

Piqued

Piqued
or, What It's Like to Be a
Mountain

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A Toki Pona Adventure

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ISBN 978-9-4653-8731-4

Published by Brave New Books

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Text, illustrations and cover design by Olaf T.A. Janssen.

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Piqued includes brief references to suicide (non-graphic), child trauma, and existential themes. Reader discretion is advised.

Preface

Dear reader,

I wrote the heart of this novel in November 2020 as part of the now-disbanded National Novel Writing Month at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Back then, I was experimenting with large language models in my teaching job and was fascinated by their potential. I had not expected the major impact they would have in just a few years.

This book is entirely my own. No AI wrote my text, and no algorithm touched the cover design. I did use AI-assisted tools for spelling and grammar, because even the wildest ideas deserve clear language.

Publishing this novel marks the beginning of sharing my backlog of work. With my late-diagnosed autism and AuDHD tendencies, I've come to embrace that my writing might stray from the typical rules taught in writing classes. And that is okay.

Thank you for reading this book. I hope you enjoy it.

Olaf T.A. Janssen

February 2026

The only enlightenment you will get out of this book is by burning it on an open fire, feasting on the afterglow.

— The Weakly Observer

Downright derivative drivel by an unimaginative mind.

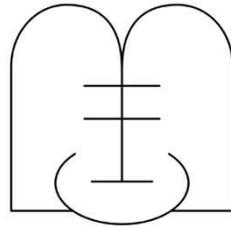
— Author's Shadow Daily

Really? Fake and punny reviews for a fake book? How perfectly on-brand.

— Meta-metacritic

The story was immensely rich, but the action left much to be desired.

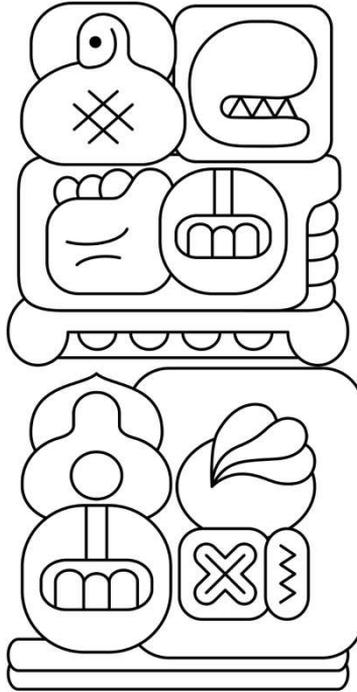
— Pr0nhub.com



Chapter 1: Bedrock

jan li pakala e noka ona la, lawa ona li tawa ala kin.

– Toki Ponist Pu



It was not very loud. Nobody noticed it amidst the rumbustious activity of the crowded village street. But this teensy sound carried extreme significance for one particular person—right on par with being born.

This person gave a raucous cry and then lifted his arms, seeking aid from the ancients. But no elder god or alignment of the stars offered him any solace.

The pavement, on which all this was taking place, was wide and new. The village council had renovated the entire street only last month. And except for the unsightly flower urns and the sudden appearance of surveillance cameras at strategic positions, there wasn't

much to complain about. However, one tile stuck out an inch above the rest.

Human feet can rise with ease over such satanic summits. The big toe of this person's left foot, often addressed as Tipi, would agree if it could. Instead, it propelled forward as part of an extensive network of bones, ligaments, muscles, and nerves. Too many things prevented pinpointing a single scapegoat. Without the option of free will, the toe hit the concrete.

There was immediate damage. The nail—due for maintenance for some time—tore just beyond acceptance. Blood dripped from a slight cut. The nerve endings took even more time before coming to terms with the current situation and gathering enough confidence to send a distress signal to the brain. It resulted in Tipi's first yelp.

Feeling powerless, the nerves sent an all-out panic wave that the brain translated into losing the entire nail, having crushed bones in multiple places, and being skinned alive. This perception resulted in a disintegration of mind and body, no longer occupying the same region of space-time. At this instant, Tipi swirled off the true path, his back-channel to the whole and the indescribable divine: the state of enlightenment.

