The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears

A NOVEL

DINAW MENGESTU

THE BEAUTIFUL THINGS THAT HEAVEN BEARS

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To Hirut and Tesfaye Mengestu, for everything

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THE BEAUTIFUL THINGS THAT HEAVEN BEARS

I

At eight o'clock Joseph and Kenneth come into the store. They come almost every Tuesday. It's become a routine among the three of us without our ever having acknowledged it as such. Sometimes only one of them comes. Sometimes neither of them. No questions are asked because nothing is expected. Seventeen years ago we were all new immigrants working as valets at the Capitol Hotel. According to the plaque outside the main entrance, the hotel was built to resemble the Medicis' family house in Italy. On weekends tourists lined the rooftop to stare at the snipers perched on the White House roof. It was there that Kenneth became Ken the Kenyan and Joseph, Joe from the Congo. I was skinnier then than I am now, and as our manager said, I didn't need a nickname to remind him I was Ethiopian.

"You close the store early today?" Kenneth asks, as he walks in and glances at the empty aisles. He comes straight from his

job, his suit coat still on despite the early May heat. His shirt is neatly pressed, and his tie is firmly fastened around his neck. Kenneth is an engineer who tries not to look like one. He believes in the power of a well-tailored suit to command the attention and respect of those who might not otherwise give him a second thought. Every week he says the same thing when he walks in. He knows there's no humor in it, but he's come to believe that American men are so successful because they say the same thing over and over again.

"Don't take it from me," he said in his defense once. "Listen to them. Every day. The same thing. Every day my boss comes in, and he says to me, 'You still fighting the good fight Kenneth?' And I put my fist in the air and say, 'Still fighting.' And he says, 'That's what I like to hear.' He makes ninety thousand a year. Ninety thousand. So, I say, 'You close the store early today?' And you say, 'Fuck you.'"

"Fuck you, Ken," I say as the door closes behind him. He smiles gratefully at me whenever I say that. As much as Kenneth has ever needed anything in his life, he has needed order and predictability, small daily reassurances that the world is what it is, regardless of how flawed that may be. He has a small mouth, with full lips that would be considered beautiful on a woman, but that on him come off as overly puckered. He's self-conscious about his teeth, which are slightly brown and bent in the same direction. Joseph pressed him once into saying why, even now with all that he earns, he has never had them fixed. Kenneth smiled a full, wide smile for us before he responded. When he speaks in front of strangers he buries his mouth behind his hand. He rubs his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger, making everything he is embarrassed about disappear.

"You can never forget where you came from if you have teeth

as ugly as these," he said. He grinned once more. He tapped a slightly brown front tooth for effect.

Kenneth looks Kenyan. His skin is dark, his nose is long and thin, and yet his features are soft, almost delicate, like a child's. He's six feet tall, but it's only in the past two years, since he got his job, that's he's ever weighed more than a hundred and fifty pounds. When he's drunk he lifts up his shirt, blows out his stomach, and pats his protruding belly proudly. "God bless America," he says with each pat. "Only here can someone become the Buddha."

I go to the back of the store and pull out the fold-up table and chairs the three of us always sit at. I have a small deli counter in the front, now empty, behind which used to lie wasted slabs of roast beef, ham, and turkey cut to look like the upper half of a cow's thigh, just before it becomes the ass. I spent two thousand dollars of borrowed money on it with the idea that perhaps my store could become a deli, and in becoming a deli, a restaurant, and in becoming a restaurant, a place that I could sit back and look proudly upon. I place the chairs right in front of the empty deli counter. I sit with my back against the glass. It's May 2. Since January, I've had exactly three deli orders (turkey, no mayo, wheat bread; turkey, mustard, wheat bread; turkey, just one slice), not a single one after lunchtime. Despite my recent efforts, there is nothing special to my store. It's narrow, shabby, and brightly lit, with a ceiling of fluorescent bulbs that hum for over an hour every morning after being turned on. I sell twenty-five-cent bags of potato chips, two-liter bottles of Pepsi, boxes of macaroni and cheese, diapers, soap, detergent, condensed milk in narrow aisles haphazardly arranged.

"Jo-Jo here yet?" Kenneth asks. Some days it's Joe from the Congo, or Joe-Joe Congo, or Congo Joe.

