Barbara Kingsolver

The Poisonwood Bible

a novel


HarperCollins e-books

For Frances

Contents

Author's Note v

Book One GENESIS 1

Book Two THE REVELATION 101

Book Three THE JUDGES 227

Book Four BEL AND THE SERPENT 375

Book Five EXODUS 449

Book Six SONG OF THE THREE CHILDREN 609

Book Seven THE EYES IN THE TREES 639

Bibliography 651

About the Author

Praise

Other Books by Barbara Kingsolver

Cover

Copyright

About the Publisher

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 inspira-

tion, 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.

The Things We Carried

Kilanga, 1959

Leah Price

We came from Bethlehem, Georgia, bearing Betty Crocker cake mixes into the jungle. My sisters and I were all counting on having one birthday apiece during our twelve-month mission. "And heaven knows," our mother predicted, "they won't have Betty Crocker in the Congo."

"Where we are headed, there will be no buyers and sellers at all," my father corrected. His tone implied that Mother failed to grasp our mission, and that her concern with Betty Crocker confederated her with the coin-jingling sinners who vexed Jesus till he pitched a fit and threw them out of church. "Where we are headed," he said, to make things perfectly clear, "not so much as a Piggly Wiggly." Evidently Father saw this as a point in the Congo's favor. I got the most spectacular chills, just from trying to imagine.

She wouldn't go against him, of course. But once she understood there was no turning back, our mother went to laying out in the spare bedroom all the worldly things she thought we'd need in the Congo just to scrape by. "The bare minimum, for my children," she'd declare under her breath, all the livelong day. In addition to the cake mixes, she piled up a dozen cans of Underwood deviled ham; Rachel's ivory plastic hand mirror with powdered-wig ladies on the back; a stainless-steel thimble; a good pair of scissors; a dozen number-2 pencils; a

world of Band-Aids, Anacin, Absorbine Jr.; and a fever thermometer.

And now we are here, with all these colorful treasures safely transported and stowed against necessity. Our stores are still intact, save for the Anacin tablets taken by our mother and the thimble lost down the latrine hole by Ruth May. But already our supplies from home seem to represent a bygone world: they stand out like bright party favors here in our Congolese house, set against a backdrop of mostly all mud-colored things. When I stare at them with the rainy-season light in my eyes and Congo grit in my teeth, I can hardly recollect the place where such items were commonplace, merely a yellow pencil, merely a green bottle of aspirin among so many other green bottles upon a high shelf.

Mother tried to think of every contingency, including hunger and illness. (And Father does, in general, approve of contingencies. For it was God who gave man alone the capacity of foresight.) She procured a good supply of antibiotic drugs from our granddad Dr. Bud Wharton, who has senile dementia and loves to walk outdoors naked but still can do two things perfectly: win at checkers and write out prescriptions. We also brought over a cast-iron frying pan, ten packets of baker's yeast, pinking shears, the head of a hatchet, a fold-up army latrine spade, and all told a good deal more. This was the full measure of civilization's evils we felt obliged to carry with us.

Getting here with even the bare minimum was a trial. Just when we considered ourselves fully prepared and were fixing to depart, lo and behold, we learned that the Pan American Airline would only allow forty-

four pounds to be carried across the ocean. Forty-four pounds of luggage per person, and not one iota more. Why, we were dismayed by this bad news! Who'd have thought there would be limits on modern jet-age transport? When we added up all our forty-four pounds together, including Ruth May's—luckily she counted as a whole person even though she's small—we were sixty-one pounds over. Father surveyed our despair as if he'd expected it all along, and left it up to wife and daughters to sort out, suggesting only that we consider the lilies of the field, which have no need of a hand mirror or aspirin tablets.

"I reckon the lilies need Bibles, though, and his darn old latrine spade," Rachel muttered, as her beloved toiletry items got pitched out of the suitcase one by one. Rachel never does grasp scripture all that well.

But considering the lilies as we might, our trimming back got us nowhere close to our goal, even without Rachel's beauty aids. We were nearly stumped. And then, hallelujah! At the last possible moment, saved. Through an oversight (or else probably, if you think about it, just plain politeness), they don't weigh the passengers. The Southern Baptist Mission League gave us this hint, without coming right out and telling us to flout the law of the forty-four pounds, and from there we made our plan. We struck out for Africa carrying all our excess baggage on our bodies, under our clothes. Also, we had clothes under our clothes. My sisters and I left home wearing six pairs of underdrawers, two half-slips and camisoles; several dresses one on top of the other, with pedal pushers underneath; and outside of everything an all-weather coat.