A middle-aged woman had reacted to Tipi's outcry. She dropped her groceries and scuttled towards the agonized figure. Not sure what to do, she rubbed his back. This resulted in Tipi descending into an uncontrollable coughing fit, to which the woman responded with even more violent patting on the back.

"Stop it!" Tipi managed between coughs. "As if I'm not in enough agony."

"Are you all right?" the woman said, undeterred.

"No, I am not all right!" he pointed at his left foot. "It's my foot. It hurts. Who did this?"

Tipi looked around to see who could have committed this heinous act, but his eyes met only the confused faces of business professionals, tourists, and giggling kids that should have been in school. Everyone looked suspiciously innocent. But what scared him more was the dawning sensation of not knowing where the hell he was. He returned his attention to his podiatric problem.

"Why am I barefoot?" he said aloud. "Who doesn't wear shoes in the middle of the street? What kind of person am I?" He looked around

again, knowing full well nobody would respond to his rhetorical questions.

The helpful woman, who did not know any of the answers to the questions, also could not help feeling ignored by Tipi and was seriously considering whether her help would reap the virtue points she was hoping to get out of the interaction.

Tipi sensed that the woman felt left out.

“And what are you still looking at? Shoo! Get lost! Or do you want to comb my hair with a fork or do something equally painful to another unrelated body part?”

After an outcry of unmistakable indignation, she picked up her groceries and took off, leaving Tipi unattended. He hopped on one leg and observed his reflection in a shop window. Tipi wore extremely loud, yellow shorts and a shirt with a print of a mystical-looking geometric pattern. He felt his chin to confirm that he carried around more beard than he had hoped.

“Tipi!” someone yelled from across the street. Three men dodged the slow traffic. Their faces looked very familiar. At least they would if he could remember them, which he couldn’t.

“Tipi, master, are you alright?”

“Yes, yes, fine,” Tipi said while the word *master* sang around in his head, disabling the alarms that had made him respond like a jackass moments before.

Two of the three men lifted Tipi at the shoulders, while the third opened the door to a nearby coffee shop. They took him inside and draped him into a booth. The pale, tall, curly guy gestured to a server for coffee, while the even paler, bearded, stocky one dropped to the floor to bandage Tipi’s foot. The dark-skinned man in glasses put things on the table in order where that was not already the case. This included sorting the condiments in alphabetical order.

Pampered, bandaged and caffeinated, Tipi gazed into the blank stares of his three rescuers.

“Who are you again?”

The three exchanged eye contact. “You know us, Tipi. *mi mute li jan Powe li jan Sikejo li jan Palisame.*”

Tipi looked at them in wonder.

“Why are you talking funny? Who are you? And don’t give me any of that *jan* this *jan* that business.”

"I'm Lenny," the bearded man said. "And they are Alex and Ford." He pointed at the curly man and his spectacled companion.

"Great. Lenny, Alex, Ford. Who are you?" Tipi said while taking a sip of his coffee. While the caffeine flipped some switches in his brain, he added, "And who am I?"

"We're your most devout followers," Alex said.

"Followers?"

"Disciples, although you hate the word. You are our guru, grand master, enlightened soul and guiding compass on the path of light."

"I'm enlightened? Is this how that feels? Because my foot hurts and I am not happy about that. I feel irritated, and this strong coffee is only making that worse. I'm not afraid to admit that I am in fact terrified about not knowing who I am and," Tipi squinted. "I am particularly peeved about that stupid beard of yours, Benny."

"Lenny," Lenny said. "And I modeled my beard after yours."

"Exactly," Tipi fondled his chin again, "I have to get rid of this *tout-de-suite*." He searched for reflective surfaces and grimaced at his own doppel-image whenever he found one. "Everyone is looking at me funnily too," Tipi said.

Alex turned to Ford and whispered in his ear. "He's off his rockers. What are we gonna do?"

"I dunno man," Ford answered. "We have to get him off the street before he embarrasses us all."

"We're gonna take you to a place where you can rest, master," Alex said out loud to Tipi. "Lenny, pay for the coffee while we help Tipi into a taxi."

"Me again?" Lenny said, but took out his wallet.

"Money isn't important, Lenny. How about some compassion and gratitude?"

Lenny snorted right before radiating a smile to the server, who grasped a handful of bills from Lenny's hand.

