

Co-Winner of the 2012 James Tiptree, Jr. Award

“In *Ancient, Ancient*, Kiini Ibura Salaam’s startling stories combine science fiction, fantasy, and mythology in a sensuous exploration of what it means to live while struggling to define self and other. Salaam’s language is poetic and sensuous — a unique and original voice. The stories are ambitious and challenging, demonstrating excellent range in both storytelling style and imagery, from the mundane to the fully fantastical. Salaam is particularly interested in agency in oppressive social realities and explores how oppression works on our gendered bodies.”

—Tiptree Award announcement

Praise for *Ancient, Ancient*

“The world as Salaam paints it is full of harsh and beautiful things: she insists that we must venture into dark places to emerge as who we are meant to be. The best of her work is imbued with subtle interventions which ultimately provide the reader with sharply felt revelations, the secrets within the text that we must each decipher independently and which speak to each other to reveal a larger project. The stories work from mutual touchstones: the illustration of sex as an act of power; a visceral relationship to the human body as a mode of currency as well as a site of rebellion; and the examination of the struggle to find oneself, particularly as a woman, in a world that offers so few options. Few writers pay such focused attention to a specific set of ideas and concerns, and this accomplished collection provides a vigorous exploration into Salaam’s unique vision.”

—Richard Larson, *Strange Horizons*, October 5, 2012

“The ancient mysteries of life hold in their grasp the power of seduction. We find seduction, being led away, in a sexual experience, a sensual touch, the coming of a new life or death, the physical movement of bodies in a dance, the allure of magic, the call of nature, the possibility of a new truth or that a truth was a lie, or to experience the life of another. There is a freedom and danger, a pleasure and pain in seduction, and Kiini Ibura Salaam compellingly explores them in her collection of speculative short fiction stories, *Ancient Ancient*.”

—*Modern Griots Review*, October 11, 2012

“This collection of moving stories interleaves many themes, perhaps the most effective for me being the alienation of the foreigner....Throughout the language is stunning, like music become words. I found my own mind dazzled and my imagination stretched to keep up with the flow of images.”

— Martha Hubbard, *The Future Fire*, July 10, 2012

“*Ancient, Ancient* illustrates the tremendous potential of speculative fiction, and the awesome power it can invoke when wielded by the right hands. This is not a collection of short stories for someone seeking a casual read that can easily be put down and picked back up again. This is serious reading that will demand your full attention, and you’re going to be really glad it did because every inch of it is compelling and delicious, complex and rich.

“Race, identity, sexuality, gender, and so much more run fiercely through these pages and balance elegantly with the storytelling and narratives; it’s easy to see why this book was a natural pick for the Tiptree, and why Kiini Ibura Salaam is definitely a writer to watch. If this entry

blew me away this much, I can only imagine what she's going to bring out next, and which distant worlds and souls she'll take me deep into the heart of, only to fling me back out again, reluctant to join the outside world."

— s.e. smith, *this ain't livin'*, August 18, 2013

"The most interesting thing...is how different all the stories are from one another. Salaam moves easily between genres, themes, and voices. Her stories work in a variety of different registers.... Overall I was impressed by the range and command of voice shown throughout the stories here. Whether tackling far-future SF, generation starships, oracular magical women, child abuse, or hidden aliens, the voice of the narration and the characters always seemed spot on. The stories also hit me on an emotional and visceral level."

— Karen Burnham, *Locus*, March 21, 2013

"Salaam's ability to firmly ground the idea of the spirit world coexisting with what we might perceive as normal or real, is a theme throughout the collection....

"All in all, readers will find themselves captivated by this fascinating collection of stories and enthralled by the author's ability to elevate our notions of what is real or not in a way that's nuanced. Each story in *Ancient*, *Ancient* makes us believe, if only for the time it takes to read them, that there could be something more to our own life narratives. This is the mark of good fiction."

—Tracey M. Lewis-Giggetts,

Mosaic Magazine, December 5, 2013

Ancient, Ancient
by
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This book is fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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This collection is dedicated to humanity's
ancient urges, and to the ancient truths that
reside in each one of us.

