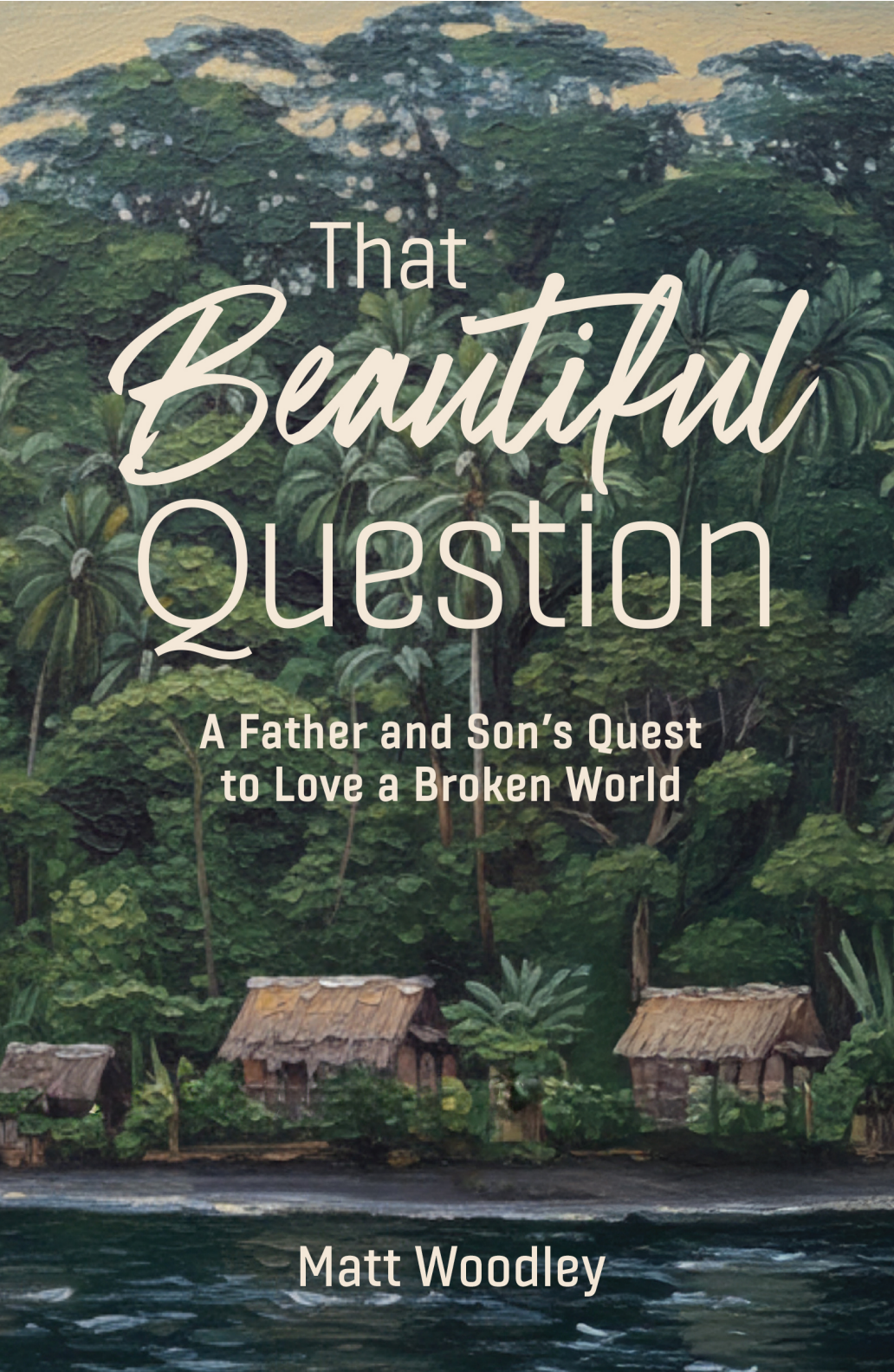

That
Beautiful
Question
A Father and Son's Quest
to Love a Broken World
Matt Woodley

That Beautiful Question: A Father and Son's Quest to Love a Broken World

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Land of the Unexpected

To love at all is to be vulnerable.
Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken.
—C. S. Lewis

While waiting in a Port Moresby (PNG's capital) airport terminal, I watched a loud, smiling PNG man in an upscale navy blue sport coat yell, "Hey tourists, get ready to be surprised while you're here." He paused for an imaginary drumroll before adding, "Because—ha ha—this is *the Land of the Unexpected!*"

Land of the Unexpected. Tourist travel sites tout Papua New Guinea with that phrase. Every time I visit PNG, I'm struck by something unexpected. On this trip I met Steven and Ruth, two sweet, huge-hearted pastors who drove the fear of God into a gang of gun-wielding thugs.

Matt drove me to Pastors Steven and Ruth's home, the Ngambe Orphanage, eight miles from Kudjip, where this husband-and-wife team cares for sixty children and one fluffy white puppy with a long pink tongue. Pastor Ruth, a stout,

hobbit-like woman with short, wiry hair, walked us around the orphanage grounds. Dented, dull gold bullet shells littered the dirt by our feet. Talking softly and calmly, Ruth told us that a few months ago this place became a war zone. Ruth and Steven had nearly been murdered. *Raskols* (the Tok Pisin word for thugs, PNG's primary language) threatened to burn their home and school buildings to the ground. But as she relayed this harrowing story, she interrupted herself and asked Matt, "Oh, by the way, can you help us expand that building over there? Can you provide some more money for a new building up that hill?"

She's Ngambe's gentle mama; at least one child always walks beside her, holding her hand or clinging to her navy blue skirt, but this mama will shake you down for her kids' welfare.