"Now let's go, go, go!" Ford said. He pushed both Alex and Tipi out of the booth, using the vigorous gesticulations of a stressed man with germophobia.

"Now hold on. All of you," Tipi said. "I'm not going anywhere with a bunch of strangers just like that." He got up from his seat, not in compliance, but to strike a defensive *tai chi* pose. "And don't I have any female followers?"

Tipi noticed a large, framed picture at the far end of the coffee shop. There was something strange about that picture; he was sure.

Alex sighed. "You have plenty of those. Half the world knows you. And we're not kidnapping you. We're just going to drop you into a taxi and get you to a pleasant hotel where you can get back your senses in peace."

"Wouldn't a hospital be a better place for me?" Tipi said. "I don't feel sane at the moment, and I would hate to get hurt without a proper re-introduction to my entire soul."

The three turned to each other and shook their heads.

"No," they said in unison. "Meditation will do you some good, I am sure," Alex said.

"Fine then," Tipi said, and he walked out of the coffee shop, being gently pushed along by Ford. "See you soon!" said the framed picture of the mountain as Tipi left the premises and Lenny closed the door behind him.

About half an hour and an awkwardly silent taxi ride later, Tipi found himself alone in a double room at The Kucha hotel. He did not know what memory loss did to someone's perception of things, but this seemed to him a rather quaint hotel. It occupied only the sixth floor of an otherwise ordinary apartment building.

"They only speak Russian here," Alex had said. "But that is okay."

"How is that okay?" Tipi had interjected while being pushed by Ford into the elevator. "Are we in Russia?"

"No, Canada."

He had pressed the button labeled six next to a red plaque with gold-plated letters which probably said something like "The Kucha" in Cyrillic. "Now don't you worry, Tipi, you just take your time and we'll be back tomorrow morning after breakfast." Lenny had said.

"Don't go anywhere," Ford had added.

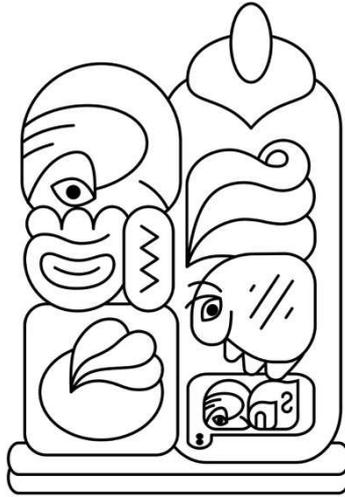
"Do some meditation, let your foot heal, that sort of thing," Alex had said.

So, there he was. Alone in his room, with two beds to choose from. He first let himself fall backwards on the bed closest to the window. Immediately the sun punished his eyes with relentless afternoon rays of light. Tipi squinted, got up, closed the curtains, and tried the other bed. He now gazed right into the small bathroom. There was carpet everywhere, even in the bathroom. "I have to pee with care," he thought.

Chapter 2: Peek-a-boo

kala pona kin li tawa lon telo jaki pi kala ante.

- Toki Ponist Pu



Solitude allowed Tipi time to think. How amazing he could get by doing everyday things with no recollection of his own identity or past. He knew how to walk, except for that slight mishap on the pavement earlier that day, and a relentless stream of words popped into his head and out of his mouth that he seemed to understand. He had not gone insane and was doing all right so far.

In the bathroom, he inspected himself. Dull dark-green eyes, a decent nose, and a suitable set of hair. Far too much and with no style, but he could work on that. Either this mirror hung ridiculously low on the wall, or he was hitting three-sigma tallness.

He noticed a string around his neck. It was a tiny key. He took it off and put it in one of his pockets. A key is most powerful when you don't know what it opens. There would be a time to ponder this, but now was not it.

He had been a grandmaster guru on the path of light. But not much of a guru. Look at that outfit. They were more like pajamas. And why

no shoes? Maybe he had left the bed like this yesterday. That would explain so very much. Maybe he was sleepwalking and woke up in the middle of the street, even though it was already past noon when he had stubbed his toe. He was not only looking for answers but also for explanations.

He examined his foot by placing it on the closed toilet lid. It no longer hurt, so he uncoiled the bandages and found only embarrassment. A slight scratch and a cracked toenail are not things to harass a poor, helpful woman about, let alone being carried by two grown men into a makeshift hospital serving coffee and cake.

