dung in circular patterns.

There's a sound like the wind blowing through a field of tall grass. I look around, wondering where the noise is coming from, but there's nobody in the hut except for me and Thandi's grandmother, the *sangoma*, who's sitting in the central part of the round hut, her mouth closed.

"*Sawubona*, Gogo *kaThandi*," I greet her, bowing low to the ancestral spirits inside her.

"*Yebo*," she replies. Her long red beaded plaits clank as she nods her head at me.

As I tell her about Gogo and her sore knees, I peek at her wild outfit, wondering if it sometimes embarrasses Thandi to see her *gogo* dressed like this. Even though Inkosikazi Nene is a modern *sangoma* and believes in doctors and nurses, she is still very traditional in the way she dresses and the way she approaches the ancestors. Everything she wears connects her to the spirit world and protects her from evil: the red and black beaded cap with a strip of cheetah fur threaded through it, the piece of blue cloth with pictures of spears and shields tied around her waist, the red ochre she rubs on her body until she shines a dull muddy red.

“I will give you the usual herbal remedy for sore knees,” Inkosikazi Nene says, reaching up to the ceiling and breaking off big handfuls of dried herbs. She shakes them together in a small gourd, rattling the herbs inside. She pours the mixture onto some newspaper, wraps it up, and hands it to me. “Steep it in boiling water. She must drink it three times a day until the swelling goes down.”

When I take the folded up newspaper, her hand rests lightly on top of mine. “There’s something else, is it, Khosi?” Inkosikazi Nene and Gogo have been friends for many years. She feels like another grandmother to me. To know that she’s on our side and we can always seek out her help...it means the world to me.

My throat is dry. The rustling sound becomes a low whistle.

“As soon as you walked inside this room, the spirits started shouting all at once,” she says.

“Is that...is that the whistling sound?” I ask.

Her fingers tighten on my wrist. “You can hear it?”

“Only a little. What are they saying?”

“They’re saying you’re in danger, little Khosi. Tell me why. Do you know why?”

I swallow. “Do you know that old woman who lives in the two-story house at the top of the hill, near the water tank, just before you reach the Zionist church? The woman that everybody says turns people into zombies?”

She nods.

“Yesterday, when I walked Gogo to our neighbor’s funeral, she spoke

to me. She told me she's coming for me and nothing on earth can stop her. She dug her fingernails into my arm." I hold out my forearm for Inkosikazi Nene to show off the shallow gouge, already scabbing over. "Do you think...do you think she's cursed me? I had a terrible dream last night that she came and challenged me to a fight. I don't want to fight her!"

Inkosikazi Nene reaches behind her and grabs a large stick of dried *impepho*. Lighting it, she waves the smoke in front of her nose, breathing in deeply, closing her eyes, and humming.

I start to speak again, but she holds up her hand to stop me.

At last, she opens her eyes. "It is almost true, what that old woman said," she says. "Almost."

"What part is true?"

"She is coming for you, that is true. And I cannot stop it. I do not know what is going to happen, Khosi. I can give you some *mutbi*; I do not know if it will help. But my spirits are telling me that there is somebody who can stop her."

I hold my breath.

"They are saying it is you, Khosi. With the help of your ancestors, *you* can stop her."

Something claws and scrabbles inside of my stomach. "I'm like a rat which the cat plays with. How can I stop her? She's a witch!"

She folds her hands across her stomach. "You must remember to honor your ancestors every day, to make sure they are protecting you," she says. "Offer a little food and drink to them in the evenings and thank them for what they do for you. They will help you. That is what they are saying."

I stumble out of the hut, Gogo's *mutbi* clutched tight in my hands. Perhaps the words Inkosikazi Nene spoke to me should fill me with confidence. But they don't. How could anybody think that I can stop a powerful witch? A witch with an army of zombies working for her?

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## GLOSSARY OF ZULU WORDS

The Zulu language is structurally very different from English. It is organized around the noun. There are seventeen classes of nouns. Because the initial part of the noun is dropped when constructing a sentence, it can be difficult for English speakers to look up nouns in a Zulu dictionary. This initial part of a noun may also be dropped when a person is addressed directly. For example, *amantombazana* means “little girls,” but if you were addressing a group of little girls directly, you would address them as *Ntombazana*.