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Rosamojo

Eyes half closed, I see the dark of daddy's pants. My bedroom door swings open. Light rips into my room, then disappears. I am alone now. Daddy's footsteps get softer and softer. I can't relax 'til I can't hear him no more. I turn my face to the wall. My neck is sore, but that's better than it being broke. My breath goes from fast to slow. Then I start to notice other things. Like the moon glowing outside my window. My leg shaking so hard I can't stop it. My fists clenched tight.

I open one hand. It's empty. I hold my fingers up to my face. It's dark in my room, but I can see two white marks my fingernails made when they were digging into my skin. I squeeze the other hand tighter. A soft springy clump of daddy's hair shifts in my palm. It would tickle if I let it. But I don't. I can't laugh while I still hear daddy's voice whispering that I'm his favorite.

Sunlight creeps under my eyelids, climbs into my eyes. I curl over on my side and draw my knees up to my chest. Don't want to move, not ever. I hear mama screaming at Lola to hurry up in the bathroom, and my heart catches in my throat. Benny is crying at the top of his lungs. I know I better get up, unless I want mama to know. I jump up and pull my nightgown over my head. At first I go to throw it in the dirty clothes hamper, then I stop and shove it under my mattress instead. My head feels dizzy, but when I hear

mama's voice in the hall, I know I gotta make everything look right.

I stumble over to my dresser and pick out a clean nightgown. The new nightgown is soft on my skin. It smells like soap powder. I wanna go lie down again and close my eyes. I wanna sleep with the fresh smell, but I don't. I yank the edges of my sheets and tuck the corners under the mattress. I climb on top of the bed and throw the top sheet high up so it'll fall down flat. Before the sheet reaches the bed, I see them: two dark streaks—one short, one long. I go to pull them dirty sheets from the bed, but then I start thinking 'bout how far away the clean sheets are. Be smarter to hide the stains from mama, than try to get some fresh ones from the hall closet. I grip the edges of the top sheet and pull it smooth. If mama comes to check on me now, she'll be real happy with how tight I made the bed. She'll be so proud, she'll never even see the stains.

When I peek out into the hall, nobody's looking. I run straight to the bathroom and shut the door behind me. Before washing up, I wipe a warm washcloth between my legs. When I look at it, I see the same dark red streaks that were on the sheets. I rinse the washcloth and wipe 'til it shows no more red. Then I wash my face and brush my teeth.

Mama is already at the stove when I sit at the table.

"No kiss for me this morning?" she say.

I don't move. I just sit at the table still as a stone.

"Rosamojo, you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?" mama laughs. Then she comes and kisses my cheeks.

Daddy kisses me on top of my head like normal. I sit on my hands because if I didn't, I'd scratch his face and mama would know something's wrong. Mama drops my plate down in front of me. The two huge yolks of my eggs

is still jiggling from their journey from the stove. I don't say nothing. Not even when Benny start to tease me 'bout how long it take me to get out of bed. Not even when Lola steal two pieces of bacon from my plate while looking me dead in the face. Not even when mama says "Rosamojo's having a bad day," and puts cheese on only my grits. Lola look at me and squint her eyes. When mama go back to the stove and daddy go to the coffee pot, she ball up her fist and say, "You better not be doing no magic."

I shake my head. "I didn't do no magic, I swear."

"What you said, sweetheart?" daddy ask when he hear my flat voice.

"Nothing, daddy," I say and stir the cheese into my grits.

Benny and Lola are loud in the backyard. Daddy and mama been left, but I'm still sitting at the table, dirty dishes spread all over the tabletop. Lola runs into the kitchen with a knobby piece of branch. Benny comes in right behind her carrying two sticks. Lola bangs the branch on the floor.

"Wanna go scare some neutra rats?" she ask.

I just shake my head no.

"We got you a stick," Benny say.

I shrug my shoulders.

"We goin then," she say. "And I don't wanna hear nothin 'bout them dishes."

I shrug my shoulders again.

Lola looks close at me. "What's wrong with you?" she ask.

I don't say nothing. Lola bang her stick on the floor, suck her teeth, and turn away.

“Come on, Benny, let’s go to the canal. Rosa’s actin all funny today.”