Not much of a guru, acting out for no good reason. It was of no use talking himself down in a crazy time like this. The three stooges who had helped Tipi earlier that day, told him to stay put until tomorrow. They meant well and had Tipi's best interests in mind as devout followers. Countering their words, Tipi's tummy rumbled, and there was no minibar in his room. Feeling his pockets, he found a few banknotes, which told him to go out and get something to eat. He considered ordering room service, but he had seen no menu in his room and he suspected the Russian-only staff would pose an obstacle. A quick scan of his vocabulary returned words in German, such as *Gesundheitsunterwäsche* and *Angelschreibmaschine*, which seemed unhelpful not only in ordering food from Russians but in any situation.

There was no way he would face the streets on his bare feet again. In the wardrobe, Tipi found brand new, inferior quality bath slippers, all wrapped up in plastic. His tummy agreed they would have to do for now, and so Tipi left his room, taking the elevator to the streets below.

It was a mild, late afternoon in what felt like summer. Without a concept of where and whereto, he headed in no particular direction, taking extra mental notes of the things he saw in case he lost his memory again and needed to find his way back. He stopped to check the logic in his reasoning, gave up, and then turned into another street that seemed to end up in a livelier quarter.

One skill that remained with him was spotting the bright and colorful signage of fast-food restaurant chains. Peek-a-boo Burgers appeared to be a decent place for a hungry citizen like himself to grab a bite without having to get into any small talk. He entered the place and ordered the most standard burger meal the menu offered. Tipi answered with a polite yes to all questions concerning extras, add-ons, and power-ups, preventing possible fuss. He paid with the wad of

banknotes in his pocket and took his tray to the most secluded seat in the over-lit dining area.

The burger was an admirable adversary to the appetite, but he rejoiced that one of the add-ons he had agreed to was another burger. Wiping sauce from his beard with a napkin, he noticed a woman giving him a sour look.

“Hey, aren’t you that guru guy?” she said after Tipi started accidental eye contact.

“Maybe?” Tipi said.

“Yeah, it’s you, mister I-have-no-ego.”

Tipi smiled and hoped the woman would somehow disappear in a puff of fairy dust. She did not.

“Aren’t you ashamed of yourself? Telling everyone how to live their lives? Love everyone, be one with the universe, and here you are stuffing your face with animal souls.”

“I am eating their meat,” Tipi said, and spread the burger buns to investigate what, in fact, he had been eating. “Can’t you just leave me alone? You are eating fast-food here too, you know.”

“I have a salad!” This talking back did not appease matters because the woman stood up and launched another tirade.

“How can you be eating meat? Murderer! You’re nothing but a fraud! Aren’t you supposed to be a breatharian? Surviving for years without food or water? Now we know you’ve been lying to all of us.”

She paused, which could only mean that she held back the last punch. He braced for impact.

“And to yourself.”

That could have been worse. Tipi had no clue how to respond. He did not know what he had been preaching as a guru. He also did not know whether he was a vegetarian or a charlatan breatharian. But the food felt very good inside, and he had hoped to finish his meal in peace.

A uniformed staff member came their way to help him out and let him have a quiet meal.

“Is everything all right here? Is he bothering you, madam?” she said to the red-faced spreader of potential malign misinformation.

“I’m fine,” the woman lied with her nose in the air. “But this lowly bastard can go to hell where he can burn with the other blood-drinking pedophiles.”

The manager turned to Tipi.

“Sir, I need you to leave.”

“Me?” Tipi said. “What did I do? I just want to eat my meal without being called whatever that was.”

“Calm down, sir. Please take your stuff and move to the exit.”

“Do you even know who I am?” Tipi said, trying out something he felt celebrities would say to get out of nasty situations.

“No, I don’t.”

“Well, neither do I!”

“But you look and smell like a bum, with your ragged clothes, dirty beard and stolen hotel slippers. And your presence is disturbing the clients.”

“I did not steal those; they were complimentary, and this is *your* sauce in my beard.” He saw the manager nodding to a big security guy who reacted as if pricked by an unannounced needle.