(The encyclopedia advised us to count on rain.) The other goods, tools, cake-mix boxes and so forth were tucked out of sight in our pockets and under our waistbands, surrounding us in a clanking armor.

We wore our best dresses on the outside to make a good impression. Rachel wore her green linen Easter suit she was so vain of, and her long whitish hair pulled off her forehead with a wide pink elastic hairband. Rachel is fifteen—or, as she would put it, going on sixteen—and cares for naught but appearances. Her full Christian name is Rachel Rebeccah, so she feels free to take after Rebekah, the virgin at the well, who is said in Genesis to be "a damsel very fair" and was offered marriage presents of golden earbobs right off the bat, when Abraham's servant spied her fetching up the water. (Since she's my elder by one year, she claims no relation to the Bible's poor Rachel, Leah's younger sister, who had to wait all those years to get married.) Sitting next to me on the plane, she kept batting her white-rabbit eyelashes and adjusting her bright pink hairband, trying to get me to notice she had secretly painted her fingernails bubble-gum pink to match. I glanced over at Father, who had the other window seat at the opposite end of our entire row of Prices. The sun was a blood-red ball hovering outside his window, inflaming his eyes as he kept up a lookout for Africa on the horizon. It was just lucky for Rachel he had so much else weighing on his mind. She'd been thrashed with the strap for nail polish, even at her age. But that is Rachel to a T, trying to work in just one last sin before leaving civilization. Rachel is worldly and tiresome in my opinion, so I stared out the window, where the view was better. Father feels makeup and

nail polish are warning signals of prostitution, the same as pierced ears.

He was right about the lilies of the field, too. Somewhere along about the Atlantic Ocean, the six pairs of underwear and cake mixes all commenced to be a considerable cross to bear. Every time Rachel leaned over to dig in her purse she kept one hand on the chest of her linen jacket and it still made a small clinking noise. I forget now what kind of concealed household weapon she had in there. I was ignoring her, so she chattered mostly to Adah—who was ignoring her too, but since Adah never talks to anyone, it was less noticeable.

Rachel adores to poke fun at everything in Creation, but chiefly our family. "Hey, Ade!" she whispered at Adah. "What if we went on Art Linkletter's House Party now?"

In spite of myself, I laughed. Mr. Linkletter likes to surprise ladies by taking their purses and pulling out what all's inside for the television audience. They think it's very comical if he digs out a can opener or a picture of Herbert Hoover. Imagine if he shook us, and out fell pinking shears and a hatchet. The thought of it gave me nerves. Also, I felt claustrophobic and hot.

Finally, finally we lumbered like cattle off the plane and stepped down the stair ramp into the swelter of Leopoldville, and that is where our baby sister, Ruth May, pitched her blond curls forward and fainted on Mother.

She revived very promptly in the airport, which smelled of urine. I was excited and had to go to the bathroom but couldn't surmise where a girl would even begin to look, in a place like this. Big palm-tree

leaves waved in the bright light outside. Crowds of people rushed past one way and then the other. The airport police wore khaki shirts with extra metal buttons and, believe you me, guns. Everywhere you looked, there were very tiny old dark ladies lugging entire baskets of things along the order of wilting greens. Chickens, also. Little regiments of children lurked by the doorways, apparently for the express purpose of accosting foreign missionaries. The minute they saw our white skin they'd rush at us, begging in French: "Cadeau, cadeau?" I held up my two hands to illustrate the total and complete lack of gifts I had brought for the African children. Maybe people just hid behind a tree somewhere and squatted down, I was starting to think; maybe that's why the smell.

Just then a married couple of Baptists in tortoiseshell sunglasses came out of the crowd and shook our hands. They had the peculiar name of Underdown—Reverend and Mrs. Underdown. They'd come down to shepherd us through customs and speak French to the men in uniforms. Father made it clear we were completely self-reliant but appreciated their kindness all the same. He was so polite about it that the Underdowns didn't realize he was peeved. They carried on making a fuss as if we were all old friends and presented us with a gift of mosquito netting, just armloads of it, trailing on and on like an embarrassing bouquet from some junior-high boyfriend who liked you overly much.

As we stood there holding our netting and sweating through our complete wardrobes, they regaled us with information about our soon-to-be-home, Kilanga. Oh, they had plenty to tell, since they and their boys had

once lived there and started up the whole of it, school, church, and all. At one point in time Kilanga was a regular mission with four American families and a medical doctor who visited once a week. Now it had gone into a slump, they said. No more doctor, and the Underdowns themselves had had to move to Léopoldville to give their boys a shot at proper schooling—if, said Mrs. Underdown, you could even call it that. The other missionaries to Kilanga had long since expired their terms. So it was to be just the Price family and whatever help we could muster up. They warned us not to expect much. My heart pounded, for I expected everything: jungle flowers, wild roaring beasts. God's Kingdom in its pure, unenlightened glory.

