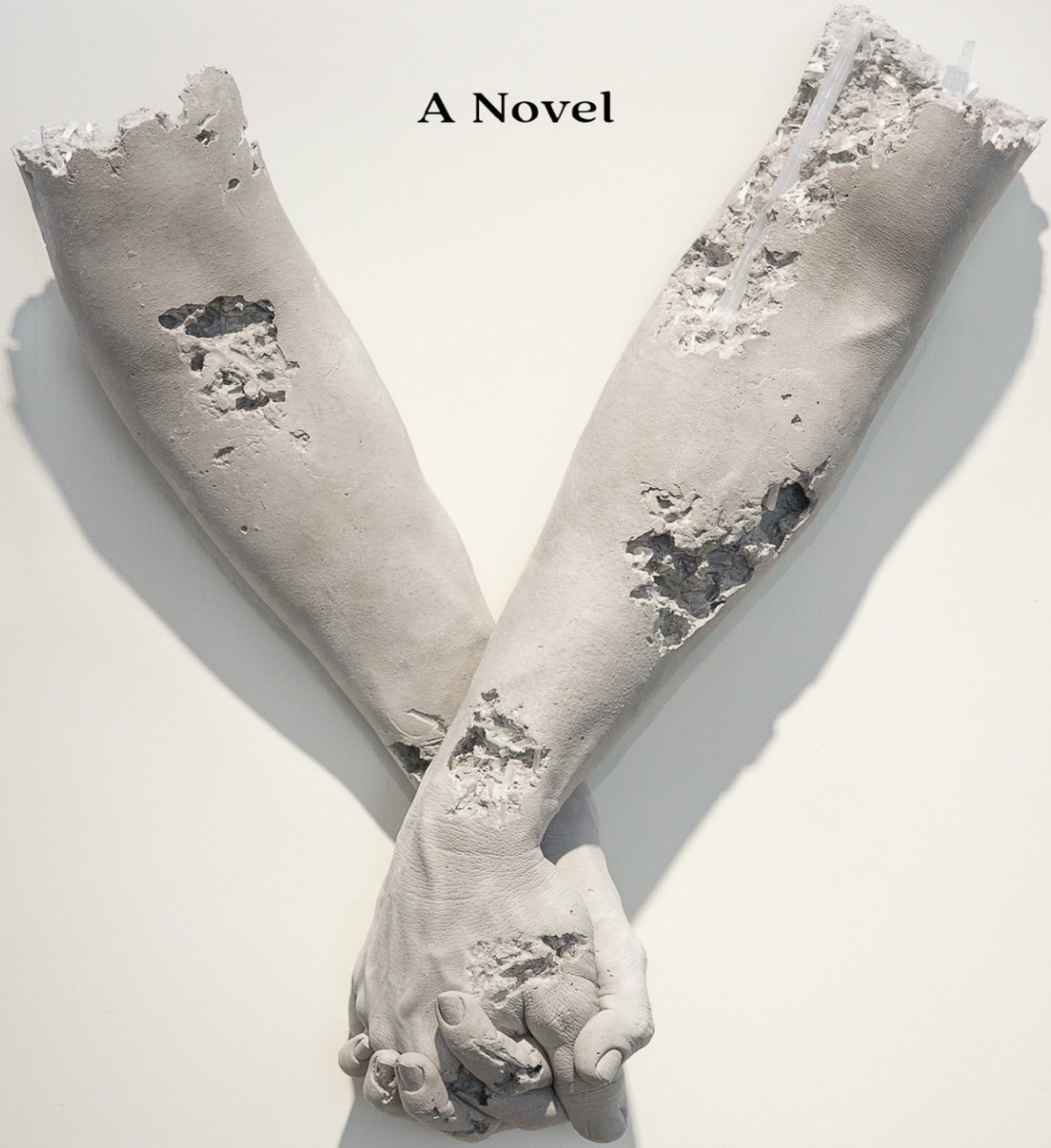
How Beautiful We Were

A Novel



Imbolo Mbue

Author of the *New York Times* bestseller
BEHOLD THE DREAMERS

How Beautiful We Were

A NOVEL

Imbolo Mbue

RANDOM HOUSE | NEW YORK

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Published in the United States by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Mbue, Imbolo, author.

Title: How beautiful we were : a novel / by Imbolo Mbue.

