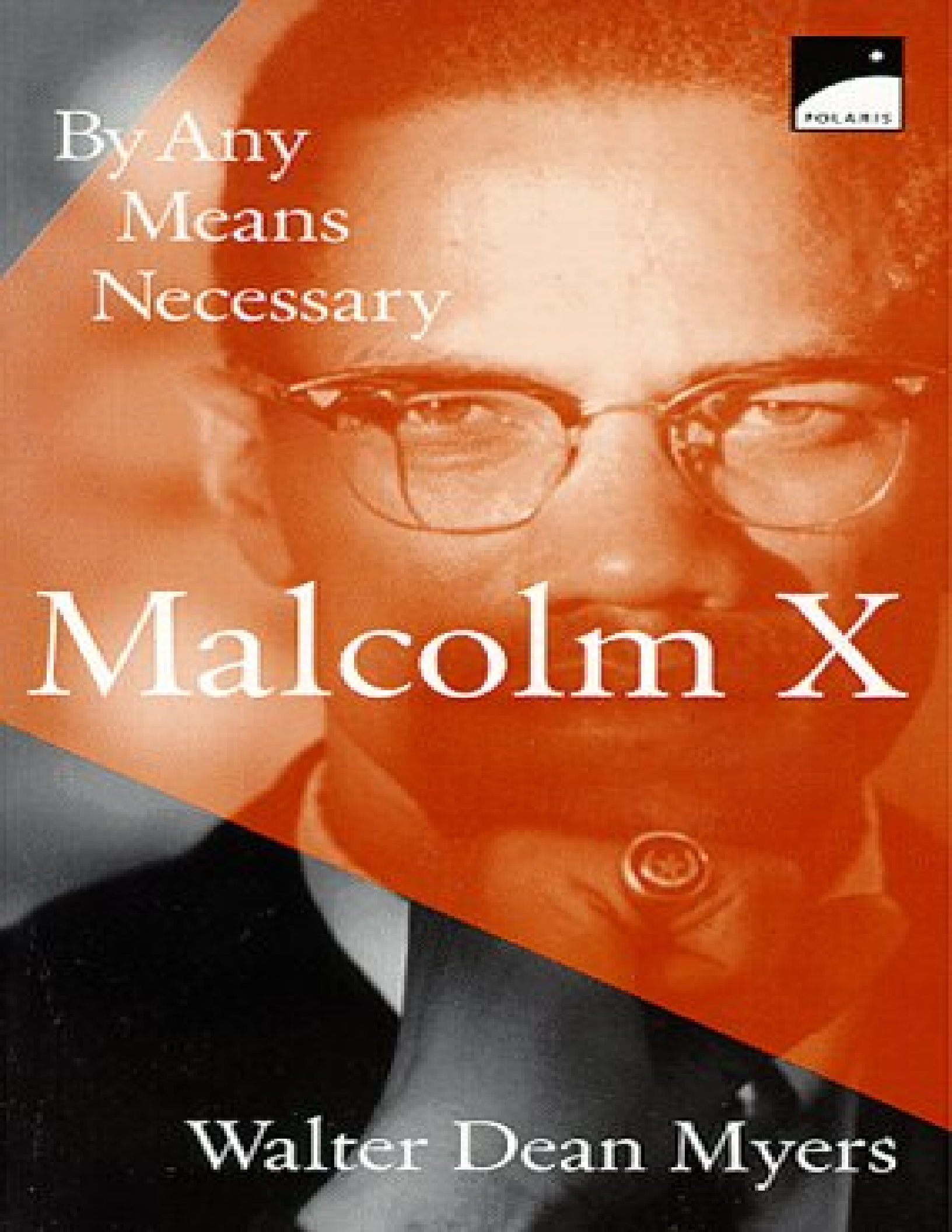
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Praise for *By Any Means Necessary*

“ A sober, deep, and very touching story of a young girl who lived through the horrors of genocide and finally came out courageously. ... It ’ s a book of resilience.”

—Josias Semujanga, author of *Narrating Itsembabwoko*

“ This personal and intimate narrative is a remarkable testament to love of family, survival, perseverance, forgiveness, service, hope, and faith. An important story that must be told and never forgotten.”

—James A. Huguenard, Attorney at Law

“ Makes you think about the events of the Rwandan genocide through the eyes of a person who lived it. This book will inspire any survivor of a tragedy to overcome pain and suffering.”

—Dr. Sharla Jones, Professor and Vice President of Million Lives Genocide Relief Fund

By Any Means Necessary

Healing and Forgiveness after Genocide

Henriette Mutegwaraba

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for

my family

I thought revisiting your memories would make me sad. Instead, writing this book made me so happy. I feel connected to you again. Thank you.

Introduction

The morning I learned my entire family would be killed, I was the only witness to the pronouncement. It went out over broadcast radio around four a.m. Uncle Jeff (who was actually my father ’ s first cousin, though I called him uncle), his mother, and his nieces and nephews were all still asleep upstairs. At first, I questioned my own ears. Surely I ’ d misunderstood! But then the “ breaking news” story played again: Juvénal Habyarimana, Hutu president of Rwanda, had been murdered, his plane shot down by unidentified parties. Assuming that Tutsi rebels were responsible, all Hutus were being called to kill all Tutsis on sight by any means necessary—gun (if available), machete (the most ubiquitous and hated symbol of the massacre), or hand when nothing else would do. My family, of course, were Tutsis. They lived in Mugusa, Rwanda, in the southern heart of the country, which was then at the center of the violence.

Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, I wasn ’ t living at home at the time. Twenty-two years old, I ’ d recently moved out to attend school in Kigali. As intertribal tensions between Hutus and Tutsis (the legacy of colonization; more on that in a minute) had worsened, I ’ d grasped my opportunity to flee to neighboring Burundi, where Uncle Jeff,

himself a refugee, had kindly offered to take me in. Since crossing the border, I ’ d had no way of communicating with my parents or five younger siblings. My only source of news was Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, or RTLM, the state-sponsored station that is today largely credited with inciting the Rwandan genocide. Hutu extremists used the outlet to spew anti-Tutsi hate propaganda. When I heard the announcer yell, “ Hutus, get up, grab your weapons! Go to every Tutsi ’ s house, hunt them, and kill them,” my heart sank into my stomach. I knew it was a death sentence for my father, my mother, my surviving grandparents, and my brothers and sisters, most of whom I ’ d never gotten a chance to say goodbye to.

Feeling as though I would die—of horror, grief, and guilt at getting out—I ran to wake up Uncle Jeff. As far as I knew, he would soon be the only family I had left.

History of Hutu-Tutsi Relations

Like many other countries in Africa, Rwanda was not exempt from colonization. The first Europeans arrived in 1895, and when they did, they found three tribes—the Hutu, the Tutsi, and the Twa people—living in relative harmony under a Tutsi king. All three spoke the same language and shared many cultural customs. While there were some physical differences between the tribes, the real division was a socioeconomic one. Tutsis were cattle herders, and insofar as having a lot of cows meant having a lot of wealth, the majority of Tutsis were in the upper class. Hutus were typically farmers; however, any Hutu who had the opportunity to raise cows would automatically upgrade his status and become a Tutsi. The same applied to a Tutsi who lost his cows; he would automatically become a Hutu.

Once Germany assumed colonial rule over Rwanda, they imposed a misguided social caste system in accordance with Hamitic Theory, which postulated that Tutsis, having generally thinner bodies, sharper noses, and lighter skin, were more akin to Europeans. As such, they were the “ superior” race, Germany said, and should therefore reign over the Hutus once and for all. Because Tutsis and Hutus had been intermarrying for generations, however, the division between the two was muddled at best and arbitrary at worst. A dangerous strain of resentment started to seethe beneath the surface.

After World War I, Belgium took control of Rwanda. They had an opportunity to improve life for Rwanda ’ s residents, but instead the Belgians continued Germany ’ s eugenics-inspired practices. Old photographs exist that show white men measuring the heads, facial features, and limbs of Rwandan men to superficially determine their ethnicity. “ Racial science,” they called it. Each Rwandan man then received an ID card that read “ Tutsi” or “ Hutu,” and with it his fate was sealed.

Those labeled “ inferior” Hutus did not, of course, take to this system kindly. It bred a deep and lingering animosity that twenty years later would culminate in the first widespread Hutu uprising. Such movements were “ successful” to varying degrees at wiping out Tutsi authority figures and even the regular, everyday Tutsi populace—the worst two attempts occurring in 1959 and 1994, respectively.

In 1959, Rwanda was on the brink of independence (the country would officially oust Belgium in 1962) and accordingly chaotic. A Hutu catechist in the powerful Roman Catholic church had recently published what he called “ The Hutu Manifesto,” effectively the beginning of the ideology of Hutu Power. Upon its publication, the Tutsi king of Rwanda mysteriously disappeared (it was later determined that he ’ d been killed), and a Belgian colonel organized a large revolt of Hutus. They killed thousands of Tutsis and forced thousands more into exile.

Smaller, more isolated “ killing sprees” would continue throughout the rest of the twentieth century.

The period from April to June 1994, on the other hand, is what the world now refers to as the Rwandan genocide. It was touched off by the assassination of President Habyarimana (Rwanda had, subsequent to the 1959 rebellion, abolished its monarchy and become a Hutu-led republic) on April 6. Over the course of three months, more than one million Tutsis and Hutu moderates, including my immediate family, would die mercilessly at the blunt edge of a cheap, imported Chinese machete. Millions more, like me, had already run or would have no choice but to run across the border to safety. Many of us never returned.

This book tells that story. To be sure, it ’ s a horror story. It is graphic and violent and scary because the Rwandan genocide was the most graphic, violent, and scary chapter in my country ’ s history. Even though I made it out alive, I carried—still carry—scars that can ’ t always be seen. Over the years I have battled depression and feelings of helplessness; certainly hopelessness. Trauma and tragedy are intimate friends. At the same time, my story is a story of redemption. It ’ s about realizing the world will never be the same, and continuing on anyway, even when you ’ re tired; even when you ’ re stuck; even when you ’ re alone. I was all those things. I hated the God who made me the way I am! Eventually, though, I accepted that life is both a miracle and a call to action. And my vocation is to empower you, too, to make it out the other side.

One of the worst parts of the whole genocide, in my experience, was how it pitted neighbor against neighbor and family member against family member. Hutu classmates I ’ d gone to school with every day of my life, or Hutu uncles who ’ d married into my majority-Tutsi family, suddenly hated me and my family in a way that cut deeper, even, than their machetes. It has taken me more than two decades to try to piece together exactly what happened in 1994 and why—so many of us still have so many unanswered questions!—and to work toward forgiveness in my own heart, so that I can help others do the same. [1]

Seeds of Conflict

At time of writing, twenty-seven years have passed since my country tore itself apart and the rest of the world looked on sympathetically while declining to intervene. If you watch video clips of the news from back then, you will hear Bill Clinton and other governmental leaders initially refusing to acknowledge the massacre as a genocide, before later touting the all too familiar phrase “ Never again.” That phrase, meant to unite the world against genocide, came into vogue with the Jewish Holocaust, resurfaced with the Rwandan genocide, has applied to Sudan since 2003, and now I see it playing out on the streets of my new country, America, and in the city I ’ ve called home since 2008, Houston. The Black community keeps mourning the unjust law-enforcement-related deaths of one BIPOC member after another and pleading “ Never again.” Until it, indeed, happens again.

And that ’ s not all. Earlier this year, something happened that hadn ’ t since the War of 1812. The American capitol was attacked by a group of extremists who, no matter how crazy their beliefs, were nevertheless the very people that building and institution were created to serve. It was a terrible day, one that scared me like I hadn ’ t been scared since leaving Rwanda. I was standing in the break room at work and watching the TV open-mouthed as senators cowered in their suits. Seeing the United States so obviously divided took me right back to the genocide and the conditions leading up to it. On the one hand, it was nothing America hadn ’ t already seen. In 1994, you watched these scenes play out in my country from the comfort of your living rooms. What was different, though, and what I imagine shook you to your cores, is that it was happening for the first time in your country. The U.S. is supposed to be different. It ’ s supposed to be a safe place, an enlightened place, a country elevated by its commitment to democracy and held up as a model for the rest of the world. But on January 6, 2021, people died. Families lost their loved ones, and no one was thinking of the people left behind. The fervor of the moment obliterated all thought of consequences, of right and wrong, and only later—always ‘ only later’—did we say, “ Never again.”