Then, while Father was smack in the middle of explaining something to the Underdowns, they suddenly hustled us onto a tiny airplane and abandoned us. It was only our family and the pilot, who was busy adjusting his earphones under his hat. He ignored us entirely, as if we were no more than ordinary cargo. There we sat, draped like tired bridesmaids with our yards of white veil, numbed by the airplane's horrible noise, skimming above the treetops. We were tuckered out, as my mother would say. "Plumb tuckered out," she would say. "Sugar, now don't you trip over that, you're tuckered out, it's plain to see." Mrs. Underdown had fussed and laughed over what she called our charming southern accent. She even tried to imitate the way we said "right now" and "bye-bye." ("Rot nail," she said. "Whah yay-es, the ayer-plane is leavin rot nail!" and "Bah-bah"—like a sheep!) She caused me to feel embarrassed over our simple expressions and drawn-out vowels, when I've never before considered

myself to have any accent, though naturally I'm aware we do sound worlds different from the Yanks on the radio and TV. I had quite a lot to ponder as I sat on that airplane, and incidentally I still had to pee. But we were all dizzy and silent by that time, having grown accustomed to taking up no more space in a seat than was our honest due.

At long last we bumped to a landing in a field of tall yellow grass. We all jumped out of our seats, but Father, because of his imposing stature, had to kind of crouch over inside the plane instead of standing up straight. He pronounced a hasty benediction: "Heavenly Father please make me a powerful instrument of Thy perfect will here in the Belgian Congo. Amen."

"Amen!" we answered, and then he led us out through the oval doorway into the light.

We stood blinking for a moment, staring out through the dust at a hundred dark villagers, slender and silent, swaying faintly like trees. We'd left Georgia at the height of a peach-blossom summer and now stood in a bewildering dry, red fog that seemed like no particular season you could put your finger on. In all our layers of clothing we must have resembled a family of Eskimos plopped down in a jungle.

But that was our burden, because there was so much we needed to bring here. Each one of us arrived with some extra responsibility biting into us under our garments: a claw hammer, a Baptist hymnal, each object of value replacing the weight freed up by some frivolous thing we'd found the strength to leave behind. Our journey was to be a great enterprise of balance. My father, of course, was bringing the Word of God—which fortunately weighs nothing at all.

Ruth May Price

GOD SAYS THE AFRICANS are the Tribes of Ham. Ham was the worst one of Noah's three boys: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Everybody comes down on their family tree from just those three, because God made a big flood and drowneded out the sinners. But Shem, Ham, and Japheth got on the boat so they were A-okay.

Ham was the youngest one, like me, and he was bad. Sometimes I am bad, too. After they all got off the ark and let the animals go is when it happened. Ham found his father Noah laying around pig-naked drunk one day and he thought that was funny as all get-out. The other two brothers covered Noah up with a blanket, but Ham busted his britches laughing. When Noah woke up he got to hear the whole story from the tattletale brothers. So Noah cursed all Ham's children to be slaves for ever and ever. That's how come them to turn out dark.

Back home in Georgia they have their own school so they won't be a-strutting into Rachel's and Leah and Adah's school. Leah and Adah are the gifted children, but they still have to go to the same school as everybody. But not the colored children. The man in church said they're different from us and needs ought to keep to their own. Jimmy Crow says that, and he makes the laws. They don't come in the White Castle

restaurant where Mama takes us to get Cokes either, or the Zoo. Their day for the Zoo is Thursday. That's in the Bible.

Our village is going to have this many white people: me, Rachel, Leah, and Adah. Mama. Father. That is six people. Rachel is oldest, I am youngest. Leah and Adah are in between and they're twins, so maybe they are one person, but I think two, because Leah runs everywhere and climbs trees, but Adah can't, she is bad on one whole side and doesn't talk because she is brain-damaged and also hates us all. She reads books upside down. You are only supposed to hate the Devil, and love everybody else.

My name is Ruth May and I hate the Devil. For the longest time I used to think my name was Sugar. Mama always says that. Sugar, come here a minute. Sugar, now don't do that.

In Sunday school Rex Minton said we better not go to the Congo on account of the cannibal natives would boil us in a pot and eat us up. He said, I can talk like a native, listen here: Ugga bugga bugga lugga. He said that means, I'll have me a drumstick off'n that little one with the curly yellow hair. Our Sunday-school teacher Miss Bannie told him to hush up. But I tell you what, she didn't say one way or the other about them boiling us in a pot and eating us up. So I don't know.

