The Poisonwood Bible

Barbara Kingsolver

Published by Faber and Faber

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First published in the USA
by HarperCollins in 1998
First published in the UK in 1999
by Faber and Faber Limited
3 Queen Square London WC1N 3AU

This UK paperback edition first published in 2000

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed in England by Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

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A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571–20175–4
ISBN 0–571–20175–X

34 36 38 40 39 37 35 33

Author's Note

THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION. Its principal characters are pure inventions with no relations on this earth, as far as I know. But the Congo in which I placed them is genuine. The historical figures and events described here are as real as I could render them with the help of recorded history, in all its fascinating variations.

Because I wasn't able to enter Zaire while researching and writing the novel, I relied on memory, travel in other parts of Africa, and many people's accounts of the natural, cultural, and social history of the Congo/Zaire. Such is the diversity and value of these sources – to me, and to any reader who might wish to know more of the facts underpinning the fiction – that I've cited many of them in a bibliography at the end of the book. Most profoundly helpful among them was Jonathan Kwitny's description of Zaire's postcolonial history, in his excellent book, *Endless Enemies*, which gave shape to my passion to write a novel on the same subject. I returned continually to that account for the big picture and countless small insights. I gleaned many kinds of instruction from Janheinz Jahn's classic text, *Muntu*; Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*; Alan P. Merriam's *Congo: Background of Conflict*; and *Lumumba: The Last Fifty Days* by G. Heinz and H. Donnay. I couldn't have written the book at all without two remarkable sources of literary inspiration, approximately equal in size: K. E. Laman's *Dictionnaire Kikongo-Français*, and the King James Bible.

I also relied on help from my lively community of friends, some of whom may have feared they'd breathe

their last before I was through putting new versions of a mountainous manuscript in front of them. Steven Hopp, Emma Hardesty, Frances Goldin, Terry Karten, Sydelle Kramer, and Lillian Lent read and commented invaluably on many drafts. Emma Hardesty worked miracles of collegial tact, friendship, and efficiency that allowed me to spend my days as a writer. Anne Mairs and Eric Peterson helped sort out details of Kikongo grammar and Congolese life. Jim Malusa and Sonya Norman provided insights for the final draft. Kate Turkington cheered me on from South Africa. Mumia Abu-Jamal read and commented on the manuscript from prison; I'm grateful for his intelligence and courage.

I thank Virginia and Wendell Kingsolver, especially, for being different in every way from the parents I created for the narrators of this tale. I was the fortunate child of medical and public-health workers, whose compassion and curiosity led them to the Congo. They brought me to a place of wonders, taught me to pay attention, and set me early on a path of exploring the great, shifting terrain between righteousness and what's right.

I spent nearly thirty years waiting for the wisdom and maturity to write this book. That I've now written it is proof of neither of those things, but of the endless encouragement, unconditional faith, insomnolent conversation, and piles of arcane reference books delivered always just in the nick of time by my extraordinary husband. Thanks, Steven, for teaching me it's no use waiting for things that only appear at a distance, and for believing a spirit of adventure will usually suffice.

BOOK ONE

Genesis

And God said unto them,
Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth,
and subdue it: and have dominion
over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air,
and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

GENESIS 1:28

ORLEANNA PRICE

Sanderling Island, Georgia

IMAGINE A RUIN so strange it must never have happened. First, picture the forest. I want you to be its conscience, the eyes in the trees. The trees are columns of slick, brindled bark like muscular animals overgrown beyond all reason. Every space is filled with life: delicate, poisonous frogs war-painted like skeletons, clutched in copulation, secreting their precious eggs onto dripping leaves. Vines strangling their own kin in the everlasting wrestle for sunlight. The breathing of monkeys. A glide of snake belly on branch. A single-file army of ants biting a mammoth tree into uniform grains and hauling it down to the dark for their ravenous queen. And, in reply, a choir of seedlings arching their necks out of rotted tree stumps, sucking life out of death. This forest eats itself and lives forever.