Description: New York : Random House, [2020]

Identifiers: LCCN 2019031375 (print) | LCCN 2019031376 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593132425 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593132432 (ebook)

Classification: LCC PS3613.B84 H69 2020 (print) | LCC PS3613.B84 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019031375

LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019031376

International edition ISBN 9780593229163

Ebook ISBN 9780593132432

randomhousebooks.com

Book design by Susan Turner, adapted for ebook

Cover design: Jaya Miceli

Cover photograph: *Holding Hands_Crystal*, © 2015 by Daniel Arsham. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

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The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.

—Isaiah 9:2

WE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN THE end was near. How could we not have known? When the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green, we should have known our land would soon be dead. Then again, how could we have known when they didn't want us to know? When we began to wobble and stagger, tumbling and snapping like feeble little branches, they told us it would soon be over, that we would all be well in no time. They asked us to come to village meetings, to talk about it. They told us we had to trust them.

We should have spat in their faces, heaped upon them names most befitting—liars, savages, unscrupulous, evil. We should have cursed their mothers and their grandmothers, flung pejoratives upon their fathers, prayed for unspeakable calamities to befall their children. We hated them and we hated their meetings, but we attended all of them. Every eight weeks we went to the village square to listen to them. We were dying. We were helpless. We were afraid. Those meetings were our only chance at salvation.

We ran home from school on the appointed days, eager to complete our chores so we would miss not one word at the assembly. We fetched water from the well; chased goats and chickens around our compounds into bamboo barns; swept away leaves and twigs scattered across our front yards. We washed iron pots and piles of bowls after dinner; left our huts many minutes before the time the meeting was called for—we wanted to get there before they strode into the square in their fine suits and polished shoes. Our mothers hurried to the square too, as did our fathers. They left their work unfinished in the forest beyond the big river, their palms and bare feet dusted with poisoned earth. The work will be there waiting for us tomorrow, our fathers said to us, but we'll only have so many opportunities to hear what the men from Pexton have to say. Even when their bodies bore little strength, after hours of toiling beneath a sun both benevolent and cruel, they went to the meetings, because we all had to be at the meetings.

The only person who did not attend the meetings was Konga, our village madman. Konga, who had no awareness of our suffering and lived without fears of what was and what was to come. He slept in the school compound as we hurried along, snoring and slobbering if he wasn't tossing, itching, muttering, eyes closed. Trapped as he was, alone in a world in which spirits

ruled and men were powerless under their dominion, he knew nothing about Pexton.

In the square we sat in near silence as the sun left us for the day, oblivious to how the beauty of its descent heightened our anguish. We watched as the Pexton men placed their briefcases on the table our village head, Woja Beki, had set for them. There were always three of them—we called them the Round One (his face was as round as a ball we would have had fun kicking), the Sick One (his suits were oversized, giving him the look of a man dying of a flesh-stealing disease), and the Leader (he did the talking, the other two did the nodding). We mumbled among ourselves as they opened their briefcases and passed sheets of paper among themselves, covering their mouths as they whispered into each other's ears to ensure they had their lies straight. We had nowhere more important to be so we waited, desperate for good news. We whispered at intervals, wondering what they were thinking whenever they paused to look at us: at our grandfathers and fathers on stools up front, those with dead or dying children in the first row; our grandmothers and mothers behind them, nursing babies into quietude and shooting us glares if we made a wrong sound from under the mango tree. Our young women repeatedly sighed and shook their heads. Our young men, clustered at the back, stood clench-jawed and seething.

We inhaled, waited, exhaled. We remembered those who had died from diseases with neither names nor cures—our siblings and cousins and friends who had perished from the poison in the water and the poison in the air and the poisoned food growing from the land that lost its purity the day Pexton came drilling. We hoped the men would look into our eyes and feel something for us. We were children, like their children, and we wanted them to recognize that. If they did, it wasn't apparent in their countenance. They'd come for Pexton, to keep its conscience clean; they hadn't come for us.

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Woja Beki walked up to the front and thanked everyone for coming.

"My dear people," he said, exposing the teeth no one wanted to see, "if we don't ask for what we want, we'll never get it. If we don't expunge what's

in our bellies, are we not going to suffer from constipation and die?"

We did not respond; we cared nothing for what he had to say. We knew he was one of them. We'd known for years that though he was our leader, descended from the same ancestors as us, we no longer meant anything to him. Pexton had bought his cooperation and he had, in turn, sold our future to them. We'd seen with our own eyes, heard with our own ears, how Pexton was fattening his wives and giving his sons jobs in the capital and handing him envelopes of cash. Our fathers and grandfathers had confronted him, after the evidence had become impossible to dismiss, but he had beseeched them to trust him, telling them he had a plan: everything he was doing was to help us reclaim our land. He had shed two cups of tears and swore by the Spirit that he hated Pexton as much as we did, wasn't it obvious? Our young men had conspired to kill him, but our old men found out about the plan and pleaded with them to spare him. We've already had too many deaths, our old men said; we've used up too many burial plots.