"Not yet."

"Africans. Congolese. You can never trust us to be on time."

"You are."

"I'm an engineer. I have to be precise. Precision is the name of my game. You say to be somewhere at eight-thirty, I'm there at eight-thirty. Not a minute later."

He pulls out a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black from his bag and places it on the table.

"How was today?" he asks me.

"Three hundred seventy-three dollars and eighty-four cents."

Kenneth shakes his head mournfully at the number. Almost nobody comes into the store anymore. It's been this way for months now, with each month a little worse than the one before. Business is slow, money is tight, and ever since Judith moved out of the neighborhood, I've been opening and closing my store at odd hours, driving away what few regular customers I still have left. Recently Kenneth tried to bring the subject up while we were alone in the store. He was looking at my accounts for April and shaking his head in dismay while tsking loudly to himself. There were ten days last month that were marked with a red zero, days that I hadn't even bothered to open the store, or that I had closed before any customers had a chance to come in.

"Why are you doing this?" he finally asked me. He held open the book so I could see exactly what he was talking about. "Do you even care?"

I shook my head, not knowing how to explain to him that there were no one-word responses or common phrases that I could turn to for an answer.

On a good day I have forty or maybe fifty customers. Most of them are stay-at-home moms or dads who've moved into one of the newly refurbished houses surrounding Logan Circle. They

stop in during an afternoon stroll with their children dangling around their necks like amulets to ward off age, sickness, unemployment, rain, death. They buy bottled water, toothpaste, cleaning supplies, and, if their kids are old enough, one of the small five-cent pieces of candy I've learned to keep next to the register for just this purpose. On those good days, which come once or twice a week, I make just over four hundred dollars. I walk home at the end of the night feeling better, not only about my store, but about this country. I think to myself, America is beautiful after all. There is more here. Gas is cheap. This is not a bad place. Things could be worse. And what else could I have done?

"So then, you hate America today?" Kenneth says. He smiles a half-smile. He pours a little scotch into a Styrofoam cup he stole from his office and hands it to me. I know that if I let him, he would pull from his pocket the missing $26.16 and slide it into the cash register. Anything to make me feel better.

"With all my heart," I say to him.

Joseph's already drunk when he comes into the store. He strolls through the open door with his arms open. You get the sense when watching him that even the grandest gestures he may make aren't grand enough for him. He's constantly trying to outdo himself, to reach new levels of Josephness that will ensure that anyone who has ever met him will carry some lingering trace of Joseph Kahangi long after he has left. He's now a waiter at an expensive downtown restaurant, and after he cleans each table he downs whatever alcohol is still left in the glasses before bringing them back to the kitchen. I can tell by his slight swagger that the early dinnertime crowd was better than usual today.

Joseph is short and stout like a tree stump. He has a large

round face that looks like a moon pie. Kenneth used to tell him he looked Ghanaian.

"You have a typical Ghanaian face, Joe. Round eyes. Round face. Round nose. You're Ghanaian through and through. Admit it, and let us move on."

Joseph would stand up then and theatrically slam his fist onto the table, or into his palm, or against the wall. "I am from Zaire," he would yell out. "And you are a ass." Or, more recently, and in a much more subdued tone: "I am from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Next week, it may be something different. I admit that. Perhaps tomorrow I'll be from the Liberated Land of Laurent Kabila. But today, as far as I know, I am from the Democratic Republic of the Congo."

Joseph kisses me once on each cheek after he takes his coat off.

"That's my favorite thing about you Ethiopians," he says. "You kiss each other on the cheeks all the time. It takes you hours to say hello and good-bye because you're constantly kissing each other. Kiss. Kiss. Kiss."

Kenneth pours Joseph a scotch and the three of us raise our cups for a toast.

"How is America today, Stephanos?" Joseph asks me.

"He hates it," Kenneth says.

"That's because he doesn't understand it." Joseph leans closer toward me, his large moon-pie face eclipsing my view of everything except his eyes, which are small and bloodshot, and look as if they were added onto his face as an afterthought.

"I've told you," he says. "This country is like a little bastard child. You can't be angry when it doesn't give you what you want."

He leans back deliberately in his chair and crosses his legs, holding the pose for two seconds before leaning over and resting both arms on his thighs.