I don ’ t claim to have the answers to all the world ’ s evils. I don ’ t know how to make sure that no one is ever murdered because of the color of their skin or the shape of their nose, their height or their faith or their personal politics. But having seen firsthand the impacts of that kind of hatred on a mass scale, I do worry sometimes that even the great United States is one gunshot away from a reckoning of the type Rwanda endured. Conflict is a seed, and seeds, however small they start off, are designed to grow. If I ’ ve learned anything, it ’ s that losing every single thing that has ever mattered to you is easier and happens more quickly than you think possible. As for me, I ’ d rather not walk through streets littered with bodies again, searching for the faces of friends and loved ones, and praying just to survive the day.

Better Tomorrow

Instead, I ’ d rather be praying for you, dear reader. In fact, I do every day. I may not be a miracle-worker, but God is, and what we ask for in good faith,

He delivers. These days I ’ m asking Him to watch over you, and to help you carry the mantle I ’ m about to assign you.

It does not matter if you are Christian or atheist; whether you are the oppressed or the oppressor; a student eager to be shaped or the teacher entrusted with doing the shaping; one person among the masses or the person leading them—you, like me, have a responsibility. You can read my story (which is really the story of every survivor everywhere) and keep it bottled up inside you … or you can share it, like I am doing now. You can turn a blind eye, pretending that systematic discrimination and injustice don ’ t affect you and your world, or you can have those difficult conversations with your parents, your partners, and your kids about the choice either to be part of the problem or part of the solution.

The one thing I know we all have in common, no matter our backgrounds, is pain. We know what it is to hurt, and also how much better it feels to heal. Let ’ s remember where we came from, including the shameful parts of our collective past, and let ’ s decide, by any means necessary, to do better tomorrow.

Henriette Mutegwaraba | April 2021

Chapter One

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

“ Tell me a story,” I begged my paternal grandmother, as I burrowed down deeper beneath the quilt on her bed. Inhaling, I smelled her crisp, white sheets, fresh and clean as Grandma Mutamba herself. A proud woman, she kept her houses (yes, multiple!) immaculate. But it was a warm, welcoming clean—the kind that asked you to settle in and stay a while. To curl up, sing songs, and of course, tell stories.

“ What story would you like to hear?” she asked in her native Kinyarwanda.

“ Tell me again how I got my name.”

Grandma Mutamba smiled. Her own name, short for Mutambarungu, meant “ one who takes away your loneliness.” In Rwanda, people typically have two names—a traditional Rwandan one, and a baptismal name, usually European. My Rwandan name, for example, is what Americans would call a last name, or surname: Mutegwaraba. My baptismal name is Henriette, pronounced the French way.

“ Once upon a time,” Grandma began, “ there was a beautiful princess named Mutegwaraba. She was the daughter of the king of Rwanda, and she was the most beautiful woman in all the land.”

I grinned. At five years old, I loved to imagine that pretty, pretty princess locked high in a tower somewhere, just waiting for Prince Charming to whisk her away.

“ She was so beautiful,” Grandma continued, “ that men were willing to compete for her hand in marriage. Mutegwaraba ’ s father, the king, decided they should fight for the right to marry her. Whichever man won could take Mutegwaraba as his wife.”

Now, I ’ m sure there ’ s more to this story, but for some reason in my family that ’ s always where it stopped. It was said that one of the men—no one knew which one—bested the other; that Mutegwaraba, my namesake, married him; and that together, they lived happily ever after.

In retrospect, this story seems like a fairytale designed to prepare young women for marriage. Indeed, it was common practice at the time, and still is in many parts of Rwanda, for girls to be paired off in early marriages arranged by their parents. My own mother was seventeen when her mother and Grandma Mutamba ’ s brother, my great uncle Senyamambara, attempted to set her up with the man who would become my father. [2] Luckily, both my mom and my dad valued education for their daughters over strategic partnerships, and I managed to escape that fate. I still carry the name Mutegwaraba, though, so who knows? Maybe one day two men will fight over me!

I spent a lot of time with Grandma Mutamba growing up, as much time as I could. Her houses, one of which was a modern three-bedroom and one of which was a traditional hut, were less than a three-minute walk away from our hut in Mugusa. Pretty much all of my father ’ s extended family lived on one large plot on a hillside, where we raised cattle and grew coffee, papaya, and avocados to sell at market. Between his five brothers and sisters and all of their kids, there was plenty of labor to work the fields and tend the gardens, see to the cooking and keep up the homes. Grandma Mutamba, being older and widowed, hired additional laborers to help her out when her children and grandchildren couldn ’ t. The related story I ’ m about to tell you now illustrates why my parents valued education so highly.

Grandma Mutamba, having been born sometime (to my best guess) in the late 1910s, was not part of those generations of Rwandan women privy to schooling. She could not read or write, and knew only the most basic math, namely simple addition. She was, nonetheless, very good with her money, which is perhaps why she did so well for herself after Grandpa Rugagi died. The way she kept track of how much to pay each of her hired hands every month went like this:

In her bedroom, next to the bed I loved to snuggle her in, Grandma Mutamba kept several lengths of rope. Each rope represented a different laborer. If a given laborer showed up to work that day, she tied a knot in his rope. At the end of the month, she counted up the number of knots per worker, and paid him his daily rate accordingly. Ingenious! To my knowledge, Grandma Mutamba was never once taken advantage of, and was known in our village for being a fair and honest employer. That said, it impressed upon my parents the need for their daughters to be able to fend for themselves, so when I was just three years old, my father started my schooling at home.

I, Henriette Mutegwaraba, am my parents ’ oldest child. There was one more before me, but they sadly lost her partway through Mom ’ s pregnancy. Five more children would follow me: Fraterne, born in 1977; Chantal, b. 1980; Claude, b. 1983, Asoumpta, b. 1986; and Cadette, b. 1989. Rwandan kids typically start attending school at age six, but again because my parents placed such importance on education, they—my father

Antoine especially—started preparing us well in advance. All six of us could read, write, and do basic math before we ever started school. As each of us came of age, we would eat lunch, take a nap, and then Dad would tutor us individually—such that I learned numbers at roughly the same time I learned to speak!

My mother Theresia taught us, too, in her own way. Even though both boys and girls had equal access to education by the 1970s, it was still expected that boys would grow up to run the family farm and girls would be wives who cooked and cleaned for their husbands. (My father was unique among Rwandan men, in that he didn ’ t mind cooking for us when Mom was busy, or just to give her a break.) For that reason, many families chose not to send their girls to school. It cost money, after all. Now that I live in the US, I realize what a crazy way of thinking that was: The world, ladies, does not revolve around your husband! Back then, though, I learned to plant flowers and harvest vegetables and cook the traditional dishes of roast meat, sweet potatoes, and beans. I also learned some more exotic recipes, as Mom had studied cooking for a year under some of Europe ’ s top chefs and was widely regarded as one of Mugusa ’ s best cooks!

If cleanliness was next to godliness, so was hospitality. By age twelve, I was expected to greet and serve drinks to any guest(s) who might stop by, whether my uncles or a visiting family friend. My mother ’ s younger brother, Uncle Vital, often dropped in with his friends; you knew they were coming by the roar of their motorcycles. We might all take a break to play cards or another game, but after delivering their beer or coffee or tea with milk as requested, it was usually back to the garden or the cleaning for me. At least I am very self-sufficient today!

When I was born, we lived in the hut my father had built before getting married to my mother. Huts in Mugusa were usually constructed from trees, stone, and cement, with neat thatched roofs. They almost always consisted of two structures: a main living quarters, with beds and a dining area, and a detached kitchen for cooking and storing food, including the grain for the animals. By the time I was a teenager, we had moved into a modern house with four bedrooms and a living room. It was still on the plot of land where my dad ’ s extended family lived together, and it still featured a separate

kitchen/pantry, as was the custom. Also, despite being “ modern,” it lacked electricity. Only the rice factory and a few public buildings downtown had electricity; the rest of us functioned by oil lamps at night.

The primary school I attended (which did have electricity, thankfully) was the only one in the village. It was a small brick building with separate classrooms for each grade. All of my cousins and eventually my siblings went to school with me, and my uncle Callixte, one of my father ’ s brothers, taught there. He taught eighth grade French. The rest of our lessons were in Kinyarwanda. I did not learn English until I immigrated to Texas in 2008.

That my uncle Callixte became an educator is significant here. You ’ ll recall that his mother, my grandma Mutamba, had no education and was a widow. This is their story.

“ Grandma, what was Grandpa like?” While Grandma Mutamba was my favorite person in the entire world, I had never met my Grandpa Rugagi. He ’ d died before I was born.

“ Well,” she said, shifting in bed beside me. When she did, her long traditional skirt rode up, revealing her beautiful and much-envied feet and long legs. “ He was a good man. Tall and handsome. Conservative and hardworking. Very tough.”

“ Do you miss him?”

Grandma Mutamba nodded sadly. “ Every day.”

“ You had six children together,” I commented, already knowing this part of their history.

“ Yes,” she smiled. “ Adela, Callixte, Gasengayire, Francois, your father Antoine, and Pascal.”

“ But Francois died,” I said, naming the uncle I ’ d never met.

“ That ’ s right.”

I thought about this as I sipped a cup of milk. “ How did he die?”

She looked at me searchingly, as though deciding whether I was old enough, at nine, for the truth. I don ’ t know what she saw there, but she answered honestly, “ He was murdered. A few years after your grandfather.”

I nearly spit my milk out. “ What?”

“ There was a war in the country,” she began. Her voice had changed, taking on the softer, quieter tenor I normally associated with Grandma. “ A lot of bad things happened. A lot of people got hurt.”

She described how “ people” (it was unclear which people) had come to Mugusa and started ransacking Tutsi homes. Tutsi men were killed on the spot, leaving Tutsi mothers and children to run through the streets, screaming for help that never came. Apparently, these killers entered Grandma Mutamba ’ s house, dragged out my grandpa, and beat him to death in front of her. They then set fire to the house, which Grandma said burned for a very long time, feeding off the oil she kept in the kitchen. Not even the cattle were spared. “ After our cows saw the throats of the neighbors ’ cows be slit, they started running, too,” she said. According to her, the animals could “ smell the hatred.”

Sometime later, the same thing happened to Uncle Francois. He was a young Catholic priest at the time.

I was shocked. How come no one had told me they ’ d been killed? Who were the people that had murdered my family? Were they still out there? And most frightening of all: Would they come back for me?

Before I could ask these questions, Grandma shushed me and said it was time for night prayer. My prayers that evening were full of doubt and fear.

As an adult, I ’ ve come to realize that outgoingness and vibrancy were probably closer to my grandmother ’ s true nature, and that the introverted despondency she projected for most of my life could have been a symptom of depression. We wouldn ’ t have known what to call it or what to look for,

but it makes a lot of sense to me now—like I now know that Grandpa Rugagi was an unwitting Tutsi victim of the 1959 Hutu uprising, and Uncle Francois, a similar casualty.

At nine, though, I barely knew the words “ Hutu” and “ Tutsi.” I didn ’ t understand the difference between them, much less that it was the difference between life and death.

So it was that a young mother and woman with few practical skills became the head of her household overnight, tasked with raising her remaining five children to adulthood. In that challenge, she was overwhelmingly successful. My uncle Callixte, of course, became a beloved teacher of French. Uncle Pascal also went on to teach French, [3] at an all-girls Catholic school in Save. My dad, who was himself just nine years old when his father and brother were killed, inherited farmland. The two girls, Adela [4] and Gasengayire, [5] eventually married and settled down.

Once her children were grown and gone, that ’ s when we grandchildren began taking turns spending nights at her house. Not only did we love her fiercely, but we didn ’ t want her to be lonely. Grandma Mutamba was my hero. Given that she was among those killed in the 1994 genocide, I ’ m more grateful than ever to have had that precious time with her. I ’ m sure I never stopped asking her questions, though to do it over, I might ask different ones.