Woja Beki continued looking at us, dreadful gums still exposed. We wished we didn't have to look at them, but there could be no avoidance. They were the first thing we saw whenever we looked at his face: gums as black as the night's most evil hour, streaked with pink of various shades; tilting brown teeth, wide spaces between.

"My very dear people," he went on, "even a sheep knows how to tell its master what it wants. That's why we've gathered here again, to resume this discourse. We thank the kind representatives from Pexton for coming back to talk to us. Messengers are good, but why should we use them if we can talk to each other with our own mouths? There's been a lot of misunderstanding, but I hope this meeting will bring us closer to a resolution of our mutual suffering. I hope that after this evening we and Pexton can continue moving in the direction of becoming good friends. Friendship is a great thing, isn't it?"

We knew we would never call them friends, but some of us nodded.

In the glow of the fading sun our village looked almost beautiful, our faces almost free of anguish. Our grandfathers and grandmothers appeared

serene, but we knew they weren't—they'd seen much, and yet they'd never seen anything like this.

"We'll now hear from Mr. Honorable Representative of Pexton, all the way from Bézam to speak to us again," Woja Beki said, before returning to his seat.

The Leader rose up, walked toward us, and stood in the center of the square.

For several seconds, he stared at us, his head angled, his smile so strenuously earnest we wondered if he was admiring a radiance we'd never been told we had. We waited for him to say something that would make us burst into song and dance. We wanted him to tell us that Pexton had decided to leave and take the diseases with them.

His smile broadened, narrowed, landed on our faces, scanning our stillness. Seemingly satisfied, he began speaking. He was happy to be back in Kosawa on this fine day, he said. What a lovely evening it was, with the half-moon in the distance, such a perfect breeze, was that the sound of sparrows singing in one accord? What a gorgeous village. He wanted to thank us for coming. It was great to see everyone again. Incredible how many precious children Kosawa has. We had to believe him that the people at headquarters were sad about what was happening to us. They were all working hard to resolve this issue so everyone could be healthy and happy again. He spoke slowly, his smile constant, as if he was about to deliver the good news we so yearned for.

We barely blinked as we watched him, listening to lies we'd heard before. Lies about how the people who controlled Pexton cared about us. Lies about how the big men in the government of His Excellency cared about us. Lies about how hundreds of people in the capital had asked him to relay their condolences to us. "They mourn with you at the news of every death," he said. "It'll be over soon. It's time your suffering ended, isn't it?"

The Round One and the Sick One nodded.

“Pexton and the government are your friends,” the Leader said. “Even on your worst day, remember that we’re thinking about you in Bézam and working hard for you.”

Our mothers and fathers wanted him to offer specifics on exactly when our air and water and land would be clean again. “Do you know how many children we’ve buried?” a father shouted. His name was Lusaka—he had buried two sons. We had been to both of the boys’ funerals and wept over their bodies, darker than they’d been in life and adorned with white shirts soon to merge with their flesh.

Lusaka’s departed younger son, Wambi, was our age-mate and classmate.

Two years had passed since Wambi died, but we thought about him still—he was the smartest boy in arithmetic, and the quietest one too, except for when he coughed. We’d been alive for centuries combined, and yet we’d never heard anyone cough the way he did. When the cough hit, his eyes watered, his back hunched out, he had to hold on to something to steady himself. It was sad to watch, pitiful but funny in the way a heavyset man falling on his buttocks amused us. Doesn’t your father know the path to the medicine man’s hut? we would say to him, laughing the careless laugh of healthy children. We knew not that some of us would soon start coughing too. How could we have imagined such a thing would happen to us? That several of us would develop raspy coughs and rashes and fevers that would persist until our deaths? Please stay away from us with that ugly cough of yours, we’d said to Wambi. But it wasn’t just an ugly cough, we would later find out. The dirty air had gotten stuck in his lungs. Slowly, the poison spread through his body and turned into something else. Before we knew it, Wambi was dead.