So how does an orphanage become a war zone? PNG's five-year election cycle almost always erupts with violence and corruption. *The Economist* described the 2022 PNG elections as "its worst ever . . . with more violence, more corruption, more fraud . . . even by the standards of a country known for dismal polls."[1] The postelection chaos becomes personal for many rural villagers like Steven and Ruth.

Prior to the elections, Candidate A visits poor villagers and, with a broad smile, says, "Here's a pig or small solar panels. Now kindly vote for me." A few days later, Candidate A's cronies arrive with a threat: "If you don't vote for our man, we'll reclaim his gifts and burn down your house." Then Candidate B's followers offer the same bribe-threat deal. Postelection, the losing man's party fulfills their threat. Matt knows families who pack up and move every five years.

1 "Papua New Guinea Conducts Its Worst Election Ever," *The Economist*, August 11, 2022, https://www.economist.com/asia/2022/08/11/papua-new-guinea-conducts-its-worst-election-ever.

The *raskols* came to Steven and Ruth's village for the usual payback. Pastor Ruth pointed to a large flat stretch of short grass about the size of two American football fields. Waving her arm back and forth, she told us, "Fifteen of our neighbors' houses used to stand in that field." We couldn't see any trace of a house—just burn marks on some trees and a few piles of burnt wood chunks. The flames had even consumed the tin roofs. "No one died," she said softly, "but they burned all those homes. Then they invaded our property, shooting their guns and shouting, 'Now we will burn these orphanage buildings to the ground.'"

But Steven and Ruth told them, "No, you will not burn these houses down."

The men laughed. "And why not?"

"These are our children and your children. You cannot destroy these buildings." Pointing his finger and gazing upward, Steven said, "God will judge you! Do you want that?" Then Steven and Ruth knelt in the red dirt and prayed. The men walked away and never returned.

Later that day, I kept thinking about the fluffy white puppy the kids kept passing around as it wagged its tail and lolled its tongue. I told Matt, "Steven and Ruth don't have enough space or even enough food. They can't sweep away all the mud. But the kids smile and laugh a lot, and they keep showering that puppy with affection. I see why you love this place."

PNG is a microcosm of so many places—a jarring collision of profound brokenness with stunning beauty, brutal violence juxtaposed with human tenderness, intense suffering mingled with sacrificial love. But over the years, I've also noticed that these extreme opposites aren't just "over there"; they're also growing in my community.

Initially, most visitors are stunned by PNG's unexpected natural beauty. Go outdoors, raise your head, open your eyes, and splendor will greet you. The layers of the Kumba Mountains roll in like three massive green waves cresting and preparing to crash on the valley below. Small, neatly layered coffee farms dot the foothills. Banana "trees" (they're the world's largest herbs, not trees) with huge bunches of green bananas sprout up along dirt foot trails. The daily high temperatures can run for weeks in the mid-seventies, with sunshine and low humidity.

Scientists are constantly finding new animal species—birds with poisonous feathers, brightly colored rainbow fish, and the Crater Mountain treehole frog (*Litoria naispela*) that camouflages itself to look like bird poo. Yep, a frog draped in a bird poop suit—and you'll only find it in . . . cue that drumroll . . . *the Land of the Unexpected*!

On my first visit, Matt, Tammy, my two grandkids, and I sat on a rough-cut, twenty-foot-high wood platform at Kumul Lodge, an ecotourism site nestled at 8,600 feet in the mountains. We stared at a lower bird stage scattered with freshly chopped pineapples, guava, mangoes, and oranges, waiting for at least one fleeting sight of some of the rarest, quirkiest, shyest, most dazzling birds in the world—the forty-plus "birds of paradise." Most species are indigenous only to the island of New Guinea.

At about $8,000 per person, travel sites book tours to Kumul for the world's most serious birdwatchers. But we just hopped in a Land Rover and drove here. Living in PNG provides easy access to God's wild and alluring creation.

But there's something even more impressive and unexpected—the explosion of cultures. Papua New Guinea has more languages (between eight hundred and one thousand) than any country in the world. That represents 12 percent of all known languages on the planet. That also makes PNG one of the most heterogeneous countries in the world.

Sometimes Westerners disparage the virtues of primitive cultures. When my neighbor heard I was making another trip to PNG, he said, "Oh, man, watch your back! They eat people over there!" When I explained that cannibalism was rare and doesn't exist today, he countered, "Oh, no, man, I saw it on a TV show. Don't get eaten!"

Matt pointed me to the anthropologist Jared Diamond's book *The World Until Yesterday*, aptly subtitled *What We Can Learn from Traditional Societies*. Diamond argues that people in places like PNG forge deeper and longer social bonds than most contemporary Westerners. "Loneliness is not a problem in traditional societies," he notes. "New Guineans tend to retain for life the important relationships in which they are born. . . . In the smaller traditional societies . . . no one is a stranger."[2]

In contrast, the former surgeon general of the United States noted, "We live in the most technologically connected age in the history of civilization, yet . . . [as a doctor] the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness."[3] He's detected a "loneliness epidemic."

Diamond includes observations by children of American businesspeople or missionaries who grew up in PNG and similar places. One former PNG child said, "In New Guinea I was able to grow up, play creatively, and explore the outdoors and nature freely . . . that is absent from the average risk-averse American childhood."[4] On Kudjip's grounds, I constantly watched mobs of kids without adult supervision happily playing soccer or basketball, pushing homemade toy trucks, or just sitting on the grass and talking until sunset.

2 Diamond, *World Until Yesterday*, 457.

3 Vivek Murthy, "Work and Loneliness Epidemic," *Harvard Business Review*, June 27, 2017, https://hbr.org/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic.

4 Diamond, *World Until Yesterday*, 458–60.

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