“I’m going, I’m going,” Tipi said, and collected the bonus burger and fries into the brown bag they served them in.

Tipi stumbled into the streets again and grabbed a few fries to counter the anxiety of the last encounter. This seemed to help a bit. He finished the rest of his meal on a nearby bench and sat back, satisfied.

A young man took a seat next to him and just as Tipi wanted to get up, a hand from behind held him down by the shoulder.

“Is this you?” the young man said and showed him a five-second, bouncy, back-and-forth video on his smartphone. The clip showed a disheveled hobo yelling and making a fuss, pushing a woman around. It took a while for Tipi to realize he was looking at himself.

“That’s not how it went,” Tipi said. This triggered the five people who now stood around him to bombard him with more of the material that the salad-woman had been spewing minutes before.

“The world can now see who you truly are,” someone in the group said. “You’re nothing but a racist, money-hogging socialist!”

“Racist?”

Tipi got up and wanted to get away from all the aggression, but these five had other plans. One grabbed him from behind while another took the remaining banknotes from his pocket.

“You won’t be needing any. Buddhist beggar. Let’s see how you do with no money for real. And gimme your shoes!”

The gang, including Tipi, looked at the now dirty hotel slippers, and an awkward silence ensued. Tipi wrestled himself free from the weakened grasp of his assailant and yelled: “Gimme back my money!”

Three smartphone cameras popped out of nowhere. Agitated voices narrated the filmed encounter in words that went by too fast. He ran with tears in his eyes towards the hotel entrance, losing a single slipper along the way.

“You’re canceled, old man!” he heard them yell. “You’ll be a nobody tomorrow with no followers. Nobody wants you anymore; your life is over!”

Tipi fled into the empty elevator and panted during his trip up to the sixth floor. He closed the hotel room door behind him and locked it tight. What kind of person was he? He seemed terrible. When Alex had told him he was this great sage, he had expected a bit more respect from the public. Maybe he did not read this world well yet, and his brain was not ready to live in the society he was experiencing at that moment.

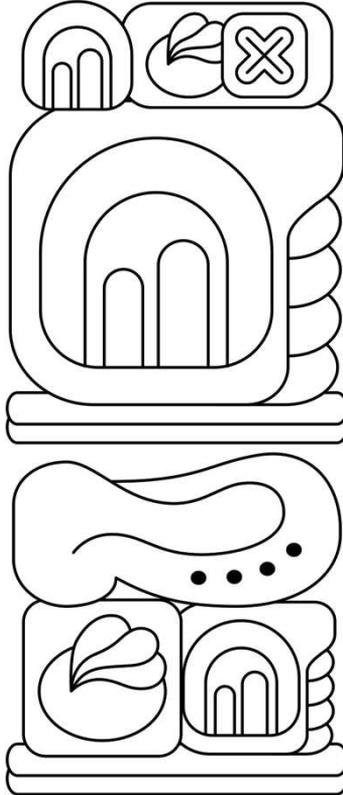
He had to find out who he was and what this world was all about. His right hand felt in his pocket in search of a smartphone: the gateway to answers when you need them. But there was nothing. There also was no computer in the room, and he had not seen one in the hotel hallway either. The room also lacked essentials such as a TV. He just had to deal with the mystery of his being without modern tools. The lack of closure and the uncertainty of his own moral standing gnawed at him. It had been too much for one day. Exhausted, he fell asleep.

In that way station before dreaming, he appreciated his decision to sleep. It seemed to be a good idea for several reasons. In the morning, the only three friendly faces he had encountered so far would visit him, and they might help him further. Higher in his hopes was the possibility that he would wake up somewhere else in a more familiar reality and find out that this day had just been a nasty dream he would soon forget.

Chapter 3: Pantaleone

sina li tawa ala e sina. kon li tawa e sina.

- Toki Ponist Pu



In the morning, Tipi jumped out of bed with the enthusiasm of someone with a wiped-clean mind. While he did not remember his former self, he knew he was now the same self as the one he had been yesterday.

The jump had created a pile of sheets on his mattress. On the other bed, the sheets looked as pristine as a giant cake with icing, dented by his fall into self-sorrow yesterday. The almost uncorrupted sheets did