For example, I still don ’ t know how she managed, emotionally and financially, without my grandfather. She was a hardworking lady, strong and smart, but how did she know to run the farm? Who told her it was paramount to send her kids to school? How did she even get all her kids into school, what with the Tutsi quota? [6] Did some European friends of the family perhaps help her out after the ’ 59 massacre? That would make sense, since it was ultimately a European priest and friend of the family named Masue who hid Grandma Mutamba, my father, and his siblings in his house in the next province over until the killers had moved on. Still, how did she find the will to persevere, until God could take them from nothing to everything they needed?

These are the things I wonder about, and likely always will.

One thing she told me often and in no uncertain terms is that I was her favorite granddaughter. Although she had several older and more responsible grandchildren, I was the only one (along with my mother) to whom she revealed the hiding spot where she kept her money. Following her son Antoine ’ s arranged marriage to my mother, Grandma Mutamba had legitimately grown to love my mother for the same qualities that Antoine had seen in her—her passion and heart.

In the years to come, I would have to draw on the memory of these women to make it through my own trial by fire. Grandma Mutamba ’ s inventive resourcefulness and grim determination, and my mother ’ s insistence on doing it all her way, swims in my blood as well; which is also the blood of Princess Mutegwaraba. If they didn ’ t, I surely would have perished over twenty-five years ago.

Chapter Two

WHEN YOU GROW UP, YOU ’ LL UNDERSTAND

To hear my father tell it, I was my parents ’ “ miracle baby”—the first child born after my mother ’ s previous miscarriage. That baby boy, Dad said, had “ gone to be with Jesus,” and in return, God had sent them me.

It ’ s considered a blessing in Rwanda to have a girl as your firstborn, a sign of good things to come. (I was also the first girl born into my father ’ s side of the family, period; Uncle Callixte and Auntie Hilary had welcomed five boys! [7]) For a mother, a girl is particularly welcome, because the baby will grow up to help her out around the house. In thanksgiving, on the day of my birth in 1972 my father gifted me his favorite cow. Cows are the most important animal in Rwandan culture because they ’ re directly correlated with wealth. The more cattle a person or family has, the more money they have—and in fact, cows can be exchanged like currency. For example, when a woman gets married, the groom ’ s family often gives the bride ’ s family cows in exchange for her hand. Good friends may also gift each other cows; or in this case, a father to his daughter.

“ My” cow, which I eventually named Intabangira, was treated with special care. Dad directed our cattle keeper to feed her only the best food and the cleanest water. The only milk ever to pass my lips came from Intabangira. Knowing she was mine made me feel important and loved.

The only downside to having cattle was the amount of work they demanded. We were a large family with lots of cows, and although the cattle keeper oversaw the bulk of their care, I understood from an early age that I wanted nothing to do with cattle farming myself. Instead, I leaned hard into my parents ’ emphasis on education. I would be a teacher, I decided, like Uncle Callixte. I would teach future generations about the 1959 massacre that had claimed my grandpa Rugagi, so that history would not repeat itself. I would model the kind of deep and abiding love for self and others that my parents and extended family showed to their communities.

The day after Grandma Mutamba told me about the massacre, I ran straight home to interrogate my dad. Did he remember the night that his father and brother had been killed? What else could he tell me about the people who ’ d been involved?

Although it was early in the morning yet, Dad had already left for work. So, I made myself some breakfast, got dressed for the day, then met up with my boy cousins (Uncle Callixte ’ s kids) to walk the thirty minutes to school.

There were four of us who walked to school together. That morning, preoccupied by thoughts of my murdered grandfather, I tentatively asked Ejide, the oldest cousin present, “ Did you know Grandpa was killed by bad people?”

“ Yes,” he said, sober and unsurprised. “ Hutus killed both him and Uncle Francois because they were Tutsis.”

“ What are Hutus?” I asked, trying to fish for more information.

Ejide lowered his voice and looked around, like someone dangerous might be eavesdropping. “ Hush. Don ’ t say a word about this to anyone or I will never tell you anything.”

That ’ s all I could get out of him. If Ejide or his brother knew anything more, they didn ’ t volunteer it.

After school, I decided to ask my mom. As she handed me a cup of milk, I casually said, “ Do you know who killed Grandpa Rugagi and Uncle Francois? Grandma told me they were killed by bad people.”

My mother ’ s eyes went wide. “ Shh,” she whispered. “ You are too young to know about that.”

“ But do you know?” I persisted. “ And why aren ’ t there any pictures of them in our house or Grandma ’ s house?”

She sighed. “ There was a war. Your father and I were just children then. Both of our houses got attacked, and that ’ s when they killed Grandpa Rugagi. Francois died sometime later. They ’ re in heaven now.” A good Catholic, Mom paused to make the Sign of the Cross. “ Thank God they did not kill my family, though they slaughtered our cattle.”

Wow. I didn ’ t know her house had been attacked, too!

“ They burned all the houses to the ground,” she continued. “ Any photos would have burned up inside them.”

I pictured the charred debris, the remains of Grandpa Rugagi ’ s original house, still visible next to Grandma Mutamba ’ s current hut. I also recalled one of the workers claiming he ’ d unearthed a human skull in the ground nearby.

“ Why did they do that?” I wanted to know.

“ Finish your milk,” she said, abruptly changing the subject like Grandma Mutamba had done. “ Someday when you grow up, you ’ ll understand.”

As sorry as I felt for Grandma Mutamba and her loss, I felt equally lucky that Grandma Terese, my mother ’ s mother, had escaped with her family intact. Mom, I would later learn, had been just seven years old when her

Hutu neighbors had set fire to their house, then hung around to make sure they lost everything.

It was becoming clear that no adults I knew wanted to talk about the past. Rwandans of Tutsi origin were still traumatized, two decades later, by what had happened in 1959, and they feared that if the wrong people overheard them discussing it with their kids or anyone else, there would be consequences. While I can understand that fear, it seems to me that in keeping quiet, they actually took on a greater risk: suppression of information. By which I mean, Tutsis who survived the ' 59 massacre effectively raised a generation of ignorant Tutsi kids. Because we didn ' t know what our parents and grandparents had gone through, we weren ' t altogether prepared for it to happen again. We didn ' t recognize the anti-Tutsi bias still affecting our families ' lives on a daily basis because it was never acknowledged. Our families protected us from the world, and in return they were killed for it.

When my mother finally agreed to marry my father in a ceremony arranged by their parents, it meant she had to move an hour away from her hometown of Gikonko to where my father ' s family lived in Mugusa. Both Gikonko and Mugusa were in the same southern province of Butare but were otherwise worlds apart for my mom. Dad, as I mentioned, came from a large family, nearly all of whom lived on the same land into adulthood, and his parents—Grandpa Rugagi and Grandma Mutamba—also had lots of siblings. Mom ' s family was comparatively smaller. While she herself was one of seven children born to Grandpa Dionise and Grandma Terese (including Charles, Marie Rose, Belethilida, Thaciana, Vital, and Aurelie), neither of my grandparents on that side had come from large families. Which is why Grandpa Dionise created a makeshift network of extended pseudo- " family members" for my mom, her brothers, and her sisters in the form of a village council.

Grandpa Dionise was a chief in Gikonko, meaning he had a lot of community sway. His duties as chief included overseeing the village finances and arbitrating disputes between family members or between workers and employers. He was a benevolent ruler, thoughtful and generous, and the way he established his council was by sharing with

worthy villagers everything he had. [8] One man named Muyango had no land and little money, but he was a good husband and father to his children. Grandpa Dionise invited Muyango and his family to move onto his and Grandma Terese ' s property and gave them some cows to raise. Muyango became the brother Grandpa Dionise had never had, and a would-be uncle to my mother. His children became like my mother ' s cousins. By the time I entered the picture, Muyango ' s family was introduced to me like blood family—hardly a far stretch, since the love between our families was obvious!

I enjoyed visiting my grandparents in Gikonko almost as much as I enjoyed staying overnight with Grandma Mutamba. First off, their hut smelled like heaven. Grandpa Dionise grew, harvested, dried, and roasted his own organic coffee, and the toffee-like aroma was a permanent part of his household. Second, my mother ' s side of the family was equally as warm and loving as my father ' s. Even as adults, Grandpa Dionise ' s and Grandma Terese ' s kids would pull their mattresses out into the living room and sleep on the floor together, just so we could all stay up late talking and laughing. When I was there, I never worried about going back home to my parents. My aunties and uncles (both blood-related [9] and those assumed into the family) treated me like their own kids and would " pitch a fit" whenever it was time for me to leave. They never let me leave without giving me a gift, and insisted they missed me as much as my mother and father did. I was " welcome any time," they said. Their jokes and the way they picked on each other good-naturedly stayed with me and surely informed my personal sense of humor.

Something I loved to do with my mother ' s family was attend their church in Gikonko. Like my father ' s family (and indeed most of Rwanda), they were Catholic, and after Mass there was always a social get-together. These events were usually held at someone ' s house, and attracted a diverse group of native Rwandans, European priests, missionaries, and laypeople, and German doctors from the hospital in Gikonko. Lots of young people would come, too, and I made many new friends on these trips.

In addition to attending Mass, my mother ' s family also took praying quite seriously. Night prayer was mandatory according to Grandpa Dionise. We

would gather in the living room after dinner to say the rosary and the Lord ’ s Prayer, and again before bed. The last thing Grandpa Dionise would do before our heads hit our pillows was to assign everyone their chores for the following day. Being Christian, to my grandfather, meant working as hard as you prayed. We still broke for an hour nap every afternoon, though!

He called it “ being royal”—his term for living like Christ. “ Be royal to your family, your friends, and everyone in your life,” he would say, “ even and especially when someone is not being royal to you.” For him, being royal looked like not only paying the men who worked his land but feeding them and giving them drinks as well. It looked like being a great boss and a better father, kind, organized, and fair. It required sharing whatever you had, no matter how humble your means, with those of less means; and doing so with respect, for everyone and everything is of God. “ You will never regret being royal,” he used to tell us. “ Royalty is a crown that will always bring joy to one ’ s heart.” [10]

Unfortunately, not everyone got the message. When Belgium gave power to the Hutus in 1959, Grandpa Dionise and his family lost everything. My mother remembered how their neighbors came for them with clubs and machetes, forcing them to hide in the forest for weeks. She recalled the starvation—how she and her siblings cried for milk and eggs—and the cold rain that cut through their thin clothes without end. The fear in her parents ’ eyes and the tears in her mother ’ s eyes … as a mother herself, these still haunted her. It was almost as if she knew that, although Grandpa Dionise and Grandma Terese had eventually managed to rebuild their wealth and reclaim their status (even going so far as to employ many Hutus!), these were the same people who would turn on them again in 1994.

It ’ s easy here to slip into a “ victim” mentality. To think *The deck was stacked against us from the beginning* and despair. My parents and grandparents worked too hard to change that narrative, though—to keep it from happening to us—for me to ever give up and give in. If Grandpa Dionise taught me anything, it was that someone, somewhere, always has it worse than you. And that the cure for self-pity is hard work and true forgiveness.

Once I was “ old enough to understand” in my mom ’ s eyes, and she shared with me the full story, she ended it by saying, “ I hope it never happens again.” Having lived through the nightmare of being surrounded by people you know brandishing clubs they mean to use against you, she didn ’ t think she could survive a second time. She did not. For as long as she was alive, though, she and my father and their families wrapped me in a love that made me feel invincible. They gave me my own cow but reminded me to always give to others. Even when others would take everything from me, including my family.

Chapter Three

COCKROACHES AND SNAKES

On my first day of school, I woke up with the sun, thrilled that the morning I ’ d been anticipating for six years had finally arrived. I scrambled to put on my blue cotton uniform, ran a comb through half my hair, and wolfed down my breakfast without chewing. As is my nature, I wasn ’ t nervous in the least—only excited for the next adventure. It was, after all, one I ’ d spent my whole young life preparing for, having learned my letters and numbers at the kitchen table with Dad while one after another my seven older cousins had gone off to school. Finally— *finally* —it was my turn.

Hand in hand with my mother, I skipped all the way to the schoolhouse so anxious was I to get there. Once inside, my enthusiasm could not be dimmed. I knew more than the other students, was smarter than the other students (or so my ego reasoned), and was all around exceedingly confident that nothing stood in my way. It was on that first day, while watching my teacher interact with my peers, that I realized I wanted to be a teacher, too.