Here are the other white people we had in Africa so far: Mister Axelroot that flies the plane. He has got the dirtiest hat you ever saw. He lives way on down by the airplane field in a shack by himself whenever he comes over here, and Mama says that's close enough quarters for him. Reverent and Misrus Underdown, who

started the African children on going to church way back years ago. The Underdowns talk French to each other even though they are white people. I don't know why. They have their own two boys, the Underdown boys, that are big and go to school in Léopoldville. They felt sorry for us so they sent us comic books to take on the airplane with us. I got almost all of them to myself when Leah and them all went to sleep on the airplane. Donald Duck. Lone Ranger. And the fairy-tale ones, Cinderella and Briar Rose. I hid them in a place. Then I got to feeling bad and upchucked on the airplane, and it got all over a duffel bag and the Donald Duck. I put that one under the cushion so we don't have it anymore.

So this is who all will be in our village: the Price family, Lone Ranger, Cinderella, Briar Rose, and the Tribes of Ham.

Rachel Price

Man oh man, are we in for it now, was my thinking about the Congo from the instant we first set foot. We are supposed to be calling the shots here, but it doesn't look to me like we're in charge of a thing, not even our own selves. Father had planned a big old prayer meeting as a welcome ceremony, to prove that God had ensued us here and aimed to settle in. But when we stepped off the airplane and staggered out into the field with our bags, the Congolese people surrounded us—Lordy!—in a chanting broil. Charmed,

I'm sure. We got fumigated with the odor of perspirating bodies. What I should have stuffed in my purse was those five-day deodorant pads.

I looked around for my sisters to tell them, "Hey, Ade, Leah, aren't you glad you use Dial? Don't you wish everybody did?" I couldn't find either one of the twins but did catch sight of Ruth May fixing to executrate her second swoon of the day. Her eyes were rolled back with mostly the whites showing. Whatever was pulling her under, I knew she was opposing it with all her might. Ruth May is surprisingly stubborn for a child of five and unwilling to miss out on any kind of a spree.

Mother took hold of her hand and also mine—something I would not have tolerated in the slightest back home in Bethlehem. But here in all the hubbub we would have lost track of each other, with how we were just getting swept along on a big dark river of people. And the dirt, law! There was dirt everywhere like red chalk dust, and me with my good green linen suit on the outside, wouldn't you know. I could just feel the grit in my hair, which is so extremely fair it is prone to get stained. Boy, what a place. Already I was heavyhearted in my soul for the flush commodes and machine-washed clothes and other simple things in life I have took for granite.

The people were hurrying us on down toward some kind of open dirt-floor patio with a roof over it, which as it turned out was going to be our father's church. Just our luck, a church made of dirt. But worship was not on the docket that night, let me tell you. We ended up there in the throng under the thatched roof and I almost screamed when I realized the hand I held was not

my mother's but a thick brown claw, a stranger! What I trusted was gone. I just plumb let go, and the earth reeled beneath me. I threw my eyes around in panic like Black Beauty trapped in the flames. Finally I spotted my mother's white shirtwaist like the flag of "We Give Up!" waving near Father. Then, one by one, I found the pastel shapes of my sisters like party balloons but in the wrong party, man oh man. I knew right then I was in the sloop of despond. Father, on the other hand, was probably all deeply gratified, just gratified up one side and down the other. Praising Jesus for this occasion to which we were all going to have to rise.

We needed desperately to change—the extra underwear and dresses were dragging us down—but there was no chance whatsoever for that. None. We just got shoved straight into the heathen pandemony. I have no idea where our suitcases and canvas bags had gone to. My embroidery hoops and a pair of pinking shears in an oilcloth sheath hung around my neck, threatening myself and others in the push and shove. Finally we were allowed to sit down about as close together as humanly possible at a table, on an oily bench made out of rough logs. Day one in the Congo, and here my brand-new tulip-tailored linen suit in Poison Green with square mother-of-pearl buttons was fixing to give up the goat. We had to sit so close to other people there wasn't room to breathe, if you even wanted to, being in the position to contract every kind of a germ there was. Another thing we should have brought: Listerine. Forty-five percent fewer colds. A roar of voices and weird birds lombarded my ears and filled my head to the brink. I am sensitive to noise of any kind—that

and the bright sunlight both give me tension headaches, but the sun at least by then had gone down. Otherwise I probably would have followed Ruth May's example and passed out or upchucked, her two big accomplishments of the day. The back of my neck felt pinched, and my heart smote like a drum. They had made a horrible roaring fire in one end of the church. Oily smoke hung above us like a net, drooping under the thatched roof. The scent of it was strong enough to choke any animal you can think of. Inside the bright orange rim of the fire I could see the outline of some dark thing being turned and pierced, with its four stiff legs flung out in a cry for help. My woman's intuition told me I was slated to die here and now, without my mother's palm even to feel the sweat on my forehead. I thought of the few occasions in my life up to now when I had tried—I admit—to bring on a fever to avoid school or church. Now a real fire beat in my temples, all the fevers I'd ever begged for, caught up to me at last.