Away down below now, single file on the path, comes a woman with four girls in tow, all of them in shirtwaist dresses. Seen from above this way they are pale, doomed blossoms, bound to appeal to your sympathies. Be careful. Later on you'll have to decide what sympathy they deserve. The mother especially – watch how she leads them on, pale-eyed, deliberate. Her dark hair is tied in a ragged lace handkerchief, and her curved jawbone is lit with large, false-pearl earrings, as if these headlamps from another world might show the way. The daughters march behind her, four girls compressed in bodies as tight as bowstrings, each one tensed to fire off a woman's heart on a different path to glory or damnation. Even now they resist affinity like cats in a bag: two blondes – the one short and fierce, the other tall and imperious – flanked by matched

brunettes like bookends, the forward twin leading hungrily while the rear one sweeps the ground in a rhythmic limp. But gamely enough they climb together over logs of rank decay that have fallen across the path. The mother waves a graceful hand in front of her as she leads the way, parting curtain after curtain of spiders' webs. She appears to be conducting a symphony. Behind them the curtain closes. The spiders return to their killing ways.

At the stream bank she sets out their drear picnic, which is only dense, crumbling bread daubed with crushed peanuts and slices of bitter plantain. After months of modest hunger the children now forget to complain about food. Silently they swallow, shake off the crumbs, and drift downstream for a swim in faster water. The mother is left alone in the cove of enormous trees at the edge of a pool. This place is as familiar to her now as a living room in the house of a life she never bargained for. She rests uneasily in the silence, watching ants boil darkly over the crumbs of what seemed, to begin with, an impossibly meager lunch. Always there is someone hungrier than her own children. She tucks her dress under her legs and inspects her poor, featherless feet in their grass nest at the water's edge – twin birds helpless to fly out of there, away from the disaster she knows is coming. She could lose everything: herself, or worse, her children. Worst of all: *you*, her only secret. Her favorite. How could a mother live with herself to blame?

She is inhumanly alone. And then, all at once, she isn't. A beautiful animal stands on the other side of the water. They look up from their lives, woman and animal, amazed to find themselves in the same place. He freezes, inspecting her with his black-tipped ears. His back is purplish-brown in the dim light, sloping downward from the gentle hump of his shoulders. The forest's shadows fall into lines across his white-striped flanks. His stiff forelegs splay out to the sides like stilts, for he's been caught in the act of reaching

down for water. Without taking his eyes from her, he twitches a little at the knee, then the shoulder, where a fly devils him. Finally he surrenders his surprise, looks away, and drinks. She can feel the touch of his long, curled tongue on the water's skin, as if he were lapping from her hand. His head bobs gently, nodding small, velvet horns lit white from behind like new leaves.

It lasted just a moment, whatever that is. One held breath? An ant's afternoon? It was brief, I can promise that much, for although it's been many years now since my children ruled my life, a mother recalls the measure of the silences. I never had more than five minutes' peace unbroken. I was that woman on the stream bank, of course. Orleanna Price, Southern Baptist by marriage, mother of children living and dead. That one time and no other the okapi came to the stream, and I was the only one to see it.

I didn't know any name for what I'd seen until some years afterward in Atlanta, when I attempted briefly to consecrate myself in the public library, believing every crack in my soul could be chinked with a book. I read that the male okapi is smaller than the female, and more shy, and that hardly anything else is known about them. For hundreds of years people in the Congo Valley spoke of this beautiful, strange beast. When European explorers got wind of it, they declared it legendary: a unicorn. Another fabulous tale from the dark domain of poison-tipped arrows and bone-pierced lips. Then, in the 1920s, when elsewhere in the world the menfolk took a break between wars to perfect the airplane and the automobile, a white man finally did set eyes on the okapi. I can picture him spying on it with binoculars, raising up the cross-haired rifle sight, taking it for his own. A family of them now reside in the New York Museum of Natural History, dead and stuffed, with standoffish glass eyes. And so the okapi is now by scientific account a real animal. Merely real, not

legend. Some manner of beast, a horseish gazelle, relative of the giraffe.

Oh, but I know better and so do you. Those glassy museum stares have got nothing on *you*, my uncaptured favorite child, wild as the day is long. Your bright eyes bear down on me without cease, on behalf of the quick and the dead. Take your place, then. Look at what happened from every side and consider all the other ways it could have gone. Consider, even, an Africa unconquered altogether. Imagine those first Portuguese adventurers approaching the shore, spying on the jungle's edge through their fitted brass lenses. Imagine that by some miracle of dread or reverence they lowered their spyglasses, turned, set their riggings, sailed on. Imagine all who came after doing the same. What would that Africa be now? All I can think of is the other okapi, the one they used to believe in. A unicorn that could look you in the eye.