It feel like the air around me is thick and I gotta move real slow. My favorite overalls be the only thing I can think of to make me feel better. I put them on before I jeck the sheets from my bed. In the tub, I wash out the dark spots. I bring the sheets down the hall, down the stairs, through the living room, through the kitchen to the back door. Just when I’m ’bout to step outside, I see nosy ole Mrs. Roberts looking into our yard. I back up, arms still full of sheets. If Mrs. Roberts see me hanging up a sheet with a few wet spots, she gonna ask mama if I got my cycle. And mama gonna come asking me questions like she did Lola. So I go back upstairs to my room. I let the sheets fall out of my arms onto my bare mattress. Then I sit on my bed a while, thinking and staring out the window. Real quick like, I get an idea. I jump up onto the mattress with my slippers on. I strain to lift the windows and struggle to get the screens out. I hang the flat sheet out one window and the fitted sheet out the other. Them wet spots should dry real quick. I just know I better get them screens back in before mama gets home.

In mama and daddy’s room everything is cool and quiet. It’s like they room ain’t part of the rest of the house. It’s so dark in there I can’t see my reflection in neither of mama and daddy’s two mirrors. I get real close on them, but I can barely make out my face. Then I start snooping around. I don’t even know what I’m looking for until I see it: daddy’s favorite harmonica sitting on top the dresser with mama’s combs and jewelry. I slip the harmonica into

my side pocket. On the floor next to daddy's side of the bed is the sports section. I crouch down and look at it. It's all marked up with inky black fingerprints. I roll it up and stick it in my back pocket. I go down the hall to the bathroom and stand on the step stool. In the medicine cabinet, I see lots of little bottles with words I can't read. Then I see daddy's toothpicks. I put a handful in my front pocket and go to the kitchen with my loaded pockets.

Beneath the sink is a burlap bag full of daddy's favorite coffee. I grab the bag by the edges and drag it out the kitchen, through the living room to the front porch. Back in the kitchen, I find the metal bowl mama uses to soak burnt pots and pans—I bring that to the porch too. I stick the toothpicks in the harmonica holes and wrap the harmonica in the newspaper. My hand twitches. I look at it and suddenly remember—daddy's hair! I run upstairs and scoop up the hair from my dresser drawer. On the porch, I unwrap the newspaper and stick daddy's hair into the harmonica holes too. Then I wrap the whole thing up again. I put it in mama's metal bowl and set the whole thing on fire. As I squat, watching it burn, my lips begin to move. Words come spilling out of my mouth, spelling out a protection prayer I never even knew I had in my head.

When the fire burns out, the whole porch is cloudy with smoke. I use a dishrag to pick up daddy's burnt things and shove them deep into the coffee beans. It seem like it take forever for me to drag that bag of coffee upstairs, but I do it. By the time I stuff the bag under my bed, my arms are wet with sweat.

When Lola and Benny come home, all the smoke from the fire is gone. I'm back sitting at the kitchen table,

looking like I didn't move. My pockets are stuffed with cotton balls I took from under the bathroom sink.

When Lola sees the dirty dishes still spread over the table, she punches me hard.

"Why you didn't clean the dishes, stupid?"

I give her the same evil look she give me this morning, and she backs off. She hates my magic. She liked it better when she could beat me up. Now she be a bit more careful.

"Come on, Benny, let's do the dishes," Lola says.

"Yeah," Benny says, like doing the dishes is a treat.

After mama tucks me in and turns out my light, I grab the cotton balls and put them under my pillow. Then I sit on top, and those prayers start coming out of me again. This time, they come so fast, it's scary. I sit there for hours, mumbling to myself, waiting for daddy to come home. When I hear daddy's car creep into the driveway, I jump out of bed and drop down to my hands and knees. As the front door opens, I grab hold of the burlap bag and yank it hard.

Daddy's footsteps are on the stairs. I'm tugging on the bag, but it don't come free. I got to get it unstuck somehow. I catch a tighter hold of the burlap, but it still won't come loose. I hear daddy's footsteps at the top of the stairs, and I just panic. I run to my desk and snatch my scissors from the desk drawer. I stab the scissors into the bag. The bag splits and coffee beans spill out. I jam my hand into the coffee and make wild grabs, feeling around for daddy's stuff. He's so close now, I can almost feel him breathing down my neck. 'Steard of my door, I hear mama and daddy's door squeak open. I let out a little sigh, but I don't

relax. I keep searching 'til my fingers touch something hard. Then I grab it—the burnt bundle of daddy's stuff.