All at once I understood the pinch on my neck was Mother. She had all four of us within the reach of her long arms: Ruth May, me, and my sisters Leah and Adah—Ruth May just small, of course, but Leah and Adah being a pretty good-sized pair of twins, although with Adah being the shorter because of her handicap. How Mother managed to keep a grip on us all like that is beyond me, I'm sure. And the beat of my heart was not my heart, I finally figured out, but the drums. The men were pounding on big loggedy-looking drums, and women were singing high, quavery tunes like birds gone crazy in the full moon. They called the songs back and forth in their own language

between a leader and the rest of the group. They were such weird songs it took me a while to realize they followed the tunes of Christian hymns, "Onward Christian Soldiers" and "What a Friend I Have in Jesus," which made my skin crawl. I guess they have a right to sing them, but here's the thing: right in front of our very eyes, some of the women stood up there in the firelight with their bosoms naked as a jaybird's egg. Some of them were dancing, and others merely ran around cooking, as if nakedness were nothing special. They passed back and forth with pots and kettles, all bare-chested and unashamed. They were very busy with the animal in the fire, pulling it to pieces now and mixing it with something steaming in a pot. Whenever they bent over, their heavy breasts swung down like balloons full of water. I kept my eyes turned away from them, and from the naked children who clung to their long draped skirts. I kept glancing over at Father, wondering, Am I the only one getting shocked to smithereens here? He had that narrow-eyed, lockjawed look like he was starting to get steamed up, but you never know exactly where that's going to lead. Mostly someplace where you wish you were anyplace but.

After a good long hootenanny of so-called hymns shouted back and forth, the burnt offering was out of the fire and into the frying pan so to speak, all mixed up into a gray-looking, smoldering stew. They started plunking it down in front of us in tin plates or bowls. The spoons they gave us were big old metal soup ladles, which I knew would never fit into my mouth. I have such a small mouth, my wisdom teeth are coming in all sigoggling. I looked around for someone to

trade spoons with, but lo and behold, nobody but our family even had any kind of a spoon at all! What the others aimed to do with their food, I wouldn't hazard to guess. Most of them were still waiting to get served, like birds in the wilderness. They held up their empty metal bowls or hubcaps or whatnot and cheerfully beat them like drums. It sounded like an entire junkyard orchestra, because everybody's plate was different. Ruth May just had a little tiny cup, which I knew she would resent because it made her seem more of a baby.

In all the ruckus, somebody was talking English. It just dawned on me all of a sudden. It was near about impossible to make out what was going on, because people all around us were singing, dancing, banging their plates, waving their arms back and forth like trees in a hurricane. But up by the bonfire where they were cooking, a coal-black man in a yellow shirt with the sleeves rolled up was gesturing towards us and hollowing at the top of his lungs: "Welcome! We welcome you!"

There was another man behind him, much older and dressed just out of this world, with a tall hat and glasses and a cloth drapery dress and swishing an animal's tail back and forth. He hollowed something in their language and everybody began to pipe down just a hair.

"Reverend and Mrs. Price and your children!" cried the younger man in the yellow shirt. "You are welcome to our feast. Today we have killed a goat to celebrate your coming. Soon your bellies will be full with our fufu pili-pili."

At that, why, the half-naked women behind him

just burst out clapping and cheering, as if they could no longer confine their enthusiasm for a dead goat.

"Reverend Price," the man said, "please offer with us a word of thanks for this feast."

He gestured for Father to come forward, but Father needed no invitation, it seems. He was already on his feet, away up on his chair, so he looked ten feet tall. He was in his shirtsleeves, which was not an unusual sight as he's one of those men that's easy in his body and in the heat of a sermon will often throw off his suit jacket. His pleated black trousers were belted tight but his chest and shoulders looked just huge. I'd almost forgotten, he still carried numerous deadly weapons under that clean white shirt.

Slowly Father raised one arm above his head like one of those gods they had in Roman times, fixing to send down the thunderbolts and the lightning. Everyone looked up at him, smiling, clapping, waving their arms over their heads, bare bosoms and all. Then he began to speak. It was not so much a speech as a rising storm.

"The Lord rideth," he said, low and threatening, "upon a swift cloud, and shall come into Egypt."

