

"A powerful and timely story"

ISHMAEL BEAH #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Long Way Gone*

THE BITE *of* the MANGO

Mariatu Kamara with Susan McClelland



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The Bite of the Mango

by Mariatu Kamara with Susan McClelland



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FOREWORD

In my culture, every story is told with the purpose of either imparting knowledge, repairing a broken bond, or transforming the listener and the teller. Mariatu's story embodies all of these elements. I have been waiting for such a story, one that reminds us all of the strength and resilience of the human spirit.

The Bite of the Mango is a rare account, written in a chillingly honest voice, of how a 12-year-old girl became a victim of one of the most brutal wars of the 20th century. It is the story of how this girl survived to start life over again, after being robbed not only of her childhood but of her hands. She has had to learn to live without them. What does it feel like to be unable to wipe away your own tears of deep sadness, to stand without hands to push you up? Mariatu tells us about these experiences and many more in her narrative of lost innocence, betrayal, and recovery during an arduous and bloodcurdling time. She describes the humility, culture, and interaction of a closely knit village community in Sierra Leone, and explores how war fueled our country's disintegration into a society filled with suspicion and distrust as neighbor turned against neighbor, child against child, and child against parent.

This powerful and timely story is told in simple language that captures both the innocence of the teller and her desperation to create a deepening awareness about the suffering of children caught up in the madness of war. “It is difficult to start talking about what happened during the war, but once you start, you have to go on,” Mariatu told me when we met in April 2007. I believe that she exemplifies this same strategy in every aspect of her life.

The light and joy in Mariatu’s face don’t show you that she is someone whose heart once said goodbye to everything she knew. Meeting this remarkable young woman changes one’s idea of what it means to be a victim of war. The media often focus on the trauma people suffer, forgetting to tell us about their ability to recover and the humanity that remains intact. Mariatu’s story gives that necessary human context to what it means to be both a victim and a survivor, to transform your life and continue to live with vigor.

I am deeply thankful that the world will be able to meet Mariatu through this book.

Ishmael Beah

New York, June 2008





CHAPTER 1

My name is Mariatu, and this is my story. It begins the year I was 11, living with my aunt and uncle and cousins in a small village in Sierra Leone.

I'd lived with my father's sister Marie and her husband, Alie, since I was a baby. I called them Ya for *mother* and Pa for *father*, as terms of endearment. It was common in my country for children in the rural areas to be raised by people other than their birth parents.

Our village of Magborou was small, like most villages in Sierra Leone, with about 200 people living there. There were eight houses in the village, made out of clay, with wood and tin roofs. Several families lived in each house. The adults slept in the smaller rooms, and we kids usually slept together in the living room, which we called the parlor. Everyone chipped in and helped each other out. The women would all cook together. The men would fix the roofs of the houses together. And we kids played together.

None of the kids in my village went to school. My family, like everyone else in Magborou, was very poor. "We need you to help us with the chores on the farm," Marie explained.

Occasionally children from wealthier families and villages would pass through Magborou on their way to and from school. Some of these children went to boarding schools in Sierra Leone's capital city, Freetown. I felt sad when I saw them. I wished I could see for myself what a big city looked like.

Starting from the time I was about seven, and strong enough to carry plastic jugs of water or straw baskets full of corn on my head, I spent my mornings planting and harvesting food on our farm outside Magborou. No one owned land in the villages; we all shared the farm. Every four years or so we rotated the crops of cassava—which is like a potato—peanuts, rice, peppers, and sweet potatoes.

Even though not everybody who lived in Marie and Alie's house was related by blood, we thought of each other as family, calling one another uncle, aunt, and cousin. Mohamed and Ibrahim, two of my cousins, were already living in the village when I arrived as a baby.

Mohamed was about 17—I wasn't entirely sure, since people in the village didn't celebrate birthdays or keep track of how old they were. Mohamed was chubby, with a soft face and warm eyes. He was always trying to make people laugh, even at funerals. Everybody would stay home and mourn when someone in the village died, usually for three days. We didn't work during that time. We sat around, and the adults would cry. But Mohamed would walk in and start making light of everyone's tears.