We could barely sing him a farewell song as we stood around his coffin, our tears drowning the words. Some of our fathers had to carry us home from the burial ground, faint as we were. Within five months of Wambi’s death, two of us would be dead. Those of us who survived feared our death was close; we were certain we’d be the next, though sometimes we feared we’d be the last—all our age-mates would be dead and we’d have no friends our size with whom we could stick out our tongues and taste raindrops, no

one to play with in the square, or fight with over the right to the juiciest mangoes.

We thought about our departed friends whenever we developed fevers or someone coughed around us. We feared someone in our homes would catch this sickness that had arrived like a thief in the dark and was now hovering outside every hut, waiting for its chance to enter. We worried for our entire families, though the disease preferred the bodies of children. We feared the first person to catch it in our huts would pass it on to another person, and the second person would pass it on to someone else, and before long our entire family would contract it and die, one after another, or maybe all at once, but most likely one after another, from the oldest to the youngest, in which case we might be the last to die, after we'd buried everyone. Our anxieties kept us awake at night.

We hated that we went to bed in fear and woke up in fear, all day long breathed fear in and out. Our mothers and fathers told us to have no worries for the Spirit would guide and protect us, but their words brought us no comfort—the Spirit had protected the other children and what had become of them? Still, we nodded whenever our parents made their assurances—our fathers as we bade them good night; our mothers in the morning if we woke up crying over a bad dream—for we knew they lied only to keep us calm, so we would have no nightmares, so we would wake up rested and run to school after breakfast, carefree and merry as we ought to be. We were reminded of our parents' lies whenever there was a new death, sometimes in our huts, sometimes in the hut next to ours, sometimes children younger than us, babies and toddlers, children who had barely tasted life, always children we knew. We were young, but we knew death to be impartial.

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Please, you must do something, one of our aunts cried to the Leader, her baby limp in her arms. It was the poison—the baby was too pure for the filth in the village well's water, the toxins that had seeped into it from Pexton's field. One of our fathers asked if Pexton could in the meantime send us clean water, at least for the youngest children. The Leader shook his head; he'd heard this question before. He took a deep breath as he prepared to give his

standard response: Pexton was not in the business of providing water, but out of concern for us he would talk to people at headquarters, they'd take our request to the government office in charge of water supply and hear what they had to say. Didn't the Leader give this same response last time? a grandfather asked. How long does it take for messages to move from office to office in Bézam? A very long time, the Leader replied.

Some of our mothers began crying. We wished we could dry their tears.

Our young men started shouting. We'll march to Bézam and burn down your headquarters, they said. We'll hurt you the same way you're hurting us.

The Pexton men simply smiled in response. They knew the young men wouldn't do it—we all knew that His Excellency would have our young men exterminated if they dared harm Pexton and our village would only be left further enfeebled.

We'd seen it happen already.

Early the previous year, we had watched as a group of six men set out for Bézam, water and dried food packed in their raffia bags. Led by the father of one of us—the one of us named Thula—the group promised the village that they would return with nothing less than a guarantee from the government and Pexton that our land would be restored to what it was before Pexton arrived. Day after day, we waited alongside our friend Thula for the return of her father and the other men, all of whom were our neighbors and relatives, three of whom had sick children. When they did not return after ten days, we began fearing that they'd been imprisoned. Or worse. A second group of men traveled to Bézam to search for and bring home the Six, but they came back empty-handed. Months later, the Pexton men arrived for their first meeting with the village. When our elders asked the Leader at that initial meeting where he thought our vanished men might be, he told them that he knew nothing, Pexton did not involve itself with the whereabouts of the citizens of our country, unless, of course, they were its workers.

On that evening in October of 1980, still smiling, the Leader reminded us once more that Pexton was our friend, and that, though we had to make

sacrifices, someday we'd look back and be proud that Pexton had taken an interest in our land.

He asked if we had any more questions.

We did not. Whatever hope we'd had at the onset of that meeting had flown away and taken with it our last words. With a final smile, he thanked us for coming. The Round One and the Sick One began packing up their briefcases. Their driver was waiting by our school in a black Land Rover, ready to take them back to Bézam, to their homes and lives overflowing with clean necessities and superfluities we could never conjure.

Woja Beki stood up and thanked us too. He wished us a good night and reminded us to return for another meeting in eight weeks. He told us to be well until then.

ON MOST NIGHTS WE WOULD have left the village square and turned homeward.

We would have said little to each other as we walked in the darkness, our entire beings drenched with an unrelenting, smothering form of despair. We would have walked slowly, our heads hung low, ashamed we'd dared to hope, embarrassed by our smallness.

