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**I**MAGINE 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 spy-

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“Powerful. . . . Kingsolver is a gifted magician of words.” —*Time*



**BARBARA KINGSOLVER**’s ten published books include novels, collections of short stories, poetry, essays, and an oral history. Her work is translated into more than a dozen languages and has earned literary awards and a devoted readership at home and abroad. In 2000 she was awarded the National Humanities Medal, our country’s highest honor for service through the arts. Ms. Kingsolver grew up in Kentucky and earned a graduate degree in biology before becoming a full-time writer. With her husband, Steven Hopp, she cowrites articles on natural history, plays jazz, gardens, and raises two daughters. She lives with her family on a farm in southern Appalachia.

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