

The White Boy

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As the children ran from the ceremonial hut, their cheerful screams and laughter nearly drowned out the calls and screeches of the many colorful birds high above in the tree canopy that enveloped their small village. This was not a day for hunting, gathering or any of the usual tribal chores. Rather, it was a day of restoration for body and soul; an opportunity to ignore the burdens of life in the rain forest and for children to be...well, *children*.

Aleki, a boy who—in the “civilized” world—might be celebrating his eighth birthday with cake and candles, was now leading the charge along damp and lushly vegetated trails. Many bare feet slapped against the well-trod forest floor and the children’s dark ebony skin glistened from the humid air. Aleki would soon endure the trials and rituals that would elevate him into tribal manhood; but, for now, he was simply the eldest man-child and the accepted leader of the little band of adolescent forest dwellers.

The children showed no fear as they ran through territory frequented by predatory cats and sharp-tusked boars. The purity of their joy and happiness was evident on each of

their faces and the volume of their excited chatter increased as they rounded every familiar turn in the trail. Aleki was first to reach their destination and the first to cast his body into the clear, cool water that filled the basin below a towering falls. He took several submerged strokes, finally breaking the surface and turning to watch as his friends raucously entered the water behind him.

Had Christianity yet reached this hidden corner of the world, the missionaries would surely find difficulty in deciding whether this place was more like the Garden of Eden, or Heaven itself. Every fern leaf, hanging vine and bright flower seemed perfect. Though laden with moisture, the air was absent of any form of pollutant. Even the children's interactions displayed no flaws; not even the slightest hint at any of the behavioral impurities of humankind. No greed. No envy. No animosity. Just the mutual respect and love that their tribe had practiced for as long as even the eldest of elders could remember.

All was tranquil as the children alternately swam below the falls, climbed the mossy cliff face and impressed one another with their leaps and dives from ever increasing heights. Aleki, establishing a new personal height record above the pool, was about to mimic a swooping boobook owl when a loud shriek caused all the children to stop and turn toward its source. Horror quickly spread as a small girl was being dragged into the thick forest by a very large black cat. Additional screams ensued as the other children scrambled to distance themselves from the attacker. Some sought refuge toward the middle of the pool; others climbed higher up the cliff face aside the falling water. Aleki stood frozen; torn between the impulse to pursue the predator and its prey, and the instinct of self-preservation.

Instinct won the boy over and Aleki ducked behind the powerful downward stream of water. There, in the dark sanctuary, he felt his way along the polished rock wall, searching for a wider ledge upon which to stand. Reaching above his head, Aleki located a deep indentation and with two hands hoisted his slender body up onto the shelf. Pushing backward, away from the rushing falls, he suddenly found himself sliding downward into a thickening darkness. The smooth and wet rock quickly gave way to rougher surfaces with sharp edges. Aleki frantically tried to halt his descent; his shoulders striking a large outcropping, sending him tumbling into the opposite wall of the shaft. He

bounced again, rolled and struck his head hard against a solid surface as he continued his fall.

Despite his panic, two thoughts ripped through Aleki's mind. The first: it was becoming increasingly warm the further he fell. The second: he hoped not to fall into whatever was causing the growing, repulsive stench around him. Then Aleki's world went completely black. Sadly, it didn't remain so.

As Aleki slowly regained consciousness, he became aware of the many contusions he had suffered during his fall. Every part of his body hurt. He cried out, not from the pain of his many injuries, but from the horrible, sulfuric smell that surrounded him. Accustomed to the sweet scents of the tropical forest, this new odor gave Aleki a sense of death and despair; emotions mostly unfamiliar to him. He resisted the urge to vomit.

Next came the awareness of intense heat; dry, like that cast off the rocks his people used to cook food in their pit ovens. Aleki felt his skin and no sweat oozed from his pores. He then blinked several times and moved a hand in front of his eyes. Was he blind? Eventually he thought he could see a faint image of his hand. It was difficult to tell. He decided to try to sit up.

As he sat in the dark place—whatever and wherever the place was—Aleki continued to regain all of his senses. The pain was bad; the smell repulsive. And then he heard the sounds. Seemingly far off, Aleki became aware of voices. But as he concentrated to determine the direction of the source, he wanted to cover his ears. What he heard was indecipherable as a language, but the misery and torment being expressed was very clear. Aleki decided he was in a very bad place and another unfamiliar emotion filled his mind...*extreme fear*.

He stood; knees wobbly and off balance. Aleki reached out, hesitantly and painfully taking a step toward the sounds. He realized that he could, indeed, see his hand and a faint pinkish light reflected off the rock walls a few feet ahead. He took more tentative steps and soon reached the edge of a very deep pit. Woozy and beginning to shake uncontrollably, what he saw down the pit made Aleki drop to his knees.

Far below, seemingly a distance that would measure from his village to the waterfall where this horrifying experience began, Aleki could see what appeared to be

hundreds—maybe thousands—of people clamoring and clawing within a fiery cauldron. Their voices of pain and agony rose up to him and, this time, he did cover his ears. A feeling of dread and helplessness overwhelmed Aleki. He wanted to turn and escape; the way he had when the large cat captured and dragged the little girl into the forest. But then his eyes caught additional movement within the vast pit and the raw terror rendered him unable to move.

Aleki and his tribe shared the rain forest with the many different birds and animals. But he had never seen anything like the creatures that clung to the walls of the pit between him and the cauldron filled with burning people. They were vile and disgusting; large and small; hideous and hateful and threatening. And, worst of all, they were each looking up at Aleki. No, not just looking. They were reaching, obsessed with his presence; waiting for him to tumble down in their direction. And before he knew it, he was leaning over the pit, somehow drawn to them.

With all his remaining strength, Aleki pushed away from the pit. In one motion he rose to his feet, turned away from the creatures and the burning people and, in the darkness, ran head first into the rock wall.

Water. Aleki was aware of the sound of water rushing past him; and the coolness of the air and mist that washed over his body. He was thirsty, his mouth very dry. He suddenly yearned for clear, cold water. Aleki opened his eyes and realized that he was back on the rocky ledge behind the falls. He couldn't remember how he got there.

Aleki stood, muscles aching, the memory of his fall a hazy shadow in the back of his mind. He reached out and cupped water, drinking it quickly. Then...voices, from below and over the roaring sound of the falls. Not evil or tormented, but familiar. Aleki cautiously stepped along the ledge and covered his eyes as he emerged into daylight.

There, gathered around the pool were his people! He spotted his mother and his father and called out to them.

“Moomba! Gaapa!” he cried. “Tapa, Aleki!”

Everyone below looked up. And began to scream.

“Gonoo! Gonoo!” they screamed. “Gonoo Aleki!”

The people ran in all directions, disappearing into the thick forest. Even his mother and father ran. Aleki was confused and afraid. Why were they calling him a ghost?

Aleki dove into the pool and as he climbed out he noticed his hand. His skin was no longer the dark, rich ebony of his people. It was white. He leaned over the water in the pool and looked at his reflection. The boy staring back, mouth drawn open and ready to scream, was completely white. *Like a ghost.*

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