"If the dead hear you making such a scene," he would say, "they'll come marching back here as ghosts and take over your bodies."

People would look shocked, and Mohamed would then speak more gently. “Really,” he would say, “the dead died because it was their time. They wouldn’t want you spending your remaining days here on earth crying about them.”

Mohamed was a good person. When food was scarce, he’d give his portion to me or the other younger kids, saying, “You eat up, because you’re little and need to grow.”

Ibrahim couldn’t have been more different. He was about a year older than Mohamed, tall and thin. Ibrahim was bossy. When we worked at the farm, he was always telling me and the other smaller kids what to do. If we didn’t obey him, he’d kick a shovel or pail or just storm off.

Ibrahim had these episodes in which his body would convulse, his eyes would get glossy, and his mouth would froth. Much later, when I moved to North America, I discovered that the disease he had is called epilepsy.

Magborou was a lively place, with goats and chickens running about and underfoot. In the afternoons I played hide-and-seek with my cousins and friends, including another girl named Mariatu. Mariatu and I were close from the moment we met. We thought having the same name was so funny, and we laughed about lots of other things too. The very first year we were old enough to farm, Mariatu and I pleaded with our families to let us plant our crops beside each other, so that we wouldn’t be separated. We spent our nights dancing to the sound of drums and to people singing. At least once a week, the entire village met to watch as people put on performances. When it was my turn to participate, I’d play the devil, dressed up in a fancy red and black costume. After I

danced for a while, I'd chase people around and try to scare them, just like the devil does.

I didn't see my parents often, but when I was 10 I went to visit them in Yonkro, the village where they lived. One evening after dinner, as we sat out under the open sky, my dad told me about my life before I went to live with his older sister. The stars and the moon were shining. I could hear the crickets rubbing their long legs together in the bushes, and the aroma of our dinner of hot peppers, rice, and chicken lingered in the air.

"The day you were born was a lucky day," my dad said, sucking on a long pipe filled with tobacco. "You were born in a hospital," he continued, which I knew was very unusual in our village. "Your mother smoked cigarettes, lots of cigarettes, and just before you were about to come out, she got cramps and began to bleed. If you hadn't been in the hospital, where the nurses gave you some medicine to fix your eyes, you would have been blind."

I shivered for a moment, thinking of what life would have been like then.

It was rainy and cold on the day I was born, my dad then told me. "That's a lucky sign," he laughed. "It's good to be married or have a baby on a rainy day."

For a living, my dad hunted for bush meat, which he sold at the market in a nearby town alongside the villagers' harvests. It seemed he wasn't a very good hunter, though, because I knew from Marie that he didn't make much money at it. I knew, too, that he was always getting into trouble, going in and out of jail. The jail was a cage with wooden bars, set in the middle of the village so everyone could peer in at the criminal.

In Sierra Leone, girls spend most of their time with women and other girls, not with their fathers, grandfathers, or uncles. It was nice to be talking with my dad in this way, and I listened carefully as he explained how I had come to be living with Marie and Alie.

My dad had married two women, as many men do in Sierra Leone. Sampa was the older wife; Aminatu, my mother, was the younger one. Before I was born, Sampa had given birth to two boys. Both of them died within a year of coming into the world. When Sampa was pregnant a third time, my dad asked Marie if she would take the child. That way, he hoped the child would live. Santigie, my half-brother, was born three years before me.

Soon after Santigie went to live with Marie, my mom became pregnant with my older sister. Sampa didn't like that. She was a jealous woman who wanted all of my father's attention. So when my sister was born, Sampa sweetly asked my dad to bring Santigie back to live with them.

Marie was my dad's favorite sister. At first, he told me, he didn't want to bring Santigie home, because he knew it would upset her. But eventually he did, as Sampa's sweetness turned sour. She fought with my dad until Santigie moved back in with them. Marie was very sad about it.

Wanting to make both Marie and my dad happy, my mom told Marie that she could raise the child she was expecting. "I don't know whether this child will be a boy or a girl," my mother told her. "But I promise that you can keep the child forever and ever and call him or her your own."