Come lunchtime, two of my older boy cousins, Ejide and Gatali, were waiting for me outside my classroom. They walked me home for lunch, and then we ran back holding hands in a line. We couldn ’ t be late getting back; tardiness was punished by whacks with a long eucalyptus switch across your hamstrings (a penalty with which I would become increasingly familiar!). At any rate, being escorted by my cousins made me feel cool.

They were tall, strong boys, and popular. Everyone thought we were brothers. I didn ’ t correct them.

School came naturally to me. For the first few years I made great grades, in turn making my parents proud. Every night, my dad sat down with me to review my homework (an atypical role for a Rwandan man, as it belied “ weakness”; but then, that great man wasn ’ t above cooking and cleaning for us, either!). If there was something, perhaps a math problem, he didn ’ t know how to do, he asked Uncle Callixte, his teacher-brother, to help me. Persistence, I learned, is the key to success. So long as I tried my best, I could do anything.

From age six to age nine, that ’ s all that mattered to me: doing well at school and taking care of my siblings in between. (Since there were five years between me and the next born, Fraterne, my parents handed off to me much of the responsibility for their care, such as making sure they ate and got to bed on time. Later, at those times when my mom was gone to market, I ’ d even be entrusted with disciplining them, which made me feel particularly grown up. Mom said this experience would make raising my own kids someday that much easier.) The year I turned ten, however, everything changed. School, the ultimate safe space, became for me a dangerous place. It ’ s when I learned I was different, and not in a “ smart” way. It ’ s when those who had come for my parents and grandparents came for me.

“ Who knows how many tribes make up the Rwandan population?” Mr. Wilson, my fifth year history teacher, asked.

Several of us, myself included, raised our hands. Mr. Wilson called on a girl named Didi.

Didi stood up from her desk and recited, “ Three: the Hutu, the Tutsi, and the Twa.”

“ Very good,” Mr. Wilson said in Kinyarwanda. Didi sat down. “ And who knows how you tell the difference between them?”

No one raised their hand.

“ Let ’ s try something, then,” he said. “ I ’ d like all Tutsi students to stand up.”

My dad was Tutsi, so I am Tutsi. Tribal distinctions were traditionally passed down through the father; that much I knew. Ignorant of Mr. Wilson ’ s intentions, and of the fact that I was effectively “ outing” myself, I stood up. Only two other students in the whole classroom did the same, both of them boys. Hirwa and Kamanzi. The three of us looked at each other, suddenly self-conscious without really understanding why. I looked at my seated classmates, now staring at Hirwa, Kamanzi, and me with new interest. Surely some of them were Tutsi, too, right? But if not, what did it matter? What was the difference, really?

Mr. Wilson laid it out for us. “ As you can see, Hirwa, Kamanzi, and Henriette are taller and skinnier than everyone else in the room.” Okay. True enough, but wasn ’ t that a good thing? Being tall and fit made me a better athlete. Kids always picked me first for impromptu soccer games. I stood a little straighter, in case (despite his condescending tone) my teacher meant it as a compliment.

“ They also have longer noses,” Mr. Wilson continued, and I blushed as twenty-five pairs of eyes scrutinized the center of my face. Crap. Was there something wrong with my nose? I snuck another glance at Hirwa. Did my nose look like his?

“ But the surest sign that someone is Tutsi,” Mr. Wilson said, his voice now dripping with hatred, “ is their arrogance. All Tutsis think they are better than all Hutus.”

That ’ s not true! I wanted to blurt, though I didn ’ t dare. Mr. Wilson was our teacher—the pinnacle of knowledge and authority. We never questioned anything he or any other educator said. So, I swallowed my indignation, instead internalizing it.

“ That ’ s because Tutsis migrated to Rwanda from Ethiopia,” he reminded us—again, a true enough statement, though what followed was designed to shame Hirwa, Kamanzi, and me—“and when they did, they invaded our country. They impressed their power upon the Hutu by installing a Tutsi

king and forcing everyone to pay him taxes. They took all our money, all our land, and all our freedom.”

Mr. Wilson paused to look around the room. “ Does anyone know why we call Tutsis ‘ cockroaches ’ ?”

I pictured the creepy, quick-moving insects with their segmented brown backs. What in the world? How was I like a cockroach?

“ Because we tried to kill them in 1959,” Mr. Wilson said, “ and they ’ re still around. Like cockroaches, the Tutsi are hard to exterminate.”

At that point, I stopped breathing. I thought of Grandpa Rugagi and Uncle Francois—of the “ bad people” who had killed them and burned my parents ’ childhood houses down. Even though the “ bad people” in that situation had been Hutu, my family had never said a single word against them. Like how well-meaning white people say they “ don ’ t see color,” I had been raised not to see tribal differences. I didn ’ t hate all Hutus because of that incident. I didn ’ t even know all of my classmates were Hutu! But there was Mr. Wilson insisting that, actually, Tutsis were the “ bad people.” They needed to be wiped out. We were “ cockroaches” and “ snakes.” [11]

My discomfort leveled up to genuine fear. What was my teacher suggesting —that the class participate in a “ science experiment” to see what the inside of a Tutsi looked like? I shrank under his and my classmates ’ gaze. I despaired that Hirwa and Kamanzi were so tall and skinny, not strong enough to protect us from a mob. I wished my cousins Ejide and Gatali were there.

What I really wanted to do was run. My long Tutsi legs were swift and sure. They could carry me home before anyone else could follow—and at home, my parents would protect me. Dad wouldn ’ t be happy that I ’ d cut school, though, and Mr. Wilson would no doubt dream up some special punishment as well. Ultimately more scared of “ getting in trouble” than I was of “ getting killed,” I stood there and I took it until Mr. Wilson said we could sit down. I don ’ t think I retained anything else from our lessons that day, too busy rehearsing what I ’ d tell my family as soon as the school day ended.

Anymore, all I recall of my parents ’ reaction that night was me asking my mother, “ If God created Tutsi people, does He love us?” and her vehement reassurance that He does. Other than that, they didn ’ t seem overly surprised by my story. They knew all about Hutu-Tutsi tensions, and with the 10% quota still capping the number of Tutsi children able to attend school, figured that bias was bound to be present in my public school, too.

As for my classmates, as soon as we all left the innocence of childhood behind for the learned cruelty of the pre-teen years, they made sure to let me know I was a second-class citizen in my own country. Bullied for my physical appearance, told that I did not “ look Rwandan,” targeted as the butt of mean jokes, I grew to hate them and school both. Once my sanctuary and my ticket to a better life, school (especially by the time I entered high school), was my prison—all the worse because I voluntarily subjected myself to its torture each day. I likewise began to hate my body. I stared at myself in the mirror and willed my nose to grow wider. I slouched when I walked, trying in vain to make myself shorter. I pleaded with the God who made me the way I am to please, please change everything about me.

Mostly, I prayed that in the end it would all be worth it.

Upon finishing eight years of primary school, equivalent to eighth grade in the US, Rwandan students who wished to continue onto high school had to take and pass a standardized test. How well they did determined if, and where, they were placed. Very few students could pass the test on their own merits. Many of those who got in had rich parents who paid off the school district. Of those who did pass, comparatively fewer of them were Tutsi. Discrimination existed at all levels of government—that ’ s why we call it systematic discrimination—and Tutsi students were often rejected on the basis of tribe affiliation alone.

Nevertheless, I went into the test, at fourteen, with confidence. I knew I was well-prepared for the exam, and when it was over, I felt certain I ’ d done well. The question remained, however, whether—and to where—I would be admitted. Would the proctor take one look at my “ Tutsi” designation and fail me? Was this to be the end of my educational journey, and with it, my dreams of being a teacher who put so much more good into the world than Mr. Wilson did?

Sometime in Summer 1986, I got the bad news: I ’ d failed. Because I was normally such a good student, however, the school made me an offer: If I wanted, I could repeat the eighth grade and take the test again. I wanted to and I did—and in 1987, I passed! The government agency placed me at Remera Rukoma, a Protestant girls ’ boarding school [12] I ’ d never heard of in Karongi. Karongi was a three-hour bus ride from home, but just an hour ’ s ride from Auntie Marie and Uncle Edward in Kigali. My parents threw me a party to celebrate. Of the thirty students in my graduating class, only three had passed the test. The other two were Hutu boys, and they would be going to different schools. Soon, I would have an all-new, all-girl peer group, comprised of the best and the brightest (or in some cases, the richest) young women in Rwanda.

While I ’ d be sad to leave my family, I couldn ’ t wait for this new adventure. It was like my first day of primary school—before Mr. Wilson and the bullying—all over again. I would have skipped the whole way there if I hadn ’ t been lugging a mattress for my dorm room. I felt like my father going off to preparatory school, and Uncle Callixte when he ’ d gone to secondary school. Everything, all my hard work, was about to pay off. And I ’ d do whatever it took to make sure it did.

Remera Rukoma was my dream school. It would also very nearly be my grave.

Chapter Four

CREATED IN GOD ’ S OWN IMAGE

Since Auntie Marie and Uncle Edward were the closest relatives, geographically, to me in Karongi, I visited their house in Kigali many times while a student at Remera Rukoma. Auntie Marie and Uncle Edward were one of those (rarer at the time, but increasingly more common) couples who ’ d broken convention to intermarry. Auntie Marie, being my mother ’ s sister, was Tutsi. Uncle Edward was Hutu. [13]

While this distinction did not, to my knowledge, necessarily affect their everyday lives, it had its uses. As a highly educated and well-connected

Hutu man, Uncle Edward had some powerful friends in the Rwandan government. He ’ s the one who found out that I had actually passed the standardized test the first time, but that my spot had been given to someone else. Likely, he ’ s the only reason I was eventually able to attend high school at all. Later, his status would protect both Auntie Marie and myself from radical Hutu extremists. Before and until then, though, I appreciated having this “ home away from home” as a stopover on my way to and from Mugusa between semesters.

My parents, Auntie Marie, and Uncle Edward all saw me off on my first day. They introduced themselves to the headmaster (an older, very strict man who carried a Bible in one hand at all times), toured the campus classrooms and cafeteria with me, and checked me into my dormitory. [14] There I was assigned a simple room with four bunked beds and a window. Communal showers were located down the hall. I chose a bottom bunk in the corner, piling atop it the few possessions I ’ d brought with me: two sets of uniforms, consisting of a white shirt and khaki skirt, two activewear outfits, as I already planned to get involved with sports, new shoes, a plate and a cup for dining, and a lock for my locker.

My roommates arrived while we were unpacking. To my relief, they seemed as shy and nervous as I was about leaving Mugusa for the first extended period of time in my life. Our parents all chatted as Auntie Marie helped me to make my bed. My mom had only a few minutes to get to know my roommates and their families and used that time to make sure they would be good influences on me.

When it was time for my parents, Uncle Edward, and Auntie Marie to leave, I walked them to the school gates. “ You ’ re going to have so much fun,” Mom reassured me—or maybe she was reassuring herself. “ Just don ’ t forget to work hard.” Like I could ever forget such a thing! I knew this was to be my one shot. Still, I promised to make her proud, and I meant it. Both of us cried as we hugged goodbye. Finally, Auntie Marie pulled my mother away from me. Mom was never great at goodbyes—she cried every time someone who ’ d come to visit had to return. My father touched my shoulder, turning me toward him, and I hugged him goodbye as well. Then they were walking away, and I went to embrace my future.

In practically every way, my high school experience was a one-hundred-eighty-degree shift away from the torment of primary school. First off, Remera Rukoma was an ostensibly Christian school. Educators there were not allowed to discriminate on the basis of tribe, and the students at Remera Rukoma were, initially anyway, equally tolerant. Almost immediately, I found a peer group who saw my 6 ’ 1” height for what it was: an athletic advantage, rather than a trait worthy of ostracism. I joined the volleyball and the basketball teams and felt fulfilled. In addition, I rose to the welcome challenge of no longer being the smartest kid in the room. For the first time in my life, I had to study as hard as I played. It didn ’ t bother me, though, because I took seriously the privilege of being one of the few Tutsi girls in the country to attend secondary school. I also knew my younger siblings looked up to me and wanted to be a good role model for them.

