

THE MAN WHO SCREAMS AT NIGHTFALL by Rush Leaming

EXCERPT

From “The Man Who Screams at Nightfall”

...I could see the glow of a fire up ahead of us, and as we reached the mango tree, Pumbu motioned for me to stay low and follow him along a small wall of honeysuckle bushes. We crouched down, and from our hiding place, I saw Kachamba furiously pacing back and forth in his yard in front of a small bonfire. He swung his arms wildly in the air as if he was fighting off something that was falling on him. He dropped to his knees and then suddenly sprang three feet off the ground. Then he began to dance, swaying and spinning his body so close to the fire that I was certain he was going to fall in. All the while he screamed and shouted deep into the empty black night.

He spoke in a dialect that I couldn't understand, so I had to ask Pumbu to tell me what he was saying. I asked him many questions: Why was he doing this? Who was he speaking to? Was he drunk? What was going on? Pumbu patiently explained to me that no, he was not drunk, and that he really didn't know who he was speaking to, but that Kachamba's wife had left him a few years ago, run off with another man and taken their children, and that ever since, he had not been right in the head. He was not from this village and had been kicked out of all the other places he had lived. He came here only because Kachamba's father, the chief of Kitengo's uncle, had once saved the life of the chief's father (Kachamba's uncle) and so the chief had to let him stay to repay that old favor. It was all very complicated, Pumbu said, and he didn't fully understand it himself.

I was hardly listening, instead transfixed and horrified by what I saw. Spinning, swirling, shouting, and screaming—Kachamba's face, so calm and happy as I had seen it earlier that day, was now knotted and twisted like a grotesque carnival mask, like some gargoyle sprung from the lowest depths of hell. The glow of the fire cut fierce shadows and gorges in his face, adding to the haunting vision that I saw.

For a long while, Pumbu and I hid behind the honeysuckle bushes and watched Kachamba shriek and wail and try to push back the night, until suddenly, all at once, he just stopped. Suddenly, he just

stood still and quiet and stared at the sky. I followed his gaze and saw another shooting star. When I looked back, Kachamba had disappeared.

“Is that it?” I asked.

“That’s it,” said Pumbu. “He usually only does this for an hour or so.”

“And he does this every night?”

“Almost,” said Pumbu and yawned. “Mmm. I’m tired. I think I am going to go home.”

We left the bushes, went past the mango tree, and said good night. I walked home alone, both exhilarated and troubled by what I had seen.

I entered my room and prepared for bed, but long after I had extinguished my petrol lantern, I lay there staring into the darkness. I couldn’t sleep. I tossed and turned. It wasn’t that unusual—I noticed that it had been happening a lot lately, that I couldn’t sleep. I got up and found the bottle of Johnnie Walker and knocked back a tall glass until at last I was floating, and at last, my eyes did shut...