Please note that though I have often pluralized words the Zulu way, I have made some exceptions. The plural for *sangoma* should be *izangoma* but I have pluralized it the English way by referring to a group of healers as *sangomas*. I have also done this with the word *tsotsi*.

<i>Amandla</i>	Power, strength. During the war for liberation, black South Africans used this phrase as a rallying cry against the whites in power who suppressed and oppressed them. The response to <i>Amandla</i> is <i>Azwethu</i> , which means “to us.”
<i>Amantombazana</i>	Little girls.
<i>Angazi/Angaz’</i>	“I don’t know.”
<i>Angiguli</i>	“I’m not sick.”
<i>Azwethu</i>	“To us!” See <i>Amandla</i> .
<i>Baba</i>	Father.
<i>Babamkhulu</i>	Grandfather.
<i>Braai</i>	Barbecue, an Afrikaans word.
<i>Cha</i>	“No.”
<i>Dagga</i>	Marijuana.
<i>Gogo</i>	Grandmother. Zulus refer to older women as Gogo, even when there is no familial relationship.
<i>Gogo kaThandi</i>	Thandi’s grandmother. Literally, grandmother of Thandi.
<i>Hamba/Hambani</i>	“Go!” “Run!” Adding the “ni” to the end makes the word plural.
<i>Hapana</i>	“No.”
<i>Harwu</i>	An exclamation like “Wow!”
<i>Hayibo</i>	An expression of disbelief or surprise, similar to <i>harwu</i> . It is sometimes spelled <i>haibo</i> .
<i>Hhayi</i>	An exclamation, like “No!” or “No way!”
<i>I-dining</i>	The dining room.

<i>Imbali</i>	Literally, the word means “flower,” but it is also a township located just outside the city limits of Pietermaritzburg.
<i>Impela</i>	“Indeed.”
<i>Impepho</i>	An herb, commonly burned as incense by <i>sangomas</i> .
<i>Impi</i>	An army regiment. Can also refer to a family group, e.g., a father, his brothers, and all their sons.
<i>Impundulu</i>	A lightning bird, sent by witches. It is an evil portent, suggesting that you or one of your loved ones has been bewitched.
<i>Indoda</i>	Man.
<i>Inkosikazi</i>	Mrs. If you address a person directly as Inkosikazi, you must drop the initial “i” on the noun and it becomes Nkosikazi.
<i>Intombazana</i>	A little girl who has not yet menstruated.
<i>Intombi</i>	A girl who has reached the age of maturity, that is, one who is capable of bearing children.
<i>Isithunzi (sake)</i>	One’s character, personality, or soul. It can also refer to a person’s “shadow,” the level of goodness and strength within, that turns him or her into an ancestor after their death.
<i>Khumbi</i>	Also known as a “taxi,” a <i>khumbi</i> is a minibus that serves as transportation all over South Africa. It is sometimes spelled <i>khombi</i> or <i>combi</i> .
<i>Kwaito</i>	A style of music popular in South African townships—a combination of Afropop and hip-hop.
<i>Lapha</i>	“Here, right here.”
<i>Lobola</i>	To pay lobolo.
<i>Lobolo</i>	Bride price.

<i>Masibambe</i>	“Let’s go.”
<i>Mfana</i>	Boy. The actual noun is <i>Umfana</i> , but Zulu speakers drop the initial “u” sound when addressing somebody directly as “Boy.” When Thandi drags out the “a” sound, <i>Mfaan</i> , she is just using slang to address her boyfriend as “Boy.”
<i>Mina?</i>	“Me?”
<i>Mntwana wam’</i>	“My child.”
<i>Muthi</i>	Medicine, all kinds. It can be used to heal somebody or for witchcraft purposes, which include poisoning one’s enemies. In popular culture, muti (spelled without the “h”) is synonymous with witchcraft potions.
<i>Na mina?</i>	“And as for me?”
<i>Ncese</i>	Shame.
<i>Ndoda</i>	Man. The word is the same as <i>Indoda</i> but the initial “i” is dropped when a person is addressed directly as “Man.”
<i>Ngena</i>	“Enter.”
<i>Ngikhathele kakhulu</i>	“I’m so very tired.”
<i>Ngisuthi</i>	“I’m full.”
<i>Ngiyabonga</i>	“Thank you.”
<i>Ngiyaxolisa</i>	“I’m sorry” or “Forgive me.”
<i>Ninjani?</i>	“How are you and your family?”
<i>Nkosikazi</i>	Mrs. This is the same word as <i>Inkosikazi</i> , but Zulus drop the initial “i” sound when addressing a woman directly as <i>Inkosikazi</i> .
<i>Ntombazana</i>	A little girl who has not yet menstruated. Without the initial “i,” it means the speaker is directly addressing somebody as “Little Girl.”