Hurray! they all cheered, but I felt a knot in my stomach. He was getting that look he gets, oh boy, like Here comes Moses tromping down off of Mount Syanide with ten fresh ways to wreck your life.

"Into Egypt," he shouted in his rising singsong preaching voice that goes high and low, then higher and lower, back and forth like a saw ripping into a tree trunk, "and every corner of the earth where His light," Father paused, glaring all about him, "where His light has yet to fall!"

He paused for breath and began again, swaying ever so faintly as he sang out: "The Lord rideth in the person of His angels of mercy, His emissaries of holiness into the cities on the plain, where Lot dwelled amongst the sinners!"

The cheers were slowing down. He had everybody's attention now.

"And Lot said unto the sinners who crowded at his door, I pray ye, brethren, do not do so wickedly! For the sinners of Sodom pressed their evil will against the entrance to his household."

I shuddered. Naturally I knew Chapter 19 of Genesis, which he'd made us copy out time and again. I detest the part where Lot offered his own virgin daughters to the rabble of sinners, to do with as they might, just so they'd forget about God's angels that were visiting and leave them be. What kind of a trade is that? And his poor wife, of course, got turned to a pillar of salt.

But Father skipped over all that and went straight to the dire consequences: "The emissaries of the Lord smote the sinners, who had come heedless to the sight of God, heedless in their nakedness."

Then he stopped, just froze perfectly still. With one of his huge hands he reached out to the congregation, pulling them in. With the other, he pointed at a woman near the fire. Her big long breasts lay flat on her chest like they'd been pressed down with an iron, but she did seem heedless of it. She was toting a long-legged child all straddly on her hip, and with her free hand was scratching at her short hair. She looked around nervously, for every pair of eyes in the place had followed Father's accusing gaze straight to her naked-

ness. She bounced her knees, shifting the big child upwards on her hip. His head lolled. He had hair that stood out in reddish tufts and he looked dazed. For an eternity of silence the mother stood there in the spotlight, drawing her head back on her neck in fear and puzzlement. Finally she turned around and picked up a long wooden spoon and went to poking at the stew kettle.

"Nakedness," Father repeated, "and darkness of the soul! For we shall destroy this place where the loud clamor of the sinners is waxen great before the face of the Lord."

No one sang or cheered anymore. Whether or not they understood the meaning of "loud clamor," they didn't dare be making one now. They did not even breathe, or so it seemed. Father can get a good deal across with just his tone of voice, believe you me. The woman with the child on her hip kept her back turned, tending to the food.

"And Lot went out and spake unto those that were worthy." Now Father was using his gentler, simmering-down tone. "And Lot said unto them, 'Up! Get ye out from this place of darkness! Arise and come forward into a brighter land!'

"O Lord, let us pray," he concluded, landing abruptly back down on earth. "Lord, grant that the worthy among us here shall rise above wickedness and come out of the darkness into the wondrous light of our Holy Father. Amen."

All faces were still set on my father, as if they all were shiny, dark plants and his red head was the sun. But their expressions had fallen in slow motion from joy to confusion to dismay. Now, as the spell broke,

people began to mutter and move about. A few women lifted up their wraparound sarongs and tied them in front, to cover their breasts. Others gathered up their bare-bottomed children and moved out into the darkness. I guess they were going home to bed without any supper.

The air above our heads grew perfectly quiet. There was not a peep to be heard but katydid noises outside in the deep, black night.

Well, there was nothing now but to dig in. With everyone's eyes upon us, my sisters and I picked up our big metal spoons. The food they'd set before us was a stew that tasted like pure nothing, just wet clumps stuffed in my mouth that I would have to chew into glue. Once I took it in, though, the very first bite slowly grew to a powerful burn on my tongue. It scorched my eardrums from the inside. Tears ran from my eyes and I couldn't swallow. This was going to be the start of a real crying jag, I had the feeling, for a girl whose only hopes for the year were a sweet-sixteen party and a pink mohair twin set.

Ruth May choked out loud and made a horrible face. Mother leaned over, to slap her on the back, I thought, but instead she whispered at us in the awfulest, hissing voice: "Girls, you be polite, do you hear me? I'm sorry but if you spit that out I will thrash you to an inch of your lives."

This was Mother, who'd never laid a hand on us in all our lives! Oh, I got the picture, right there, our first night in Africa. I sat breathing through my nose, holding in my mouth the pure, awful slavor of something on fire and a bristle of stiff hairs from the burnt hide of a dead goat. I shut my eyes tight, but

even so, the tears ran down. I wept for the sins of all who had brought my family to this dread dark shore.