The schedule at Remera Rukoma was grueling. We woke up at five a.m. for bathing and breakfast, followed by a short fellowship period in the chapel. Classes started at eight-thirty a.m., with a midday break for lunch. After lunch, it was our duty to help the cafeteria staff clean up and prepare the next meal—e.g., by peeling potatoes. Sports practice began as soon as classes finished for the day, and dinner was served at seven. Between dinner and lights out, there was the opportunity for a second fellowship period in the chapel. (Morning and evening prayer, it should be noted, were my absolute favorite times of day. I love gospel music, and the Remera Rukoma choir was amazing!) Tardiness to any event meant the loss of “ discipline points,” and as I had in primary school, I suffered this punishment regularly. Otherwise, the rigorous physical and academic curriculum, completed by rotating between the dorm, church, school, and the gym, left little time for distractions. I focused on what needed doing, and also as in primary school, I excelled.

One evening early in my first year of high school, I met a girl who would become my closest friend—Claudette. I was searching for a seat at one of the Year 1 tables in the cafeteria when this older girl, clearly familiar with life at Remera Rukoma, approached me. “ My name ’ s Claudette,” she said in Kinyarwanda, extending her hand. “ What ’ s your name?”

“ Henriette,” I replied, surprised she was even talking to me.

“ Where are you from?”

“ Butare province.”

Claudette ’ s eyes lit up. “ Hey, I ’ m from Butare, too. Want to join me at my table?”

Well, of course I did. It was an honor to be invited to eat with the older girls. Claudette ’ s friends all shifted their chairs to make space for me, and I slowly got to know their names and stories. As it turned out, they were fifth years, close to graduating, and all of them played on the school volleyball team. Claudette herself was the captain. It showed in the way the other girls respected her.

At one point, I overheard one girl whisper to another girl, “ She ’ s very tall.” I knew they were talking about me, and while it hurt to be whispered about, I tried not to let it bother me. My primary school wounds had hardly scabbed over yet, though, and I ’ ll admit it stung. Only later did I learn they meant it in a good way. The volleyball team needed tall players. They thought I might be a good fit!

After a dinner of roast meat and rice, Claudette walked me back to my dorm room. She said that if I ever had a question about anything—school, sports, whatever—I could go to her and she would be there for me. How special and lucky I felt to have made a friend already, one it seemed I could count on! She then invited me to volleyball practice the next day. I had never played before and wasn ’ t sure how. The idea of something so new frightened me. But then I decided the polite thing to do was say yes; and anyway, I did want to get more involved. So, I told Claudette I ’ d see her at five on Thursday.

That night, I fell asleep happy, feeling for the first time in five years like I belonged somewhere. For a few hours, I even forgot my mother ’ s goodbye tears.

Volleyball came as naturally to me as school. I showed up to my first practice with Claudette having no idea what I was getting into, and left having fallen in love. At first, I simply sat on the sidelines of the outdoor

court and watched the other girls bump, set, and spike. It didn ’ t look too hard, so soon enough I jumped in and found out it was easy. Every time I played, I got a little bit better, until eventually I made the Remera Rukoma team. We traveled to games on the back of a truck and played girls ’ teams from as far away as Bwakira and Gisovu.

Height is good for more than just volleyball. Eventually I made friends with girls on the basketball team, too, and they started inviting me to play casually with them. I didn ’ t like basketball as much as volleyball—I didn ’ t have the lung capacity for all that running and lacked the coordination besides—but I loved having friends (still a new and treasured luxury!) and played with them often. It wasn ’ t long before the school ’ s basketball coach noticed me.

“ Would you consider coming to practice?” he asked me one day. “ We could really use another center.”

“ Oh, I don ’ t think so,” I said, flattered but aware my time was already overstretched by volleyball. “ I just like playing for fun.” Really, I needed to focus on my classes. Good grades would get me a job before basketball did.

But he didn ’ t let up. “ Your height would be a real asset to the team,” the coach said.

“ No, I ’ m not any good,” I insisted.

“ Maybe not yet,” he countered. “ But it ’ s my job to train you. You just need to give me a chance. What do you say—three days a week after school?”

Grudgingly, I agreed. In those days, I just couldn ’ t say no to authority figures, even when my gut warned me otherwise!

For six months, I struggled to juggle two sports. Only one of them—volleyball—brought me joy. Plus, I thought I owed it to Claudette to focus on volleyball, since she had been the first person at Remera Rukoma to reach out to me. True to his word, however, the basketball coach had also

invested a lot of time in me. How could I tell him no now? I asked Claudette what I should do. Wisely, she suggested I tell the basketball coach how I was feeling. He said he understood but asked me to think about it for a few days before making any decisions. I never went to another basketball practice.

With more time in my schedule now, I started playing volleyball every day. For fun, the school staged monthly mock competitions between the girls on the volleyball team and the Remera Rukoma teachers, including doctors and nurses from the nearby hospital. [15] The whole student body would show up to watch these matches. I felt like a star.

Sometime in my second year, that changed. I was practicing with a few girls from the school team one evening, and one of them, an older girl I didn ’ t know very well, commented on my lanky arms and legs. “ Henriette ’ s arms look like baguettes!” she said, laughing loudly and pointing at me. She encouraged the other girls to make fun of me, too. Some of them joined in, and just like that I was ten years old and in Mr. Wilson ’ s class again. My classmates were bullying me. I was hurt and embarrassed. I wanted to run and hide for weeks, maybe years. The difference was that this time I could. No teacher was going to punish me. No parents were there to insist I go back.

Later, once again staring at myself in the mirror and hating what I saw, I made the decision to quit volleyball, too. I was tall and skinny, yes, but more than that I was ugly. I took to heart what those girls said about me and I let it *make* me ugly, both inside and out. No one, I told myself, wanted to watch such an ugly girl play volleyball. No one wanted to see those gangly arms and legs flailing all over the court. My only option, I believed, was to avoid other people entirely. If I didn ’ t subject myself to those I ’ d thought (wrongly) were my friends, I didn ’ t have to hurt. They couldn ’ t call me names. Couldn ’ t whisper “ cockroach” and snicker. Never mind that Remera Rukoma was a Christian school. These girls weren ’ t “ Christian.” Avoidance had worked for me in primary school; it would work for me again.

In between semesters, at Christmas and over the year-end break, I went home to visit my family in Mugusa. We kept in touch during the school

year by writing letters, but I was selective in what I chose to share. I didn ’ t want them to worry, of course—but also, the headmaster read every letter that came in and went out, and I was trying not to draw unnecessary attention to myself. This was a marked departure from my behavior as a child, when Mom had been my best friend and there had been no secrets between us. Thus, the day that Mom finally learned I ’ d quit the volleyball team, she stopped what she was doing to ask me why. We were standing in her kitchen making dinner, and without warning, I broke down and spilled everything to her.

“ High school is the same as primary school,” I sobbed. “ I thought it would be different, that the kids would be nice, and I could just focus on my education, but they ’ re not and I can ’ t. They make fun of me because I ’ m tall, and they call me names, and they make sure I know I don ’ t belong. I hate it there.”

Alarmed at what I ’ d said, I pulled back from my mother ’ s comforting embrace. “ I didn ’ t mean that,” I quickly corrected. “ I ’ m so thankful to be there. I ’ m grateful for everything you and Dad have done for me. It ’ s just … harder than I thought it would be,” I ended.

Mom rubbed my back sympathetically. “ Henriette Mutegwaraba,” she said in the tone she used when she was serious. “ You were created in God ’ s own image. You are beautiful—or don ’ t you believe that God makes beautiful things?”

I nodded, sad and mute.

“ You don ’ t have to worry about what other students, your teachers, or your coaches think about the way you look. To me, you look like God.”

In the past, my mom ’ s words had always made me feel better. Her support had been the fuel for the engine of my life, the diesel that kept me going, that convinced me I could fly. Even when I was flying in bad weather, I never doubted that I would land with her as my pilot. After all, she ’ d been through worse, hadn ’ t she? Survived not just discrimination, but a Tutsi massacre? This time, however, her words failed to buck me up. Sixteen then, I was less interested in what my parents thought about me, and more

concerned with how the world—especially my “ friends”—saw me. Despite her best efforts, Mom could not convince me that I was beautiful.

I returned to campus for the second half of Year Two resigned to a policy of self-imposed isolation. Without telling the coach why, I stopped showing up to volleyball practice, and eventually he stopped asking. I sat in the back of my classroom, where no one could see my arms and legs, and focused on my work. They could criticize my height, I thought, but they could not criticize my brain.

Worship was the only thing left that brought me joy. I lived for the twice-daily fellowship periods in the chapel, when the entire student body would gather for worship. Picture a giant auditorium with enough chairs for six hundred young women, plus staff, and a high ceiling off of which echoed our earnest voices raised in song. It wasn ’ t the Catholic service I was used to, but it was the next best thing: the two times a day when my fear and anxiety fell to their knees before the power of our Lord, and I felt at peace. Sometimes the choir was accompanied by traditional drumming, as they did in Save, [16] and my heart thumped painfully for home. I could almost hear my dad singing “ Umuryango Mutagatifu” (“ Holy Family”) in his soft timbre after dinner was finished, the cows had been milked, and the sun was going down for the day. (Before marrying my mother, he ’ d briefly attended seminary with plans of becoming a Catholic priest. [17] Thankfully, although he continued to volunteer with Caritas, the priesthood didn ’ t work out—because he was a wonderful father.)

Every other weekend the students ’ families were allowed to visit, and as often as they were able, my parents, Auntie Marie, and Uncle Edward came to see me. They brought me special foods I couldn ’ t get at school, like cake and milk, and I enjoyed showing my family off to those few Tutsi students I still considered friends. We couldn ’ t leave campus, but we ’ d eat meals together in the cafeteria and attend chapel as a family. Every once in a while, my favorite cousin Gatali came, too—a real treat, since he was also in boarding school and didn ’ t get to leave campus very often either. Gatali was handsome, and other girls asked if he was my boyfriend. “ My brother,” I always clarified, since even though he was not my blood brother,

he may as well have been. That ’ s how caring and protective of me Gatali was.

On visitors ’ weekends, only family members were supposed to come, no boyfriends. Some girls lied and snuck their partners onto campus, anyway, passing them off as brothers. The closest I ever came to having a boyfriend was the time my friend Venancia set me up with her older brother. He ’ d already finished school and was working in the north. Masabo and I wrote dozens of letters to each other, but never did meet face to face. He was murdered in the ’ 94 genocide.

In the meantime, Gatali was enough for me. I didn ’ t have time for boyfriends, but he and I always made sure to meet up at Christmas and over the year-end break, when Butare hosted a province-wide party specifically for high school students. The event was meant to reunite and entertain teenagers from around the region, and there was music, dancing, soft drinks, and cake. The few times I attended, Gatali came with me and danced with me exclusively. The purely platonic attention made me feel special and made other girls jealous.

At home, thankfully, my parents never pressured me to date or to marry. They still wanted me to get my education first. I had every intention of doing so and would have graduated from Remera Rukoma in a few short years, except the killing started again.

Chapter Five

PURGING THE INTERNAL ENEMY

October 1, 1990. I was eighteen, and Rwanda was a mess. More than 700,000 Tutsi refugees, forced to flee during the 1959 massacre and subsequent similar events, were still living in foreign countries, unable to return. They wanted to come back to Rwanda, but the Habyarimana regime (1973-1994) insisted the country was too small. “ Tutsi refugees should stay where they are,” the president decreed. “ There is no room for them in Rwanda.” Tired of the mistreatment—and frankly, tired of the bullshit—those Tutsis living abroad began to band together. They organized what

amounted to a small but strong army, calling themselves the Rwandan Patriotic Front, or RPF. On October 1, RPF moved en masse back across the border. Their goal? To liberate and reestablish equal rights for those they ' d left behind. The method? Chaos.

When thousands of RPF members suddenly poured back into Rwanda from Uganda, the government didn ' t know what to do. Panicked, President Habyarimana responded with force. He ordered his army to subdue and capture the rebels, but RPF was strong and largely evaded arrest. President Habyarimana then turned his attention to the innocent Tutsis who ' d lived in Rwanda all along. Their homes were broken into and searched, lest a family be willfully hiding RPF members, guns (which were illegal contraband in Rwanda), or even photographs showing someone who didn ' t live at that address. If any such person or item was found, it was assumed you were Tutsi traitors, and you were punished accordingly. The army threw suspected Tutsi traitors in jail by the truckload. When the jails were full, they held them hostage in stadiums. Those who refused to come peacefully were killed.

