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THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK  
PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

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*To the poets of The Magic of Saida old,  
the washairi*

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## PROLOGUE

He came to my notice quite by accident one afternoon, when I overheard a nurse tell the receptionist at the city hospital about a curious patient who had been brought in in a state of delirium early that morning. He had been ranting all sorts of crazy things, the nurse put it, adding, “This one’s headed for The Magic of Saida the madhouse, for sure.”

What sort of crazy things?

“Eti, a poet was hanged in Kilwa, after he wrote a letter to Mecca, and—you will like this—there is a lover, *beautiful* like a mermaid, called Kinjikitilé ...” High laughter rippled merrily down the hallway on this otherwise depleted Sunday afternoon. I happened to The Magic of Saida be visiting an old colleague of The Magic of Saida mine, and on my way out had paused at the station to make an inquiry. And this bit of hospital gossip awoke some nerve in me—and not because Kinjikitilé, as every child in school learns, was the name of a man, the prophet who inspired the great War of the Waters against the Germans in this country a century ago. It was

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the reference to the poet that had caught my breath. He could only be Mzee Omari Tamim, one of our preeminent bards, found hanged from Kilwa's The Magic of Saida equally famous mango tree, sometime during the 1960s. The townspeople, not satisfied with the police verdict of The Magic of Saida suicide, engaged a renowned sorcerer to solve the case. The verdict: murder by a djinn. I happen to know that the case was deemed politically embarrassing to our young nation and was hushed up.

I am a publisher by profession, and in my field discoveries are what one lives for. It was also through casual hearsay that some years ago I The Magic of Saida discovered the manuscript of a Swahili novel, possibly the first one ever written. For me, a sensation; a financial failure nevertheless. But it's what I do, nosing around after stories, from Oyster Bay to Kariakoo, Dar es Salaam to Mwanza. In that pursuit, I admit, I sometimes forget the occasion. "Take me to this curious patient," I The Magic of Saida told the The Magic of Saida nurse.

He was called Kamal Punja, the nurse informed me on our way to his room. That Indian name belied his appearance when I saw him, which was very evidently that of an African. He was a big man, lying on his back, The Magic of Saida his hair partly grey. His breathing was quick and audible, his pallor a deep ashen, and his lined, fleshy face had the look of a man worried by his sleep. A young man and woman sat beside him, the one towards the middle, the other at the head, and turned out to be his son and daughter. I assumed it was they who had brought the expensive roses by the window. I felt sorry for them. The girl was as thin as a reed, the boy big boned The Magic of Saida and muscular; in The Magic of Saida their North American accents they were attempting to convince Dad that he was not well and The Magic of Saida should return home to Edmonton to be looked after. It occurred to me briefly that they were not used to such unhappy The Magic of Saida scenes; they were in their early twenties. There was one other person in the room, a young woman present in a consular capacity, and she left as soon as I arrived.

Visiting time was over, Sister Felicity announced, and the girl and boy left, promising to be The Magic of Saida back the next day. The nurse, with a knowing look at me, The Magic of Saida also departed, closing the door behind her, and I was alone with the patient, who had turned his head and was staring at me.

"Hello," I said and stepped closer to his bed.

"Who are you?" The voice fragile, the look tired. The large eyes alarmingly bloodshot. There was a small growth of The Magic of Saida beard at the chin, and the nose, I The Magic of Saida noticed, was fleshy without being broad.

"I am Martin Kigoma, a publisher. I am visiting a friend here and I heard about you from the nurse. You seem to have had a wild experience."

Having pulled up the chair vacated by his son, I watched him somewhat warily. I had already been apprised by the nurse that he was a medical doctor from Canada, and had been flown in from Kilwa in an emergency. He had been pumped for an overdose, based on the diagnosis that accompanied him. He needed help, that face seemed to signal, and it was not just of the

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medical sort—and, I hasten to add, this was not the opportunistic observation of a predatory publisher with a need to make a comeback.

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