<i>Ntombi</i>	A girl who has reached the age of maturity, that is, she is capable of bearing children. It is the same word as <i>Intombi</i> but when a girl is addressed directly as <i>Intombi</i> , Zulu speakers drop the initial “i” sound.
<i>Pho!</i>	An exclamation, like “Wow!”
<i>Phuthu</i>	The staple of Zulu meals, a corn meal mush, usually eaten with vegetables and meat.
<i>Rand</i>	South African currency.
<i>Sala kable</i>	“Stay well.”
<i>Sangoma</i>	Traditional healer. A <i>sangoma</i> is a diviner, distinct from the herbalist—the <i>inyanga</i> —though often a <i>sangoma</i> embodies both roles.
<i>Sawubona/Sanibona</i>	“Hello” (singular/plural).
<i>Shebeen</i>	An illegal or unofficial bar, one that somebody has opened in their home.
<i>Shesha/Sheshani</i>	“Hurry.” Adding “ni” makes the command plural.
<i>Sho!</i>	An exclamation, like “Wow!”
<i>Sikhona</i>	Literally, this phrase means “we are here,” but basically means, “we’re fine.”
<i>Sisi</i>	Sister. A term of affection but used commonly among men and women of approximately the same age, even if they aren’t related.
<i>Siyahamb’ ekukhanyen’ kwenkhos’</i>	“We are walking in the light of God.”
<i>Siyaphila</i>	“We are well.”

<i>Tokoloshe</i>	A small, hairy creature—monkey-like—who is evil in nature and makes mischief. Witches may curse a person by sending a <i>tokoloshe</i> to cause mayhem in his or her life.
<i>Toyi-toyi</i>	A type of dancing created during South Africa’s war for liberation. It is used for both protest and celebration.
<i>Tsotsi</i>	Gangster, bad boy.
<i>Ubuntu</i>	Literally, the word means humanity or mankind, but as a concept in African culture, <i>ubuntu</i> suggests that all humans are connected to each other and that what hurts one human, hurts all humans.
<i>Ukuthwasa</i>	A special illness that men and women (primarily women) undergo when they are called to be a <i>sangoma</i> , usually involving visions, disorientation, wandering.
<i>Umfana</i>	Boy. When Thandi drags out the “a” sound, <i>Mfaaan</i> , she is just using slang to address her boyfriend as “Boy.”
<i>Umnumzana</i>	Mr. Zulu speakers drop the initial “u” sound when directly addressing somebody as Umnumzana.
<i>Umbakathi</i>	A person who sends illness and death. A witch.
<i>Unamanga</i>	“You’re a liar!”
<i>Utsbwala</i>	Beer, specially brewed for celebrations and rites honoring the ancestors. It has a very low alcohol content and is a nutritious drink.
<i>Uyagula?</i>	“Are you sick?”
<i>Uyakhona narwe?</i>	“Is she with you?”
<i>Uyaqonda?</i>	“Do you understand?”

<i>Vuka</i>	“Wake up.”
<i>Wena</i>	“You.”
<i>Woza</i>	“Come.”
<i>Wozani</i>	“You (plural) come.”
<i>Yebo</i>	“Yes.” It is sometimes used to say “Hello!”
<i>Zionists</i>	One of many Christian sects in South Africa that emphasizes physical healing through prayer, water, and the laying on of hands.