Mama and daddy's door squeaks again. I listen for a second, thinking maybe daddy just got in bed, but no, I can hear the clunk clunk of his footsteps. I stick my hand under my mattress and feel around for my magic pouch. Daddy's footsteps stop in front of my door, and it feel like my heart stops. I turn the pouch upside down and shake it wildly. Marbles, gum, and a picture of Ronald, the boy I have a crush on, spill to the floor. Daddy's turning the doorknob now. My fingers are shaking as I reach for the cotton. I stuff a little cotton into the bottom of the pouch and drop the bundle of daddy's things on top. I turn to face daddy as I fill the pouch up with cotton and a handful of coffee beans.

Daddy's face is confused. He stands in the doorway as I tie the pouch closed and hang it around my neck. When I am finally still, he starts to walk toward me.

“Don't be scared, baby,” daddy says.

I put my hand out in front of me and daddy stops short. I turn my palm up to the ceiling and imagine daddy's heart resting in my grasp. The second I feel the weight of his heart in my hand, I snap my fingers shut. Daddy gasps and bends over. I squeeze until the thing stops beating. Daddy stumbles away.

The next morning, mama's not in the kitchen. Me, Lola, and Benny go to mama and daddy's room. Lola pushes the door open, and me and Benny creep in behind her. Mama is sitting on the bed crying. She don't ask about the missing bag of coffee or her burnt metal bowl. She don't even

notice how I bent the screens. The only thing she notice is daddy. He's lying next to her breathing heavy. His hands are shaking. His skin looks gray.

"Lola, honey, go call a ambulance. Your daddy is sick. Benny, come with me downstairs. Help me make daddy some tea. Rosa, stay here with your daddy. Call me if he starts to lookin worse."

I nod my head, but I can't speak. When everyone leaves I'm too frightened to move. I stay with my back against the wall, close to the door.

"Rosamojo," I hear daddy whisper. "Rosamojo."

I don't say a word.

"Rosa, make me well."

Tears start to drip out my eyes, but I don't make a sound.

"I won't do it again, Rosa, give me my heart back."

"I didn't mean to, daddy," I whisper.

"Can't you see how upset you makin your mama?"

I put my hands over my ears.

"Daddy, I didn't mean to," I say a little louder.

"Take the hex off me, Rosa, please," daddy says.

But I can't. My mind is blank. Nothing comes. Not like the protection prayer that just spilled out my lips. Not like I knew exactly what to do to grab hold of daddy's heart. I can't think of anything at all. When mama gets back, I'm crying hard.

Mama kisses me. "Don't cry sweet baby, daddy will be fine."

But I just cry harder because I know he won't.

Mama hugs me. "Go downstairs with your sister and brother, sweetie. Let me talk to daddy."

But I don't move. I'm terrified daddy will tell. Mama pushes me toward the door, but my body is stiff as a old oak.

"Go 'head, honey," she says. "Go on downstairs."

"Can I tell daddy something first, mama?"

"Go ahead, Rosa."

I force myself to walk close to the bed.

"Don't tell, daddy. Don't tell mama and I promise, I'll fix it."

Daddy grunts. He can't see my fingers crossed behind my back. It's not that I don't want to fix it, it's that I can't. If daddy dies, things are gonna get real bad. But I can't let mama find out what I did. Not ever.

I go downstairs and sit between Benny and Lola on the couch. Benny is crying, Lola is picking a scab on her knee.

"You think Daddy's gonna die?" Lola asks.

When I don't answer, she shoves me, but I still don't say nothing. When the ambulance sirens get close, Benny stops crying. Before they even pull up in the yard, I feel a fire burn inside me. I don't say nothing to Lola, but that's how I know daddy died. Mama screams loud and we all tense up. When mama comes downstairs, she don't say nothing. She points the ambulance people to the stairs and sits on the couch with us. She spreads her arms wide and squeezes us tight.

