

# Excerpt from: **Butter Honey Pig Bread**

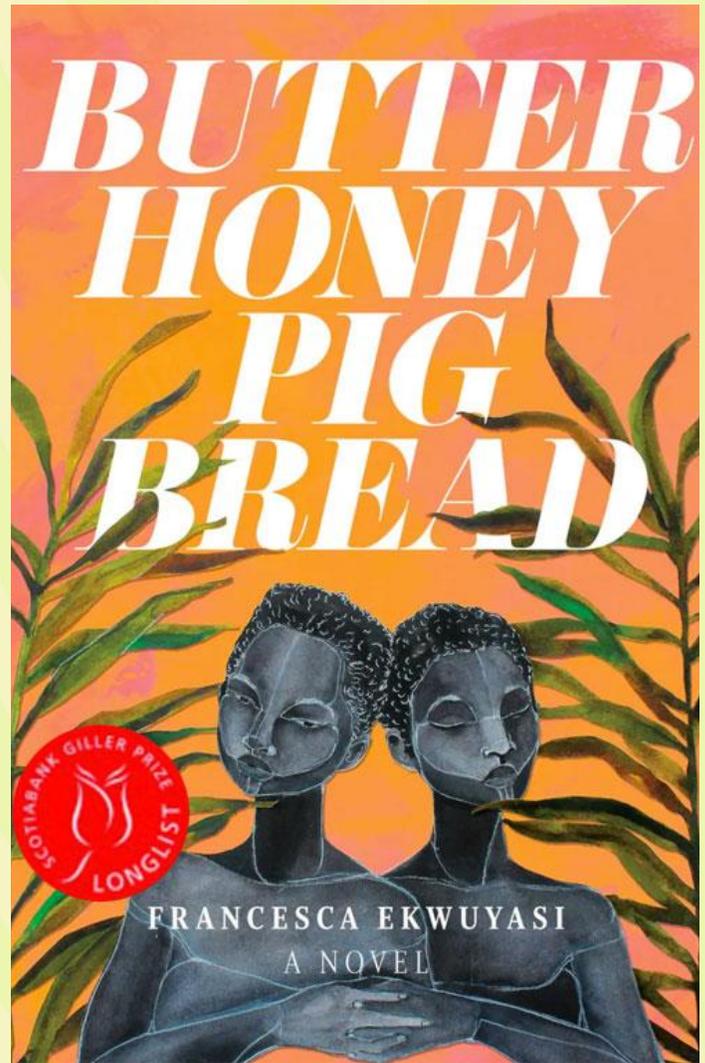
If you ask Kambirinachi, this is how she'll tell it:

There was a spirit, a child, whose reluctance to be born, and subsequent boredom with life, caused her to come and go between realms as she pleased. Succumbing to the messy ordeal of being birthed, she would traverse to the flesh realm, only to carelessly, suddenly, let go of living like it was an inconvenient load. Death is only a doorway, and her dying was always a simple event; she would merely stop breathing. It was her nature. The dark tales of malevolent spirit children, *Ọgbanjes*, are twisted and untrue. It was never her intention to cause her mother misery; she was just restless. It was just the way.

The time before her final birth, in an attempt to make her stay, her mother marked her with a red-hot razor blade, just as the Babalawo instructed. Three deep lines at the nape of her neck, below the hairline, smeared with a pungent brown paste that burned and burned. All this so the *Ọgbanje* would stay bound to its body, and if not, at the very least, she would recognize it should the child choose to be born again.

The child died, of course.

She returned again. And maybe she took pity on the woman, or perhaps she was bored with the foreseeable rhythm of her existence, but this time she chose to stay. And the three horizontal welts on the back of her neck signified to the woman, her mother, that this



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was the same child. It might have been a coincidence; perhaps the woman's mother-in-law (she'd never liked the woman, found her haughty) marked the child in secret to torment her.

Nevertheless, for Kambirinachi, living was a tumultuous cascade between the unbearable misery of being in this alive body indefinitely

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and an utter intoxication with the substance, the very matter, of life. When there was peace, life was near blissful, but otherwise, Kambirinachi's childhood was nightmarish for her mother. Ikenna was an exhausted woman, a woman made hard by nearly two decades during which her body betrayed her. Or, as some might put it: almost two decades of being plagued by an *Ogbanje* that caused her three late-term miscarriages, one stillbirth, two dead infants, and a dead toddler. She used to be much sweeter, softer, kinder, but it's impossible to go through that particular brand of hell and stay untouched. She couldn't help it; she hated the child a good portion of the time. And the child, too, must have hated her, after making her wait and suffer, only to wail the way she did—unprovoked, inconsolable, and seemingly interminable. To preserve her sanity and, frankly, the child's well-being, Ikenna retreated inside herself, saving all tenderness for her husband, and leaving only a barely concealed indifference for Kambirinachi.

Kambirinachi was elusive. Even if she was sitting right before you, her absence would be palpable. As an eleven-year-old, her attention was always elsewhere.

"Where is Kambirinachi today?" her father often teased, childlike, a broad smile stretched across his bearded face to reveal crooked and tobacco-stained teeth.

Kambirinachi chose that smile to be her anchor when the songs calling her back home were most persistent. One doorway back home was the unfinished borehole in the backyard, covered in flimsy, rotted wooden boards, with

an opening just wide enough to swallow her small body and water just deep enough to drown her. Really, anything that would kill her was a doorway. The songs and voices of her Kin were loud loud shouting; it shocked her that nobody else could hear them. They made her accident-prone.

The unfortunate thing tripped on stones that weren't there and ended up with broken bones that couldn't entirely be explained. She would go to sleep healthfully robust but wake up with blistering fevers.

So she learned to think of her father's smile and to sit still until the voices grew muffled and she could carry on with her adventure of the day. Any thoughts of the future worked like a loosened tap that let the voices of her Kin rush out in a high-pressure stream, so she also learned not to think too far ahead. She thought of things she liked about being in her alive body: the smell of dust rising from the ground outside when heavy rain struck the earth, the burnt-sugar coconut taste of *baba dudu*. She thought of things she disliked: the sound of her mother's voice when it was hardened by anger—she was angry often—the fervour in the pastor's voice when he shouted on Sundays—he shouted often—about hellfire, Holy Ghost fire, and God smiting his enemies. She thought backward, about the in-between place before birth and after the hollowing of her body: her home—the place where she could become the things she loved most, where she would join the rays of sunlight and sing sing in sharp tones, high and joyful.

It struck in her a sadness, the pitying kind of sorrow, to know the things that alive bodies could never be.