On any other night, the meeting would have been a reminder that we could do nothing to them but they could do anything to us, because they owned us. Their words would have served no purpose but to further instill within us that we couldn't undo the fact that three decades before, in Bézam, on a date we'll never know, at a meeting where none of us was present, our government had given us to Pexton. Handed, on a sheet of paper, our land and waters to them. We would have had no choice but to accept that we were

now theirs. We would have admitted to ourselves that we'd long ago been defeated.

On that night, though, that night when the air was too still and the crickets strangely quiet, we did not turn homeward. Because, at the moment we were about to stand and start bidding each other good night, we heard a rustle in the back of the gathering. We heard a voice telling us to remain seated, the meeting was not yet over, it was just beginning. We turned around and saw a man, tall and lean, hair matted, wearing nothing but a pair of trousers with holes on every side. It was Konga, our village madman.

He was breathing heavily, as if he'd sprinted from the school compound to the square. He was exuberant and bouncy, not his usual lethargic self, the self that lumbered around the village laughing with invisible friends and shaking his fists at enemies no one else could perceive. We saw the glow in his eyes in the light darkness, his excitement apparent as he rushed to the front of the gathering, nearly floating in exhilaration. We looked at each other, too dumbfounded to ask: What is he doing?

Never had we seen the Leader so stunned as when he turned to Woja Beki and asked what Konga wanted—why was a madman disrupting the end of his meeting? Never had we seen Woja Beki as devoid of words as when he turned to face Konga.

Before us all stood a never-before-seen version of our village madman.

As if all authority on earth belonged to him, Konga barked at the Pexton men, told them to sit down, hadn't they heard him, were their ears so full of wax that sound couldn't penetrate it? The meeting wasn't over, it was just beginning.

The Leader, maddened by Konga's audacity, and running short on the decorum he'd brought from Bézam, reciprocated the bark, asking how dare a madman speak to him, Pexton's representative, in that manner. Konga chuckled, before responding that he had the right to speak to anyone any way he liked, an answer that prompted the Leader to turn to Woja Beki and demand to know why Woja Beki was standing there like an idiot, tolerating this insolent fool. Konga cleared his throat—everything in it—and spat out

what we imagined was a glob of dark yellow phlegm between the Leader's feet.

We gasped. Did Konga know who the men were and what they could do to him?

The Leader glared at Konga. Then us. Then Konga again. He motioned for his underlings to pick up their briefcases. All three men lifted their briefcases and turned to leave. We took a deep breath, thankful the drama had reached its finale, but our relief morphed into greater perplexity when Konga asked the trio how they intended to return to Bézam. The representatives turned around, puzzled, if not alarmed.

What happened next, we could never have expected. Could never have imagined Konga would put a hand inside his trousers in front of the Pexton men and the village. Our mothers and grandmothers covered their eyes, afraid he was about to do a thing women should not witness, the thing they'd told us to never look at if Konga did it in front of us.

We kept our eyes open and watched as Konga caressed something in his trousers, his lips parted, stroking, stroking, no doubt an exaggeration. Gently, he pulled out something. He held it up and asked the men if it belonged to them. Our eyes widened, as did the men's—they'd recognized their car key, golden and glossy, in the madman's hand.

Before we could recover from the revelation, Konga asked the Pexton men where their driver was. The driver always waited in the car during the meetings, but with the key in Konga's hand, where could he be? Konga did not say. He merely, with a smile, informed the men that the key in his hand was indeed their car key and when they returned to the school compound they would not find their driver waiting.

We began talking all at once. What was happening? What was he doing?

Woja Beki started stuttering, bowing to the Leader, informing him that Konga was only playing a madman's game, the Leader should please understand that without brains Konga couldn't discern that the honorable representatives did not play games; of course the driver was fine, likely

standing next to the car; of course Konga was going to hand over the key immediately; the Leader should please accept deepest apologies on behalf of the village; none of this was meant to disrespect our guests; travel blessings on their return to Bézam; all of Kosawa was grateful to them for coming once more to—

Konga commanded Woja Beki to shut up and step aside.

We wanted to hoot with delight. We yearned to jump up and clap, but we didn't—we were witnessing something extraordinary whose unfolding we dared not disturb.

Konga lifted his eyes to the sky, as if to commune with the stars. When he lowered them, he informed the Pexton men that they would not be returning to Bézam that night. The Leader and the Sick One and the Round One looked at each other and chuckled, amused at the idea that a madman was threatening to keep them captive. We thought it somewhat funny too, but we did not laugh, because Konga said it again, this time slowly, categorically: Gentlemen, you'll be spending the night with us in Kosawa.