Adah Price

SUNRISE TANTALIZE, evil eyes hypnotize: that is the morning, Congo pink. Any morning, every morning. Blossomy rose-color birdsong air streaked sour with breakfast cookfires. A wide red plank of dirt—the so-called road—flat-out in front of us, continuous in theory from here to somewhere distant. But the way I see it through my Adah eyes it is a flat plank clipped into pieces, rectangles and trapezoids, by the skinny black-line shadows of tall palm trunks. Through Adah eyes, oh the world is a-boggle with colors and shapes competing for a half-brain's attention. The parade never stops. Into the jangled pieces of road little jungle roosters step from the bush, karkadoodling. They jerk up their feet with cocky roosterness as if they have not yet heard about the two-legged beasts who are going to make slaves of their wives.

Congo sprawls on the middle of the world. Sun rises, sun sets, six o'clock exactly. Everything that comes of morning undoes itself before nightfall: rooster walks back into forest, fires die down, birds coo-coo-coo, sun sinks away, sky bleeds, passes out, goes dark, nothing exists. Ashes to ashes.

Kilanga village runs along the Kwilu River as a long row of little mud houses set after-one-the-other beside a

lone red snake of dirt road. Rising up all round us, trees and bamboo. Leah and I as babies had a long, hodgepodge string of unmatched beads for dress-up which would break when we fought over it and fly into a snaking line of odds and ends in the dirt. That is how Kilanga looked from the airplane. Every red mud house squats in the middle of its red dirt yard, for the ground in the village is cleared hairless as a brick. The better to spy and kill our friends the snakes when they come calling, we are told. So Kilanga is a long low snake break clearing. In a long row the dirt huts all kneel facing east, as if praying for the staved-off collapse—not toward Mecca exactly but east toward the village's one road and the river and behind all that, the pink sunrise surprise.

The church building, scene of our recent feast, resides at one end of the village. At the other end, our own house. And so when the Price family strolls to church we are able en route to peer straight into each and every villager's house. Every house has only a single square room and a thatched roof, under which might dwell the likes of Robinson Crusoe. But no one here stays under a roof. It is in the front yards—all the world's a stage of hard red dirt under bare foot—where tired thin women in every thinkable state of dress and disrepair poke sticks into their little fires and cook. Clumps of children stonethrowing outflowing rush upon terrified small goats, scattering them across the road so that the goats may tiptoe back and be chased again. Men sit on buckets and stare at whatsoever passes by. The usual bypasser is a woman sauntering slowly down the road with bundles upon bundles balanced on her head. These women are pillars of wonder, defying gravity while wearing the ho-

hum aspect of perfect tedium. They can sit, stand, talk, shake a stick at a drunk man, reach around their backs to fetch forth a baby to nurse, all without dropping their piled-high bundles upon bundles. They are like ballet dancers entirely unaware they are on stage. I cannot take my eyes from them.

Whenever a woman leaves her wide-open-to-the-world yard to work her field or saunter off on an errand, first she must make herself decent. To do this, even though she is already wearing a wraparound skirt, she will go and get another large square of cloth from the house, which she wraps around her first skirt—covering her legs right down to the instep of her foot—into a long, narrow sarong tied below her bare breasts. The cloths are brightly printed and worn together in jangling mixtures that ring in my ears: pink gingham with orange plaid, for example. Loose-joint breaking-point colors, and whether you find them beautiful or find them appalling, they do make the women seem more festive, and less exhausted.

Backdrop to the Kilanga pageant, rising up behind the houses, a tall wall of elephant grass obscures our view of anything but the distance. The sun suspended above it in the afternoon is a pink, round dot in the distant white haze you may stare at and never go blind. The real earth where the real sun shines seems to be somewhere else, far from here. And to the east of us, behind the river, a rising rumple of dark green hills folded on each other like a great old tablecloth, receding to pale hazy blue. "Looming like the Judgment," says our mother, pausing to wipe her damp forehead with the back of her hand.

"It's a place right out of a storybook," my twin sis-

ter, Leah, loves to declare in response, opening her eyes wide and sticking her short hair behind her ears as if to hear and see every little thing oh so much better. "And yet this is our own family, the Prices, living here!"

Next comes this observation from my sister Ruth May: "Nobody here's got very many teeth." And finally, from Rachel: "Jeez oh man, wake me up when it's over." And so the Price family passes its judgments. All but Adah. Adah unpasses her judgments. I am the one who does not speak.