That night I dream of mama. Her face close to my face, we giggling and talking girl talk. But then I feel the string of my pouch pulling at my neck. My eyes fly open. Mama's face *is* close to my face, but ain't no giggle in her eyes. She's hanging over my bed, and her hairline is all sweaty. She looking at me like she don't know me—like I'm not

me, not a girl even, just some stubborn piece of meat she's tugging on.

My hands fly up and I grab my pouch. Mama hiss out some air before she speak.

"Be sleep time, Rosa," she say.

"I know, mama, but I can't sleep with you wrenchin on my neck."

"Take it off, then," mama say, like she daring me or something.

"Mama you know I always sleep with my pouch."

Mama closes her eyes like she can't look at me while she's talking. Silence hang between us for so long, I think I'm dreaming again. Then mama open her eyes. She look at me like she searching for the truth.

"You just a child," she say. Then she blink all the pity out her eyes, and her voice get hard again.

"Empty out the pouch, Rosa."

My heart starts beating double time. I start to cry.

"Why you want me to do that, mama?"

"I can't survive no more bad news, Rosa," she say with her teeth all clenched up. "It all got to come out tonight, so when the sun rise tomorrow, it's done."

I start crying harder then. Mama stop talking and lick her lips. One second, she look like she want to love me, the next second she look like she want to kill me. Her hands are shaking like she been wrestling with the Devil himself.

"Rosa, there's some things in life that's too troublin to understand and too wicked to look straight in the eye. You just a baby, and God knows I don't want to witness to this, but I can't lie to myself no more."

Mama gives me a soft look, then evil steal back into her eyes. “You shoulda stayed asleep, Rosa, and let me find out on my own.”

My legs start twitching cuz they wanna run right out the room. But they trapped in the twisted up sheets. Besides, there’s no way I could get past mama. Not tonight. I take a big ole gulp of air trying to slow down the hurt rushing out my chest.

“I can’t,” I whisper, and I look at the wall ’stead at mama. I wanna say — “*Mama*, I can’t” — but I don’t know if she still be my mama after what I done to daddy.

Mama rise up to her feet then. I can feel the anger crackling off her like lightning. “I never had no cause to hit you before, Rosa, and tonight is not the night to start. Now hush up and empty out that pouch.”

I don’t want her to be mad at me, but it’s like my whole body is yelling “No!” I hunch my shoulders over and cover the pouch with my hands. Next thing I know, mama is on me. She’s scratching my face and neck trying to rip off the pouch. When mama finally get a good grip on the pouch, it don’t make no noise. All the protest is coming from the draw of my breath and the thump of my heart.

Soon as the pouch leave my body, I gets to shaking. I’m shaking so hard it feels like the whole house is trembling with me. I don’t know who starts to wailing first, and I don’t know who is the loudest. All I know is when daddy burnt harmonica hit the floor, me and mama turn inside out. All our hurts like to drown us in that room. I go hot, I shiver with chills, I get ate up by fear—wild, hungry fear—worse than when daddy was coming to my room that second time. When I can’t take it no more, I just start to yelling. I yell so hard my throat start to close up on me.

Then mama voice break through all that noise. I can hear her screaming, “Why? Why? Whyyyyyyyyy?”

I’d do anything to make mama understand, but my mouth is numb. I can’t tell her the truth. If I tried to explain, the words would rip me right down the middle and break mama into a million tiny pieces.

“Ask daddy why,” I whisper and my whisper cut through all that screaming and wire up the air with electricity. Mama’s chest is heaving like something evil is truly inside her. Sweat is pouring off her like the wet on a jelly jar fresh out the icebox. The rhythm of my breath scatter all over the place. My throat feel like roadkill, and I can’t gather up enough air to keep my lungs going. The last thing I remember is mama staring at me with a look I don’t ever want to see again. Then my eyes roll back in my head and my body just give out.

Next time I see mama is at daddy’s funeral. First time I’m seeing Benny and Lola, too. Soon as mama see me, she look at me real hard. Not mean or scared, but just studying real serious. Maw-Maw’s been fattening me up with pound cake and gumbo, but I don’t think that’s why mama’s staring. I think she trying to peel me open with her eyes, trying to figure out if her little girl is still inside me. I want her to see I’m still me, I want her to love me like before—but if she don’t, I won’t fall to pieces like I thought I would before Maw-Maw got her hands on me. Maw-Maw give me peace and trust and plenty of hugs and kisses. She never look at me funny or make me feel like she suspect me of harboring the Devil. She told me all God’s children got they miracles and they struggles, and

sometimes those two be the same thing. Then she brush my hair and tell me not to trouble myself with worry.