"But you have to praise it when it comes close, otherwise it'll turn around and bite you in the ass."

The two of them laugh and then quickly pour back their drinks and refill their glasses. There is a brief silence as each struggles to catch his breath. Before either of them can tell me something else about America ("This country cares only about one thing . . ." "There are three things you need to know about Americans . . ."), I call out, "Bukassa." The name catches them off guard. They both turn and stare at me. They swirl their cups around and around to make sure it looks like they're thinking. Kenneth walks over to the map of Africa I keep taped on the wall right next to the door. It's at least twenty years old, maybe older. The borders and names have changed since it was made, but maps, like pictures and journals, have a built-in nostalgic quality that can never render them completely obsolete. The countries are all color-coded, and Africa's hanging dour head looks like a woman's head wrapped in a shawl. Kenneth rubs his hand silently over the continent, working his way west to east and then south until his index finger tickles the tip of South Africa. When he's finished tracing his hand over the map, he turns around and points at me.

"Gabon." He says it as if it were a crime I was guilty of.

"What about it?" I tell him, "I hear it's a fine country. Good people. Never been there myself, though."

He turns back to the map and whispers, "Fuck you."

"Come on. I thought you were an engineer," Joseph taunts him. "Whatever happened to precision?" He stands up and puts his large fat arm over Kenneth's narrow shoulders. With his other hand he draws a circle around the center of Africa. He finds his spot and taps it twice.

"Central African Republic," he says. "When was it?"

He scratches his chin thoughtfully, like the intellectual he always thought he was going to become, and has never stopped wanting to be.

"Nineteen sixty-four? No. Nineteen sixty-five."

"Nineteen sixty-six," I tell him.

"Close."

"But not close enough."

So far we've named more than thirty different coups in Africa. It's become a game with us. Name a dictator and then guess the year and country. We've been playing the game for over a year now. We've expanded our playing field to include failed coups, rebellions, minor insurrections, guerrilla leaders, and the acronyms of as many rebel groups as we can find—the SPLA, TPLF, LRA, UNITA—anyone who has picked up a gun in the name of revolution. No matter how many we name, there are always more, the names, dates, and years multiplying as fast as we can memorize them so that at times we wonder, half-jokingly, if perhaps we ourselves aren't somewhat responsible.

"When we stop having coups, we can stop playing," Joseph said once. It was the third or fourth time we had played, and we were guessing how long we could keep it up.

"I should have known that," Kenneth says. "Bukassa has always been one of my favorites."

We all have favorites. Bukassa. Amin. Mobutu. We love the ones known for their absurd declarations and comical performances, the dictators who marry forty women and have twice as many children, who sit on golden thrones shaped like eagles, declare themselves minor gods, and are surrounded by rumors of incest, cannibalism, sorcery, and magic.

"He was an emperor," Joseph says. "Just like your Haile Selassie, Stephanos."

"He didn't last as long, though," I remind him.

"That's because no one gave him a chance. Poor Bukassa. Emperor Bukassa. Minister of Defense, Education, Sports, Health, War, Housing, Land, Wildlife, Foreign Affairs, His Royal Majesty, King of the Sovereign World, and Not Quite But Almost the Lion of Judah Bukassa."

"He was a cannibal, wasn't he?" Kenneth asks Joseph.

"According to the French, yes. But who can believe the French? Just look at Sierra Leone, Senegal. Liars, all of them."

"The French or the Africans?"

"What difference does it make?"

We spend the next two hours alternating between shots and slowly sipped glasses of Kenneth's scotch. Inevitably, predictably, our conversations find their way home.

"Our memories," Joseph says, "are like a river cut off from the ocean. With time they will slowly dry out in the sun, and so we drink and drink and drink and we can never have our fill."

"Why do you always talk like that?" Kenneth demands.

"Because it is true. And that is the only way to describe it. If you have something different to say, then say it."

Kenneth leans his chair back against the wall. He's drunk and on the verge of falling.

"I will say it," he says.

He pours the last few drops of scotch into his cup and sticks his tongue out to catch them.

"I can't remember where the scar on my father's face is. Sometimes I think it is here, on the left side of his face, just underneath his eye. But then I say to myself, that's only because you were facing him, and so really, it was on the right side. But then