I went to live with Marie as soon as I had been weaned from my mother's milk. For some reason that even my dad for-

got, Sampa sent Santigie back to Marie when I was about three. My half-brother and I became very close. We slept side by side on straw mats, ate from the same big plate of food, and washed each other's backs in the river. When we were older, we teased each other endlessly. But three years later, Sampa decided she wanted Santigie back again. He didn't want to go, and I didn't want him to leave either. But Marie and I had to take him back to his mother.

By then, Sampa and my mom were so jealous of each other that they'd have big fights. It was hard to understand what they were arguing about, since they spoke so fast and so loud, but they'd pull each other's hair and spit and kick. When this happened in the house, Santigie and I crept so far back that our spines were flush against the wall. Our eyes would be wide open, staring, and we'd cover our mouths with our hands to stop ourselves from laughing out loud. Two grown women fighting, with their eyes flashing, their bosoms flying, and their dresses pulled up to their waists, was a funny sight. When I saw how Sampa and my mom fought, I was happy that Marie was raising me. I only wished she could raise Santigie too.

A few months after Marie and I returned to Magborou, someone sent word that Santigie was sick. His belly stuck out like a pregnant woman's, we heard. He was so weak he couldn't even get out of bed. The medicine woman gave him all sorts of remedies, but nothing helped. And this time, my dad told me, he didn't have enough money for the hospital. Santigie died at home in the middle of the night.

A strange thing happened to me after Santigie's death. As I was walking one day, I thought I could hear his voice calling

me. I turned to look, but there was no one there. This happened several times over the next year. I often wondered in the times that were to come if Santigie was a spirit watching over me.

The evening my dad told me about my early childhood, he stopped talking as some of the village children began to sing and drum in the center of town. This was the evening the townsfolk of Yonkro met to sing and dance, share stories, and gossip, just like we did every week in Magborou.

“Thank you,” I whispered to my father.

He nodded his head in response, stood up, and went back into the hut to join the others.

Adamsay was Marie’s youngest daughter. She had gone to live with my grandmother when she was very small, and she came back to stay with us when I was about seven and Adamsay was 10. That’s when I began to understand a little bit of why my mother and Sampa were so jealous of each other. I got angry when Marie gave Adamsay new clothes or extra food to eat. I would yell at Marie: “She’s your own child and you like her better.”

My aunt would say: “That’s not true!” If I continued to complain, Marie would lose her patience and pull out a tamalangba, or what we called a whipping stick, made from a long, thick weed that grows everywhere. “Don’t say such things,” she would admonish me, slapping my behind with it. “It’s not true.”

Despite my jealousy, I liked having a sister. And Adamsay was nice even when I was mean to her. She’d give me extra

food sometimes, and she helped me sew up my skirts when I ripped them playing.

The same year I went to visit my parents, I learned that a friend of Alie's wanted to marry me. The man's name was Salieu. He didn't live in our village, but he had relatives who did, so he visited often. One day he walked right up to me while I was playing a game with some other kids. He stood so close I could feel his hot breath on my cheek. "When you grow up, I will be your husband," he announced.

I was scared. When Salieu pulled away, I ran and found Adamsay. "What does this old man want with me?" I asked her.

"Maybe he wants to kiss you," she said, laughing.

"Ugh, how awful."

Adamsay joked around, saying things could be worse. "You could be married off to Abou."

We giggled, thinking of the old widower in Magborou who spent his days sitting in the shade beside his hut, staring at the ground. Adamsay and I made up a game after that. We went through all the men in Magborou and matched them up with all the young girls. I paired Adamsay with the village chairman, who was like the mayor of Magborou, a tall, skinny older man who already had a big family.

A few days after he'd accosted me, Salieu and his parents came to have a chat with Marie and Alie. Adamsay and I were ordered outside to play, even though it was late and we had to get up early to work on the farm the next day. We crouched underneath the window and craned our necks to hear. But we couldn't, because everyone inside was speaking softly.