After the funeral, Lola and Benny sit there gobbling up big plates of fried chicken with red beans and rice. They act like they don't miss me at all, but I catch them staring at me when they think I ain't looking.

After the eating's done, Maw-Maw unwrap three cakes. I snatch up a piece of one and sneak off. I can't take mama's stares or Benny and Lola's looks no more. Don't know who else know I ain't been home, but I don't want to feel nobody's prying eyes picking me apart.

I find a corner next to the china cabinet in Maw-Maw's sitting room. Ain't supposed to carry no food in here at all, but I mean to eat private, even if it gets me in trouble. Before I take my first bite, I feel somebody hit me on the shoulder. I look up, but I'm scared to look back. If I'm leaning on the wall, can't nobody hit me from behind, can they?

I wait awhile, but nothing happens. I break off a chunk of cake. That's when I feel that tap tap on my shoulder again. This time I turn and look back. Ain't nobody there. I get up and move to the other side of the room. I settle down and bite into Maw-Maw's cake real quick before that ole tapping can stop me. While I'm chewing, I hear daddy's voice inside my head.

"It good Rosa?" he say.

I jump and look around. Daddy laugh.

"You can't see the dead, Rosa."

"Daddy that you?" I whisper.

Daddy don't say nothing. I take a sad look at my cake. Look like don't nobody wanna let me eat in peace. I get up

and take my cake to the backyard. Soon as I get outside, daddy start talking again.

“Rosa, you have to forgive me.”

I slam my plate down on the picnic table.

“Me? Forgive you?”

“Yeah, I wanna go where my soul supposed to go, but...”

Daddy fall silent. My lip starts to poke out like it does when I’m feeling prickly.

“Rosa, you holdin me back.”

“That’s why you sneakin around here tappin on my shoulder at your own funeral?”

“Rosa, I need you to forgive me so I can go where I need to go.”

I go quiet on that one. Me forgiving him make it seem like he didn’t do nothing wrong.

“You gotta tell mama what happened,” I say and cross my arms.

“How I’mma do that, Rosa? You the only one that could hear me.”

A big knot of sobs is welling up in my throat, but I choke it down.

“You ain’t the only one can’t go where you supposed to. I ain’t been home since you left. Mama don’t even want me no more.”

“But Maw-Maw takin good care of you, Rosa. I’m *nowhere*.”

I turn my back to daddy, which I realize is stupid real quick because daddy is everywhere and nowhere at once.

“I can’t help you ’til you make mama know I’m not the Devil’s child.”

“Once I make your mama know the truth, then you’ll forgive me?”

I sit down on the picnic bench in a heap. I feel like all the air done left my body.

Finally I say, “Daddy, can I forgive you even if I’m glad you dead?”

Daddy go real quiet. After while I figure he’s gone.

“Daddy?”

Daddy clears his throat. “Did daddy hurt you that bad, Rosa?”

I nod my head.

“And you was gonna keep doing it.”

Then daddy quiet again. Finally he say, “Sometimes right and wrong not so easy to sort out, Rosa.”

“I’m a child, daddy,” I wail. “I’m not ready for grown up things.” My voice starts shaking, before I know it I’m bawling.

“It’s alright, Rosa,” daddy say. “I can see you not ready to forgive me. I’m terrible sorry you hurtin so bad. I never meant to do you wrong. I’m gonna go now, but I’ll be back. I’m not gonna push you, but you can’t make me stay here forever. You gonna have to forgive me and let me go where I need to go.”

I don’t answer, I just sniff real hard. It take me awhile to pull myself together. I look at the tops of the trees. I stare up under some birds as they fly by. I watch a stretch of raggedy-looking clouds float on by. When my tears finally dry up, I wipe off my face and head back to the house.

When I grab hold of the door, I hear daddy again.

“Rosa, honey, please promise me you’ll at least think about forgiving me.”

“I will,” I say tiredly. I ain’t got no more fight left in me.

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

And I’m still keeping that promise to this very day.