During one of these random, violent sweeps my childhood friend Jamila got hurt. Jamila ' s parents had once owned the house that Auntie Marie and Uncle Edward lived in. She and I had met when her parents moved out and my relatives moved in. Even though Jamila was a few years older than me, we ' d hit it off right away. She was quiet and beautiful—tall, dark-skinned, long-nosed, big eyes—every bit the Tutsi stereotype, though she was mixed. Her father was a Muslim Hutu. In the 1990s, Jamila was a student at Rambura—an elite, all-girls Catholic boarding school. When it was attacked by the government militia, several students died, and Jamila ended up in the hospital. That ' s when it became personal for me … until the Interahamwe really hit close to home.

No one was exempt from the government militia ' s sweeps, including my family. I wasn ' t there to see it, but my parents ' house was ransacked twice a month for months on end. The government told the Interahamwe that they could keep anything they found in Tutsi homes, and as my parents were well off, Mom and Dad were frequent victims. Militia men would show up unannounced at all hours of the day and night and make my family wait

outside while they tossed (and stole) everything, looking for guns they ' d never find. [18] I was 19 or 20 when my mom gave me " the rape talk." Most girls get " the sex talk," but Rwanda at that time was a different beast. " I have seen ladies being raped," she said, " and I don ' t want to see that happen to you." She wasn ' t trying to scare me so much as prepare me for our new reality: Things were bad, but they would get a lot worse.

For Grandma Mutamba, it felt like a nightmare she ' d already lived through once and from which she couldn ' t awake. Would she lose her house again? Would she lose more of her children? Grandma Mutamba ' s siblings shared these fears. In January 1990, the daughter of her brother, my auntie Murikanwa, had been arrested on suspicion of harboring Tutsi refugees. They were picking us off one by one.

Marked upticks in the violence occurred in October 1990, January 1991, February 1991, March 1992, August 1992, January 1993, and February 1994. Between these years, the Interahamwe (literally translated as Those Who Attack Together) grew their ranks, refined their tactics, upped their capacity for bloodshed, and became an all-around formidable government force. Bombs were planted on public busses that when detonated destroyed whole city blocks. Boarding schools were targeted, the better to " wipe out the next generation of Tutsis." The Hutu-led militia established roadblocks on every major road in Rwanda—checkpoints at which pedestrians and passengers in vehicles alike had to stop and show their ID cards. If you were Tutsi, it was assumed you were trying to escape the killings, and then you ' d be killed anyway. [19]

This was the same period that Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) really found its voice and its audience. Hutu extremists spouted messages of hate and anti-Tutsi propaganda over the airwaves, while publications like Kangura (Wake Others Up), founded by Hassan Ngeze, called for total ethnic cleansing. " If they [the inyenzi, meaning cockroaches] raise their heads again," Ngeze printed in 1994, " it won ' t be necessary to go and fight the enemy remaining in the bush. Instead we will start by purging the internal enemy [… and] they will disappear." He was the same man who published the inflammatory " Ten Commandments of the Hutus," [20] though his was just one of more than twenty-five

newspapers and magazines touting Tutsi hatred. The local media (the international media had not yet picked up the conflict) would then blame the mounting Tutsi death toll on the Rwandan Patriotic Front, so that any moderate Hutus who may have still sympathized with the Tutsi cause could be made to turn their hearts against them. It was a terrifying time, predicated on lies, dissent, and general anarchy.

The only glimmer of hope shone in August 1993, when President Habyarimana and the RPF jointly signed the Arusha Accords, a set of five protocols meant to end once and for all the Rwandan Civil War. When a year passed, however, and the violence hadn ' t ceased, that ' s when President Habyarimana ' s plane would be shot down, and the Rwandan genocide against Tutsis would officially commence.

By then, though, I was already gone.

As the incidence of attacks on boarding schools increased in the early ' 90s, rumors circulated that Remera Rukoma would be next. School staff, including the headmaster, didn ' t take the threats very seriously because of the " celebrity" students then attending Remera Rukoma—girls like President Habyarimana ' s own niece! (His wife ' s niece also attended the school and was even in my class. She was nice to me until she was not.) It seemed Remera Rukoma thought their presence would protect us, so there were no school assemblies, no training on what to do should an attack occur. And anyway, at my school of 600, less than 60 of us (in keeping with the 10% quota) were Tutsi. The concerns of the Hutu majority outweighed ours, so we discussed our fears in private. Tutsi students had secret meeting places where we got together outside of Hutu eye and earshot.

Anymore, what little news passed in or out of the proverbial bubble of boarding school was always bad. The Hutu Power movement was steadily gaining in popularity, we knew, and violence against Tutsis was increasing accordingly. Never mind that a ceasefire had been signed on March 29, 1991—there was still no end to the civil war in sight. At one of these secret Tutsi gatherings, I learned that Tutsi citizens were once again fleeing Rwanda as refugees. There were people helping other people escape—an underground network of sorts. All of it was vague and hush-hush, though. You had to already know the right people or know someone who could

introduce you. I began to worry that the next time I went home on break, I ' d find out my family was dead.

Sometime in early 1992, our worst fears came true. We all woke up one morning to the sounds of people shouting and singing hate songs. Despite the presence of our student " celebrities," Hutu extremists had surrounded Remera Rukoma ' s gated campus walls. They carried banana trees on their shoulders like coffins—to symbolize the bodies of dead Tutsis—and could be heard yelling " Kill the cockroaches!" in unison. Lucky for me, they could not get through the gates, but I saw them as I was walking to breakfast. Most of them were wearing the red, black, and yellow uniform of the political party. They looked upset and dangerous.

After breakfast, we met for morning fellowship in the chapel. The headmaster read from the bible and led us in a few songs; then he announced class was canceled for the day. The demonstration happening outside, he explained, was a protest. Those noisy people were protesting the return of Tutsi refugees who lived in foreign countries, and also celebrating the recent deaths of some notable RPF leaders. " In lieu of class today," the headmaster directed, " you will join the protest and march with them. This is not optional. Doing so is mandatory for every student."

Disbelieving, I risked a glance at my fellow Tutsi students. They seemed equally shocked, equally scared. Next thing we knew, though, the headmaster was leading the way toward the school gates, and we had no choice but to follow. Six hundred of us filed out the gates and joined the hundreds of protestors already present. We marched for miles. We sang their songs. We repeated their hate speech back to them. I slandered my own tribe so no one would look at me and say, " See, she is one of them!" A few protestors nevertheless noticed my long arms and legs and said threateningly, " We will kill all Tutsis in this country." So long as I agreed with them, however, they left me alone.

The demonstration continued for four hours, during which time the mayor and other officials took turns speaking on how to identify and protect ourselves from " the Tutsi enemy." When at last we were allowed to return to school, I felt physically and emotionally exhausted. Too tired even to eat, I skipped lunch in the cafeteria and went back to my dorm room. I didn ' t

want to see or talk to anybody. I needed time to process the morning, and how scary it had been to march alongside people who thought I deserved to be killed. What I didn ’ t know was that I wasn ’ t alone; I was being watched. And that evening, I got called back to the headmaster ’ s office.

“ Why weren ’ t you at lunch today, Henriette?” he asked me point-blank.

“ I didn ’ t feel well,” I said—which was true.

“ So, it ’ s not because the march upset you?”

“ No, sir,” I said.

He sighed. “ We know very well that you and your family support the Rwandan Patriotic Front.” In fact, my cousin Gatali had just joined RPF. No way was I going to mention that, though. “ Such subversive behavior is not and will not be tolerated at this school.”

“ But I don ’ t support the rebels,” I insisted, knowing it was useless, that the headmaster would not believe me. The problem was not actually my “ behavior.” The problem was *me* . That, and the pressure the headmaster felt to “ perform” in the eyes of the government—the instinctual need to save his own skin.

Following the protest, the school issued a new edict: Tutsi students were no longer allowed to congregate in groups of more than two. The headmaster also suspended several Tutsi students whom he accused of being spies for RPF for good measure, with the assurance that they would not be allowed into any other government school in the whole country.

These actions, we were told, were taken in the interest of Hutu students ’ safety. With RPF threatening the northern border of Rwanda, near Uganda, Hutu students apparently did not feel safe. A core number of them (many of whom where the children of powerful Hutu extremists) formed their own alliance, and this alliance made a list. It named all the Tutsi or suspected Tutsi students in the school. Presenting this list to the headmaster, these Hutu girls politely requested that all Tutsi students be removed from their classes and their dorms, and made to eat, live, and learn separately from

them. The headmaster listened to their request, then took it one step further. He went from classroom to classroom asking every student to write down on a piece of paper the name of a student they believed to be a Tutsi spy or otherwise dangerous. When he came to my classroom, I watched every student around me bend diligently over their paper and write. Mine, I left blank.

The headmaster collected these papers, and a few hours later, I was not surprised to be called down to his office. Two policemen in uniform showed up at my classroom, asked to speak to the teacher in the hallway, then asked to speak to me. I was seated in the back and started shaking as I made my way past all my peers and out the classroom door. Just because I wasn ' t surprised didn ' t mean I wasn ' t terrified. My classmates cheered. " Take the snake before she poisons us!" someone yelled. The cops, escorting me with guns drawn, smiled back at the rest of the students. They didn ' t say a word to me as we marched through the warm sunshine.

We went to the headmaster ' s office. Inside, there were four other men I ' d never seen before, a delegation from the Ministry of Education. The men told me that 90% of Remera Rukoma students had named me as a spy—all, that is, except for the 10% who were Tutsi. While I didn ' t believe this claim for a second, nor could I disprove it. It ' s not like they let me see the papers! Next, they echoed my accuser from the classroom, and said I had threatened to poison Hutu students. " We also know you ' ve been criticizing the government," one man said. " Saying Rwanda needs a new government." All I could do was declare my innocence over and over, while they sent someone to search my room for " evidence."

While the man who ' d left to toss my bunk was gone, the rest of them demanded I name all of my relatives who lived outside Rwanda. " You ' re a definite suspect," they explained, " and you can help your case by helping us, or you can hurt your chances." By that point, I was crying too hard to answer what felt like hundreds of questions, most of which involved random allegations I had no comeback for anyway. This went on for an hour and a half, with the armed cops waiting outside the office door the whole time. Finally, the headmaster told me to go back to my classroom, warning me, " The investigation is still ongoing."

I ’ ve never felt such shame as I did walking back into my classroom. It was twenty times worse than Mr. Wilson ’ s history lesson, because these accusations, although unfounded, were more serious. Classmates pointed at me and whispered about me, and outright bullied me in the weeks that followed. “ Witch!” they screamed in the hallways. “ Snake!” When a small box full of greenish powder was “ suddenly discovered” in my suitcase (I have no doubt that another student planted it there; luckily, it was determined not to be poison), my reputation as a Tutsi rebel was cemented. No one, not even my fellow Tutsis, associated with me after that. It was too dangerous for them, and I understood that. It meant I ate alone, prayed alone, and cried myself to sleep (on the nights I didn ’ t stay up worrying that someone was coming to kill me) alone in my bed every night. My eyes were never not red and swollen.

My teachers didn ’ t treat me much better, save for a man named Mr. Fosten, whom we called Dudu. He was young, fresh out of university, and he taught physics. Dudu had attended college in Butare province, and as the son of a rich Hutu father and Tutsi mother, he knew both sides of the story. One day he stopped me outside the cafeteria and implored me to be careful. I could tell he did not believe the rumors that I ’ d intended to poison other students. My French teacher, on the other hand, who was from Congo, enjoyed embarrassing me in front of my class. After calling me a “ Tutsi witch,” he said I would never pass his class. He then made me stay after school to clean his blackboards. As usual, I blushed it out in silence and prayed for those tough times to pass.

Throughout this ordeal, my communication with my family was still limited to letters—letters that the headmaster screened. I didn ’ t tell them anything, deciding that if I was to die at Remera Rukoma, I should die strong, without having added to my parents ’ worries. My mom especially had a tender heart; a young adult now, I was the one meant to protect her, and not the other way around. I wished I could be home, helping to take care of the family. At the end of the semester, I got that wish.

Just before my fourth year concluded, the headmaster called me back to his office. “ When you go home for break,” the headmaster said, “ stay home. You ’ re not welcome back at Remera Rukoma.”