The next morning, Marie pulled me aside while we were

planting sweet potato and said Salieu wanted me to be his second wife. The marriage would be in a few years, she said matter-of-factly.

“I don’t want to marry Salieu,” I told Marie.

“But he’s my husband’s friend, Mariatu,” she said, stopping her planting to look at me sternly. “If you don’t find anyone else, you will marry him.”

Before long, I discovered I *did* have feelings for someone else. Musa was a sweet boy, just a year or two older than me, who lived in a nearby village. From the time we were little, he and I would see each other during planting, since his family shared our farm. He would also come to our village with his family at night to sing and dance.

One afternoon, Musa and I stopped our digging, sat down beside each other, and talked. We gossiped about the other kids. Then we went swimming in the river and splashed each other. Afterwards, we sat alongside the river, dangling our toes in the cool water. This soon became our routine: we’d stop our work early, talk, then swim, and then talk some more. I liked being around Musa. My entire body felt warm.

One day Musa took my hand and said that when we were older, we would get married and have children together.

Afterwards, I told Marie. “Musa’s father is a rich man,” she snapped. “He’s not going to let his son marry a poor girl.”

My stomach churned. I held my words inside, for in Sierra Leone children are taught never to disobey their elders. But when I went to sleep that night, I cried. I hid my face as well as I could so Adamsay wouldn’t see my tears.

I saw Musa the next day at the farm, and I smiled when he

looked at me. “When his father sees how happy we both are, then he’ll say yes to our marriage,” I told myself. I remembered what my dad had said about me being lucky. “Maybe this will be another time when I am lucky,” I thought.

But then the rebels invaded our lives, and everything changed.

It all started during the dry season when I was 11. War had come to Sierra Leone, and our chairman heard that the violent rebels who were destroying villages and killing people in eastern Sierra Leone were headed toward Magborou. The rebels wanted to overthrow the government, which they accused of being corrupt and not helping the people. The rebels were from different tribes across Sierra Leone, including Temne, like us, and I couldn’t understand why they wanted to kill poor people or take over our villages, eat all our food and sleep in our houses. But apparently they did.

Whenever we heard a rumor that the rebels were close, the chairman would order all of the villagers in Magborou to flee into the bush. The first time it happened, we abandoned our homes and took nothing with us, hiding in the bush for several days as we listened to our stomachs moan in hunger. After we’d returned safely to the village, Marie and Alie came up with a plan. They filled empty rice bags with dried vegetables and cassava. We all stuffed a change of clothes and some bedding into the bags too. From then on, whenever the chairman said the rebels were on their way again, we would grab our bags and walk into the bush in single file, following Alie.

After a while, the hiding began to seem normal. We would

spread our straw mats in a forest clearing and stay there, sometimes for as long as a month. I wasn't really scared at first. We kids continued with the games we always played back in the village. We'd sing and call out to each other. Around the fire at night, we would tell stories or share what we had heard about the war. We would lie on our backs and stare up at the moon and stars. I remembered, though, that long ago my father had told me never to count the stars. "If you do, and you land on the star that is you, you will die," he said. I wasn't quite sure what he meant, but I knew I didn't want to die!

As the rumors about the rebels grew more frequent, we had to keep quieter during our time in the bush. We stopped cooking our food so the rebels wouldn't see the smoke from our fires, and sometimes all we ate for an entire day was raw cassava, which is very hard and dry and bland. Everybody talked in whispers. Chills ran through me whenever I'd hear a noise, such as a twig breaking in the bush behind the clearing. A few times I overheard the adults talking. They were saying that the rebels didn't just kill people, they tortured them. I didn't talk a lot in the forest after that. When we were in hiding, Ibrahim would often stay right beside me, making sure I was safe. During these times, I didn't mind him being bossy.

When reports of the rebels came during the dry season of the next year, the chairman decided we should all go to another village, Manarma.

"There are lots of people in Manarma," he told us when we had gathered to listen to his instructions. "We will be safer there than here or in the forest."

The day my family left for Manarma seemed to be no

different from any other time we had fled the village. We would go back to our regular lives as soon as the chairman said it was safe to return.

But this time, things would not work out that way.