He meant what he was saying, we could tell from his tone, and the Leader could now tell too, because he stopped chuckling. He looked at us in confusion, asking us what was going on, what was the madman talking about, his tone at first beseeching before turning demanding; determined as he was to get a response from us no matter the means.

We uttered not one word.

The Leader glared at Konga. Wrath was gushing out of the Pexton man's nostrils, but he had to contain himself. Raising his voice only slightly, he told Konga that whatever game he was playing was now over, it was time Konga handed over the key, he'd rather not use force, the night was certain to end badly if he did, he did not want that, considering how much Pexton cared for Kosawa, so it would be best if Konga quietly handed him the key so that this could all be forgiven and forgotten.

We did not expect Konga to obey, but neither did we imagine he would stare at the Leader for seconds, scoff, and burst into a prolonged laugh.

The Leader turned to Woja Beki, who quickly bowed his head.

“Get my key from him,” the Leader shouted at our village head.

Woja Beki made no attempt to move. It was obvious to us why the Leader would ask this of Woja Beki—the Leader could never debase his honorable personhood by getting himself, or his men, into a physical confrontation with an uncouth madman.

“Get my key from that idiot,” the Leader shouted again.

Woja Beki remained frozen in his spot, perhaps ashamed, likely afraid, to look into the eyes of the big man from Bézam.

What came afterward, we’d long fantasized about doing ourselves—some of us had done it in dreams from which we woke up smiling—but it did not lessen our shock when it happened, when Konga, laughing no more, walked up to Woja Beki and spat in his face. We giggled, we gasped in horror, we half-shut our eyes. Woja Beki, without raising his head, wiped the saliva that had landed on his lips. Barely glancing at Woja Beki, the Leader, now a gesticulating bundle of fury and befuddlement, resumed his shouting, yelling at everyone, anyone, to get his key from the madman, someone get his key right now, otherwise there’d be severe consequences.

Not one of us did or said a thing.

None of us took it upon ourselves to tell the Leader that Konga was untouchable. We did not attempt to tell him that no matter what Konga did, however much he humiliated or hurt us or scared us, we could not touch him, because we do not touch men with his condition. We did not tell the Leader that for decades no one had touched Konga and no one ever would, because to touch a madman was to invite the worst curse.

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If the Leader had sat down with us, we would have told him Konga's story, the story our parents repeated whenever we ridiculed Konga, every time they caught us skipping behind him around the village, laughing at his matted hair, his lone pair of trousers, his dirt-clogged fingernails. We would have told the Leader that Konga wasn't born a madman and that, hard as it might be to believe it now, he was once a proud, handsome man.

If the Leader had asked, we would have told him that long before we were born, when our parents were children our age, dozens of young women in our village dreamed of becoming Konga's wife and bearing sons as chiseled and long-limbed as him. His parents, long gone now, dreamed of the grandchildren their only child would give them. He was a fine farmer, a fine hunter, and a very fine fisherman. On any given day, our parents told us, Konga could be great at being anything—he was destined for a beautiful life. But then, one day, a hot day, he began complaining of voices that wouldn't stop talking to him. They were laughing at him, he told his parents, imploring him to kill himself, telling him he was going to live forever. They appeared in his dreams at night and emerged from dark spaces during the day in the form of men, women, and children who'd been in the grave for so long they'd lost most of their flesh. They seemed determined to never let him go, badgering him in a language he couldn't understand, surrounding him whenever he sat down to eat, chasing him around the village.

His parents took him to our village medium, who told them that nothing could be done—a vengeful spirit had taken Konga's sanity as punishment for an evil committed by one of his ancestors centuries before Konga was born. Konga was to spend the rest of his life as an atonement; the spirit could not be appeased. All his parents could do, the medium said, was to keep the front door of their hut open so Konga could come and go as he wished. They also needed to leave a mat outside their hut so Konga could find a suitable outdoor place and sleep comfortably on the nights the voices allowed him to.

By the time we were born, Konga had been sleeping under the sky for twenty years. With his parents gone and having left behind no siblings to feed him, our mothers took turns bringing him food and water under the mango tree. Some days he ate the food and drank the water; other days he ignored it until the flies came for it, and the ants marched into it, and the goats accidentally knocked over the bowls holding the rest of it, and our mothers sighed and took their bowls home, only to carry food to him the