His decision should have upset me. Instead, I felt unexpectedly free. It didn ’ t look like I thought it would, but this was God answering my prayers.

The day I left, Dudu pulled me aside to tell me he was sorry. “ You ’ re an ‘ A ’ student, Henriette, and you don ’ t deserve this.” I smiled, touched by his kindness. “ At the same time,” he continued, “ you shouldn ’ t have criticized the government.” My smile faded as I spun on my heel and walked out. Good riddance to Remera Rukoma.

Chapter Six

HIS NATURE WAS SATAN ’ S

June and July 1992 I spent in Mugusa helping Mom, Grandma Mutamba, and my aunties around the compound. It was good to be with them and good to feel industrious (we were never *not* cooking, cleaning, or gardening!), but come September, I ached to return to school. Having been expelled from Remera Rukoma, though, and promised that no other public school would accept me, I needed a new plan. What did it look like? Where could I go? Who, at this point, would accept me? [21]

My cousin Francoise (Gatali ’ s sister) was in private school in Save. The cost was mind-boggling—roughly 10,000 Rwandan francs a year—but at least there was no entrance exam. Private schools took anyone who could pay. My parents discussed it and decided they could afford to send me to private school for my last two years. “ You ’ re worth it, Henriette,” they said, making my heart overflow. “ And don ’ t let anyone tell you otherwise.” Instead of sending me to Save with Francoise, they picked a slightly less expensive school by the name of Ecole Zairoise. It was a Congolese school, likewise located in Kigali, but smaller than Remera Rukoma and mixed-gender. Approximately two hundred teenagers from around Africa, many of them the kids of diplomats, made up the student body. We wore denim skirts and white shirts and took classes in French, Swahili, and Lingala (a Bantu language). As Ecole Zairoise wasn ’ t a boarding school, I only attended class from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday to

Friday, staying at Auntie Marie ’ s and Uncle Edward ’ s house the rest of the time.

A disclaimer: I loved my aunt and uncle as much as any of my family, and I felt grateful they put me up when they didn ’ t have to. At the same time, it was by late 1992 a less than ideal situation, given Hutu-Tutsi tensions, Uncle Edward ’ s status as one of the Hutu elite, and my own intrinsic Tutsi-ness. That year, whether because he actually believed in Hutu Power or merely wanted to play it safe, Uncle Edward joined the far-right Coalition for the Defense of the Republic (CDR). The CDR was allied with the ruling National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development and would ultimately serve as one of the death squads responsible for massacring Tutsis during the genocide. Soon, Uncle Edward began hosting CDR meetings at their house. Every Saturday and Sunday, ten to twelve powerful Hutu men wearing red, black, and yellow would show up in Auntie Marie ’ s living room. She and I, both of us Tutsis, had to wait on them all weekend long, serving food and drinks while the CDR discussed “ what to do about the cockroaches.” The government, they agreed, was preparing for “ apocalypse”—but exactly what that meant, I didn ’ t know. I had some idea, though, because then these men would look at me and Auntie Marie directly and say, “ You don ’ t belong in this country. You ’ re going to be killed. We will finish off all Tutsi snakes!” Their hate was that out in the open. It didn ’ t matter that Auntie Marie was Uncle Edward ’ s wife, or I his niece. We weren ’ t blood-related to him, so his status could only protect us for so long.

That kind of constant messaging changes people. Whatever Uncle Edward ’ s intentions when he initially joined, over time he bought into the brainwashing. One day he wouldn ’ t sign a document I needed for school. The next he wouldn ’ t talk to me. He stopped showing love to me even in private, and I stopped feeling safe. Killing Tutsis was “ the right thing to do,” he believed. Tutsis were “ enemies of Rwanda.” This language was confusing to me, not to mention hurtful. Uncle Edward was part of my family. Why didn ’ t he love me unconditionally? Why wasn ’ t he making sure I was safe? [22]

Sometimes, I would go into my bedroom before my aunt called me to bring another cup of tea and just cry. Listening to the CDR ’ s plans to torture Tutsis was itself like being tortured. I wished I ’ d never gone to live in Kigali. I wondered if I ’ d live to graduate Ecole Zairoise.

School—or the thirty-minute walk there, anyway—was worse. New roadblocks popped up every day. At times I was detained for hours while militiamen questioned me, went through my bag, and threatened my family. They called me names and kept me there long after letting all of my foreign national classmates through, just because they could. Most of my teachers were Congolese and didn ’ t care about Rwanda ’ s racial tensions. That was a blessing and a curse, since it meant they were nicer to me than any teachers before them, but also had no tolerance for my being late all the time. Ecole Zairoise was therefore a sanctuary of sorts—but step one foot outside the school (which we occasionally did when we left to buy donuts and milk at lunch time), and you entered a war zone again. [23]

If zombies are the walking dead, then I was a zombie, shuffling along with a target on my back, praying just to be left alone. Shoved around, spit upon; the random abuse was bad enough. Threats from people I knew hurt more.

Sixbelle was one of my uncle ’ s closest friends. He lived a few blocks away from Auntie Marie and Uncle Edward and often came over for dinner. As a child, I ’ d looked up to this man, respected him as a family friend and my elder. Then he ’ d started attending CDR meetings, too, and one day he cornered me at my bus stop. “ Hello,” I said, greeting Sixbelle as I would anyone I knew. He didn ’ t return my smile, though. He sneered.

“ When the apocalypse starts,” he said, “ you, Henriette, are going to be my first victim.”

Shocked but not stupid, I quickly averted my eyes to the ground. I didn ’ t want him to think I was challenging him—this man who ’ d known me since I was a little girl, who ’ d broken bread with me, accepted countless cups of tea from me, who ’ d acted in all ways like another uncle. Maybe if I played small and innocent, he would still see me as such. Maybe he ’ d remember that I was more than a Tutsi cockroach to be squished.

But no.

“ It ’ s my gift to you,” Sixbelle said. “ Because if someone else gets to you first, he won ’ t be as merciful. He will amuse himself with you first. Drag out the pain. You should appreciate what I ’ m telling you.”

Sixbelle knew what he was talking about. He knew that apocalypse meant genocide. Understood that Hutus everywhere were being groomed to rape, torture, and kill Tutsis everywhere.

But I knew some things, too. His name, for example, was Sixbelle. But his nature, I understood, was Satan ’ s.

I went to school that day wondering if I should tell Auntie Marie about my encounter with Sixbelle. Sadly, I was no longer sure if I could trust her. If I did tell her, and she told Uncle Edward, I would likely be in trouble—as my uncle made it clearer every day that he shared Sixbelle ’ s ideology.

All day long Sixbelle ’ s words tumbled around in my brain. I imagined the next time he showed up at our house. I pictured serving my would-be murderer a cup of tea. The images lodged there and began to grow, hurting me terribly as they did so, until I knew I had to exorcise them by confiding in my aunt.

She could tell something was wrong as soon as I walked in the door. I looked tired, sad, scared, and angry, she said. “ What happened?”

“ I saw Sixbelle at the bus stop this morning,” I began. The rest came out in fits and starts. It ’ s hard to really acknowledge that someone wants you dead.

Auntie Marie listened to my story without interrupting. She stared at me like someone who believes they ’ re dreaming. Afterward, she promised me I was safe under her roof. But she refused to look me in the eye as she said it.

“ You ’ re hiding something,” I accused.

She denied it, of course, and walked away. A few minutes later, though, she came back, her conscience having bested her. “ The list is already done,” she admitted.

“ What list?”

“ I haven ’ t seen it,” she added.

“ Auntie Marie, *what* list?”

“ It ’ s a list of all the Tutsis in the country. The government compiled it. So they can systematically eliminate us.”

I let this information sink in, then asked, “ Are you and I on that list?”

She didn ’ t answer.

“ What about my parents? Fraterne, Chantal, Claude, Asoumpta, and Cadette?” I said, naming my siblings. “ Tell me!” I demanded, like she had the list in front of her and could check it at will.

Auntie Marie burst into tears. “ I haven ’ t seen it,” she repeated, needing me to understand. But I didn ’ t understand, I couldn ’ t. I will never understand what led my country to decide that some Rwandans deserved to live, while others deserved to die.

We hugged each other and held on tightly. “ Promise me you won ’ t tell anyone,” my auntie said. “ Your uncle will kill me if he finds out I told you.”

It was just as well. I didn ’ t want anything to do with my uncle anymore, anyway. In fact, I was over Kigali and my life there, period. Still, I wasn ’ t so sure that what Auntie Marie suggested next was the right solution.

According to Auntie Marie, so long as she played by Uncle Edward ’ s rules, he had every intention of protecting her, a Tutsi woman, from Hutu extremists. “ What you need, Henriette,” she proclaimed, “ is a Hutu husband who will do the same for you!”

Well, not only did I *not* want to get married right then, I had also seen Auntie Marie crying when she thought no one was looking, upset about the dehumanizing comments her husband made about Tutsis, and the ways in which the rest of her family was suffering. *Does Auntie Marie even love Uncle Edward?* I remember wondering. *Or is he her human shield?* Tying my life to a stranger ' s on the off chance it could save me seemed like trading one bad fate for another. Prison by any other name is still a prison, after all.

Next thing I knew, though, there was Paul—a Hutu man maybe ten years older than me who my auntie had decided was " perfect" for me. He ' d been a tenant in one of her rental houses when he was younger and had since started his own " very successful" business. Auntie Marie worked out all the details. She invited him over for tea and to meet me. All I saw was an " old" man I didn ' t know and didn ' t want to know. I said hi and promptly walked away.

Auntie Marie followed me back to my bedroom. She locked the door behind her, probably so we wouldn ' t be interrupted. But it made me feel trapped. " Paul is a good man," she lectured me. " He will take care of you and keep you safe."

I didn ' t say it aloud, because I knew she thought she was helping me, but in my head, I was thinking *I would rather die than marry Paul* . " What did my parents say?" I asked.

" I haven ' t discussed it with them yet, but I ' m going to. And I ' m going to suggest that after you and Paul get married, maybe one of your brothers can live with you, too. Keep more of the family safe that way."

Ugh. Surely my parents would say no!

If Auntie Marie called my parents, I wasn ' t privy to their conversation. I just know that Paul kept coming around, usually every Saturday night for dinner. He didn ' t say much, but I didn ' t like the way he looked at me—like I was already part of his property. Most Saturdays I went to bed without eating.

One weekend, Auntie Marie and Uncle Edward went to Mugusa to visit my family. They didn ’ t take me with them, but they took Paul, to introduce him I suppose and to begin to make arrangements for our wedding. My mother asked her brother, my uncle Vital, to come over. Thank God she did, because Vital was a high school teacher who valued education as highly as my parents did. Uncle Vital put his foot down: “ Henriette cannot get married before she finishes school!” My mom was on the fence. She loved the idea that Paul would protect me, but her brother ’ s adamance tipped the scales. She and my father decided I should make my own decision. Finally, a little agency!

The next weekend, I asked to go to Mugusa. I wanted to talk to Uncle Vital myself, I explained, and get Grandma Mutamba ’ s thoughts on the matter. Uncle Vital and Grandma Mutamba reminded me again (though I already knew) how important my education was, and Uncle Vital pointed out that Paul could not guarantee my protection. “ Only God can protect you,” he said. “ Do not let anyone push you to marry Paul.”

That ’ s all I needed—one person to stand beside me and support me. I cried and hugged my uncle and promised to finish school no matter what. Auntie Marie was not happy with my decision. She encouraged Paul to keep coming over. He did, and every time I hid in my bedroom. She also tried to make me become a card-carrying member of the National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development (or MRND), which would have affiliated me with President Habyarimana ’ s political party for life. Rather than betray my allegiance and my own good sense, I opted to leave Kigali altogether.

It had finally become too much. The constant stress. The threats. The not knowing who I could be myself around, and who wanted to kill me. (Or who was determined to marry me off.) I was never not being watched, whether by a Hutu neighbor or a government official. Never not stopped at roadblocks. It just wasn ’ t safe in Kigali anymore. Forget about finishing my education. Yes, I ’ d made a promise to Uncle Vital, but what good was a diploma, I reasoned, if I was six feet underground? Better to quit school and go home, where at least I ’ d be surrounded by people who loved me. If Tutsis everywhere were going to die, we should die together, in Mugusa.