In the year of our Lord 1960 a monkey barreled through space in an American rocket; a Kennedy boy took the chair out from under a fatherly general named Ike; and the whole world turned on an axis called the Congo. The monkey sailed right overhead, and on a more earthly plane men in locked rooms bargained for the Congo's treasure. But I was there. Right on the head of that pin.

I had washed up there on the riptide of my husband's confidence and the undertow of my children's needs. That's my excuse, yet none of them really needed me all that much. My firstborn and my baby both tried to shed me like a husk from the start, and the twins came with a fine interior sight with which they could simply look past me at everything more interesting. And my husband, why, hell hath no fury like a Baptist preacher. I married a man who could never love me, probably. It would have trespassed on his devotion to all mankind. I remained his wife because

it was one thing I was able to do each day. My daughters would say: You see, Mother, you had no life of your own.

They have no idea. One has *only* a life of one's own.

I've seen things they'll never know about. I saw a family of weaver birds work together for months on a nest that became such a monstrous lump of sticks and progeny and nonsense that finally it brought their whole tree thundering down. I didn't speak of it to my husband or children, not ever. So you see. I have my own story, and increasingly in my old age it weighs on me. Now that every turn in the weather whistles an ache through my bones, I stir in bed and the memories rise out of me like a buzz of flies from a carcass. I crave to be rid of them, but find myself being careful, too, choosing which ones to let out into the light. I want you to find me innocent. As much as I've craved your lost, small body, I want you now to stop stroking my inner arms at night with your fingertips. Stop whispering. I'll live or die on the strength of your judgment, but first let me say who I am. Let me claim that Africa and I kept company for a while and then parted ways, as if we were both party to relations with a failed outcome. Or say I was afflicted with Africa like a bout of a rare disease, from which I have not managed a full recovery. Maybe I'll even confess the truth, that I rode in with the horsemen and beheld the apocalypse, but still I'll insist I was only a captive witness. What is the conqueror's wife, if not a conquest herself? For that matter, what is *he*? When he rides in to vanquish the untouched tribes, don't you think they fall down with desire before those sky-colored eyes? And itch for a turn with those horses, and those guns? That's what we yell back at history, always, always. It wasn't just me; there were crimes strewn six ways to Sunday, and I had my own mouths to feed. I didn't know. I had no life of my own.

And you'll say I did. You'll say I walked across Africa with my wrists unshackled, and now I am one more soul

walking free in a white skin, wearing some thread of the stolen goods: cotton or diamonds, freedom at the very least, prosperity. Some of us know how we came by our fortune, and some of us don't, but we wear it all the same. There's only one question worth asking now: How do we aim to live with it?

I know how people are, with their habits of mind. Most will sail through from cradle to grave with a conscience clean as snow. It's easy to point at other men, conveniently dead, starting with the ones who first scooped up mud from riverbanks to catch the scent of a source. Why, Dr Livingstone, I presume, wasn't he the rascal! He and all the profiteers who've since walked out on Africa as a husband quits a wife, leaving her with her naked body curled around the emptied-out mine of her womb. I know people. Most have no earthly notion of the price of a snow-white conscience.

I would be no different from the next one, if I hadn't paid my own little part in blood. I trod on Africa without a thought, straight from our family's divinely inspired beginning to our terrible end. In between, in the midst of all those steaming nights and days darkly colored, smelling of earth, I believe there lay some marrow of honest instruction. Sometimes I can nearly say what it was. If I could, I would fling it at others, I'm afraid, at risk to their ease. I'd slide this awful story off my shoulders, flatten it, sketch out our crimes like a failed battle plan and shake it in the faces of my neighbors, who are wary of me already. But Africa shifts under my hands, refusing to be party to failed relations. Refusing to be any place at all, or any thing but itself: the animal kingdom making hay in the kingdom of glory. So there it is, take your place. Leave nothing for a haunted old bat to use for disturbing the peace. Nothing, save for this life of her own.

We aimed for no more than to have dominion over every

creature that moved upon the earth. And so it came to pass that we stepped down there on a place we believed unformed, where only darkness moved on the face of the waters. Now you laugh, day and night, while you gnaw on my bones. But what else could we have thought? Only that it began and ended with *us*. What do we know, even now? Ask the children. Look at what they grew up to be. We can only speak of the things we carried with us, and the things we took away.