Our Father speaks for all of us, as far as I can see. And he is at the moment not saying much. His hammer turned out to be a waste of two or three good pounds, because there appear to be no nails in the mud-and-thatch town of Kilanga. The wide-open building that serves as church and school was built of concrete-block pillars holding up a roof of palm thatch and billowy clouds of scarlet bougainvillea. By now it all seems more or less welded together by its own decay. Our house is also mud, thatch, cement, and flowering vines. Leah in her earnest way helped him scout around for a project, but alas he found nothing worth pounding at, anywhere. This was a great disappointment to Our Father, who likes to repair things between Sundays.

Yet here we are to stay. The bush plane that dropped down into the field to leave us here went right away again, and there will be no more coming-going until that same plane returns again. We asked about the dirt road through the village and were told it stretched all the way to Léopoldville. I doubt it. A short way on either side of our village the road falls

into a frenzy of hard dirt ruts that look like ocean waves frozen solid in the middle of a tempest. Our Father says in the great beyond nearby there are probably swamps you could sink a battleship in, not to mention a mere automobile. We do see vestigial signs of automobiles in our village, but they resemble the signs of life you would dig up in a graveyard if you were inclined to that pastime. Which is to say: parts dead and rusted, scattered around and used not for transportation but for anything but. On a walk one day with Our Father he pointed out for his daughters' edification a carburetor air-filter lid boiling a family's dinner over a cookfire, and a jeep muffler being put to use by six boys at once, as a drum.

The Kwilu River is the throughway here: Kwilu, a word without a single rhyme. Nearly a prelude, but not quite. Kwilu. It troubles me, this dubious escape route. It sits unanswered like a half-phrase of music on my ear.

Our Father claims the Kwilu is navigable downstream from here all the way to where it joins the Congo River; upstream, one may go only as far as the high, scenic cataracts that thunder just to the south of us. In other words, we have arrived very nearly at the end of the earth. We sometimes do see the odd boat passing by, but only carrying people from nearby villages exactly like this one. For news or mail or evidence of what Rachel calls The Pale Which We Are Way Beyond, we wait for the rough-and-ready airplane pilot, Mr. Eeben Axelroot. He is reliable in the following way: if they say he is coming on Monday, it will be Thursday, Friday, or not at all.

Like the village road and the river, nothing here

really continues to its end. The Congo is only a long path that takes you from one hidden place to another. Palm trees stand alongside of it looking down at you in shock, like too-tall, frightened women with upright hair. Nevertheless, I am determined I will walk that path, even though I do not walk fast or well. My right side drags. I was born with half my brain dried up like a prune, deprived of blood by an unfortunate fetal mishap. My twin sister, Leah, and I are identical in theory, just as in theory we are all made in God's image. Leah and Adah began our life as images mirror perfect. We have the same eyes dark and chestnut hair. But I am a lame gallimaufry and she remains perfect.

Oh, I can easily imagine the fetal mishap: we were inside the womb together dum-de-dum when Leah suddenly turned and declared, Adah you are just too slow. I am taking all the nourishment here and going on ahead. She grew strong as I grew weak. (Yes! Jesus loves me!) And so it came to pass, in the Eden of our mother's womb, I was cannibalized by my sister.

Officially my condition is called hemiplegia. Hemi is half, hemisphere, hemmed-in, hemlock, hem and haw. Plegia is the cessation of motion. After our complicated birth, physicians in Atlanta pronounced many diagnoses on my asymmetrical brain, including Wernicke's and Broca's aphasia, and sent my parents home over the icy roads on Christmas Eve with one-half a set of perfect twins and the prediction that I might possibly someday learn to read but would never speak a word. My parents seem to have taken this well in stride. I am sure the Reverend explained to his exhausted wife that it was the will of God, who could plainly see—

with these two additional girls so close after the first one—our house had enough females in it now to fill it up with blabber. They did not even have Ruth May yet, but did have a female dog that howled, Our Father still likes to say, Like One Too Many Sopranos in Church. The Dog that Broke The Camel's Back, he also calls it. Our Father probably interpreted Broca's aphasia as God's Christmas bonus to one of His worthier employees.

I am prone to let the doctors' prophecy rest and keep my thoughts to myself. Silence has many advantages. When you do not speak, other people presume you to be deaf or feeble-minded and promptly make a show of their own limitations. Only occasionally do I find I have to break my peace: shout or be lost in the shuffle. But mostly am lost in the shuffle. I write and draw in my notebook and read anything I please.

It is true I do not speak as well as I can think. But that is true of most people, as nearly as I can tell.

Leah

In the beginning my sisters bustled indoors, playing the role of mother's helper with more enthusiasm than they'd ever shown for housework in all their born days. For one reason only: they were scared to set foot outside the house. Ruth May had the bizarre idea that our neighbors desired to eat her. Rachel, who sighted imaginary snakes at the least provocation, said, "Jeez oh man," rolled her eyes, and announced her plan to