My parents welcomed me back with open arms. Life in that rural village was slightly better, though homes were still being ransacked regularly. The specter of the coming apocalypse was already reaching its long, dark arms toward Mugusa.

It was seeing my younger siblings—how big they were getting, and how smart, kind, and loving they were—that made my heart hurt even worse. They were children, innocent of everything except having been born into a Tutsi family. I started to worry more about their lives than my own. “ Please, God,” I prayed at night, “ take me and spare them. I don ’ t care if I am killed, so long as my parents and my brothers and sisters are protected.”

One night, my mom overheard my prayers. With tears in her eyes, she came and joined me in bed. “ Henriette,” she said, “ don ’ t pray like that again. You are young yet, with a long life ahead of you. If someone has to go, I ’ d much rather your father and I be killed than you, our precious daughter.”

Now both of us were crying. I appreciated her words, but I didn ’ t like them. I knew if they were killed and I survived, I would not be able to go on. It was selfish, but I wanted to be the first to go.

She gathered me into her arms. “ Don ’ t you worry,” my mother said. “ God is with you all the time. He loves you, Henriette, and so do I.”

Mom laid there with me for a long time. Neither of us spoke again, lost to our separate thoughts. I kept thinking about how to save them, my parents and my siblings, and hearing over and over the Interahamwe ’ s promise *Not even one survivor* . The government had made it clear that in the future, people would be asking what the extinct “ Tutsi” had once looked like.

I needed to do *something* , and soon—but what?

Chapter Seven

TIME TO LEAVE

My cousin, my “ brother,” my best friend Gatali told me over lunch one day that he intended to join the Rwandan Patriotic Front—the group of Tutsi rebels then attempting to wrest control of the country from President Habyarimana. To Tutsi youths everywhere, RPF members were our Batman and our Spiderman: superheroes banding together to free the people from oppression. We would have worn their shirts and hung posters of them on our walls had merchandise like that existed, [24] and had it been safe to do so. The reality was that openly supporting or sympathizing with the RPF was good as asking to be killed. Actually joining the RPF was even more dangerous.

“ Oh, I don ’ t know, Gatali,” I said when he told me of his plan. “ That sounds really scary.”

“ I don ’ t have a choice, Henriette,” he responded. “ There are Rwandans who have been living outside the country for years, sometimes decades, unable to return. They want to come back and reunite with their families, and that should be their right! But they haven ’ t been able to. Think about Uncle Jeff,” he said, naming our cousin who was then living as a refugee in Burundi. “ He and other refugees can ’ t fight for themselves out there, so it ’ s my duty to fight for them here. To fight for all Tutsis. To fight for Rwanda!”

His words moved me. My heart went out to those family members I ’ d never actually met since they ’ d fled before I was born. I knew our family occasionally sent some of them money; for example, when we sold a cow. Probably they in turn were contributing some of that money to RPF, in the hopes that they could someday return to Rwanda. Now twenty-four-year-old Gatali wanted to make his own contribution.

“ Anyway,” Gatali said, heading off my next argument, “ I ’ ll get a sponsorship if I join the RPF.” He meant that the RPF had promised to educate its members in exchange for their service, almost like the American GI Bill. If Gatali joined, he could eventually go to college for free. My cousin knew how important school was to me, and that I only wanted the best for him. So, I gave him my blessing and tried not to be sad. Tried, instead, to focus on all the ways he ’ d be empowered, and those he would empower along the way.

“ I ’ m going to come back,” Gatali promised me. “ I will see you again.”

“ Okay, brother,” I said, sending him off to war, to fight and live in the bush, not knowing if he ’ d survive or when and how said war would end. But certain, above all, that I was proud of him.

Gatali wasn ’ t the only person from Uncle Callixte ’ s family to leave home that year. Uncle Callixte himself also passed away. He was old—the oldest of Grandma Mutamba ’ s sons—and his liver failed a year before the genocide broke out. It was sad, of course, but in retrospect I ’ m thankful he escaped being murdered. Uncle Callixte ’ s oldest son Alex, who had already married and moved to his own home, had a few years before been attacked by his Hutu neighbors. [25] He recovered, but he and his wife and child would be killed in the genocide. So would Uncle Callixte ’ s wife, Auntie Hilary. The third son, Ejide, had recently been released from jail for trying to visit his maternal grandmother in the Congo. The second son, Aphrodice, and the fifth son after Gatali, Rugema, were still at home in 1993, as was the youngest child, my girl cousin Francoise. Francoise would be the next to leave Mugusa. I would go with her.

There were still rumors floating around about Rwandan “ coyotes,” men for hire who were helping persecuted Tutsis cross the border. You just had to know the right people. Francoise, who was younger than me by a few months, said she did. “ There ’ s a guy,” she whispered when she thought no one was listening. “ His name is Charles. He can take us to Burundi.” Burundi is the small country south of Rwanda. It was where Gatali had most likely gone to join the RPF, though for safety reasons he ’ d been unable to send word of his whereabouts. “ What do you think?” she wanted to know. Hardly believing my own response, I nodded and said we should do it. It was time to leave the only country I ’ d ever known. We hatched a plan.

“ Charles,” it would turn out, was a scammer. Who knows if that was even his real name. After getting her mother ’ s permission to do so, Francoise paid him the entirety of her school tuition—10,000 Rwandan francs—to ferry me, her, and our other cousin Uwimana out of Rwanda. (Uwimana, which means You Belong to God, was, again, not a “ real” cousin, but our families had been friends for so long that we called her cousin.) Charles

would disappear with that money and never be seen or heard from again. It was a blow, but it didn ’ t stop us from trying on our own. Twenty-one and twenty years old, respectively, Francoise and I thought we could do anything. (Writing this now, I ’ m shaking. If I had to do it again, I doubt I ’ d have the same courage. But as I always say, God makes a way when there seems to be no way!) At the time, we thought that if we died trying, well, we were bound to die in Mugusa anyway—so why not?

Francoise ’ s mother, Auntie Hilary, obviously knew about our plan. My parents knew, too. We couldn ’ t tell our brothers and sisters or Grandma Mutamba, though, because if one of them accidentally spilled the beans, there ’ d be an all-out manhunt to track us down. As much as the government wanted to keep Tutsi refugees from coming back into Rwanda, they wanted even more to keep the Tutsis already in the country exactly where we were—making it easier to find and kill us.

The late August morning that Francoise and I were scheduled to depart, my father came into my room to tell me goodbye. It wasn ’ t even dawn yet—the sun had not yet poked its head into the sky—but I ’ d been up for hours unable to sleep. While I lay there in bed, trembling over the unknown fate that awaited us, he kissed my forehead and whispered how much he loved me. After he left for the fields, I cried into my blanket but told myself it was going to be great. It *had* to be, for my dear cousins ’ sake if not my own.

A few hours later, my mother waved me off with tears in her eyes. We ’ d said our goodbyes the night before. There was nothing else left to say except “ I love you.” She held my youngest sister Cadette, who was three, in her arms, and I looked at Cadette instead of Mom so I wouldn ’ t cry. It was for Cadette that I was doing this. Once I got established in Burundi, I hoped to send for my younger siblings.

I began the thirty-minute walk to Francoise ’ s house carrying a backpack with some snacks and a change of clothes. We weren ’ t exactly sure how long the journey would take, or even if we would make it. Chances were good we ’ d be killed or imprisoned long before reaching the Akanyaru River, which divides Rwanda from Burundi. Nevertheless, my parents had raised me to be strong and trust in God. Nothing would happen that He

hadn ’ t preordained. I shifted my backpack and attempted to steady my breathing.

Along the way, I passed a lot of strangers on the road. I worried that they could tell what I was up to—that my scared face might somehow give away my guilt. When I made it to Francoise ’ s house and she came out to join me, also carrying a backpack, immediately I felt better. I wasn ’ t alone on this adventure. There was safety—or at least reassurance—in numbers.

Next, we picked up Uwimana, who was at boarding school. She was standing outside one of the shops next to her school so the other students wouldn ’ t question her. She, too, had a small backpack and nothing else. The three of us walked on together.

An hour or so down the road, I realized we were being followed. Someone on a bicycle was pedaling as fast as they could after us. I felt sure they meant to stop us. As the person got closer, we recognized him as Rugema, Francoise ’ s and Gatali ’ s brother! He ’ d jumped on his bike as soon as he ’ d noticed his sister was gone, and indeed, he meant to stop us. “ You can ’ t leave,” Rugema begged Francoise. “ It ’ s a bad idea. You ’ re going to get caught! Then we ’ ll all be in trouble because of what you ’ ve done. Please come home with me.” Determined, we kept walking, and Rugema kept pedaling alongside us, pleading with us. Eventually, though, he saw we meant to continue, and he gave up. He turned back sad and worried about us. Equally sad, we forged on ahead.

Another hour passed. With one hour to go to Butare City, where we planned to stay the night with family, we again saw Rugema ’ s bike from a distance. It was my cousin come to discourage us a second time, but this time we hid in the trees. We saw him pass by; he did not see us. Only once we were sure he was gone did we resume our journey. To throw him off our track further, we decided to take a bus the rest of the way.

Around five p.m., we arrived in Butare City. The family friend who kept us overnight was named Munyambo. His house was just an hour from the Burundian border. Munyambo didn ’ t know why we were really in Butare City. Since there were lots of great hospitals there, we told him we were in town for a doctor ’ s appointment. Early the next morning, we set off again.

This was the point that Coyote Charles was originally supposed to meet up with us, but lacking his help, we moved ahead with Plan B. Uwimana had a friend in Butare City who somehow knew one of Rwanda ' s most famous soccer players. Not only was this guy a world-class athlete, but he was using his privilege to help oppressed Tutsis secretly escape. " Sure, they can stay with me," the soccer player told Uwimana ' s friend. " I know lots of people in Burundi and will make some connections for them." Amazing! We got the athlete ' s address.

That night, holed up in a room at the soccer player ' s comfortable home, Francoise, Uwimana, and I discussed what to do. Thanks to the soccer player, a Burundian guy named Zac had agreed to meet us in the morning and take us across the river. We were scared. Yes, we ' d made good progress, and been blessed with angels in disguise like the athlete, but now the danger was greater than ever. If we got caught trying to cross, or if Zac was a scammer like Charles, we ' d basically be out of options. None of us slept that night, either.

The next morning—our third away from home—we waited anxiously for Zac to show up. While we were waiting, two other Tutsi youths with backpacks came to the pickup point. The soccer player had arranged for their passage as well. Oh no, I thought, my heart sinking in my chest. Because although there was safety in numbers, too many kids were a crowd. We risked drawing more attention to ourselves unnecessarily. And who knew if we could trust these other Tutsis, anyway? What if they were traitor spies who would inform on us?

" No, no, they ' re good people," the soccer player assured me when I cornered him in the adjoining room. " Their families were killed, so they ' re leaving to join RPF. I promise they mean you no harm."

Mollified, I returned to Francoise and Uwimana. But still I was nervous. Zac was late. Was he coming or not?

As it turned out, not. By dinner time, Zac still hadn ' t shown up, and the soccer player swore he didn ' t know what had happened. " It ' s possible he got caught trying to smuggle people out," our host mused. The soccer player was supposed to leave for practice, but he decided to stay at his

house with us instead. “ Just in case Zac shows up,” he explained. He knew the five of us were impatient to get going, but what ’ s more, staying there any longer than necessary was unsafe for him and us both. Finally, he took his motorcycle fifteen minutes into town to see if any of his friends there had heard from Zac. He returned ashen-faced and shaking. After several minutes spent pacing around the house and muttering to himself, “ They know. They know, and I don ’ t know who told them”—which made us all extremely nervous—he said, “ Get ready. You ’ re leaving now.”

Francoise, Uwimana, and I looked at each other, like *Is he serious?* He was. We ran into the bedroom to get our backpacks. When we returned, the soccer player said, “ The government knows I ’ m hiding people in my house who are trying to join RPF. They ’ re coming to arrest me—and you, too, if you stay here. I ’ ll get you out, but we have to leave now.”

Myself, my cousins, and the would-be RPF members rushed to load up in his car. We drove for thirty minutes in total silence, no one saying a thing, none of us knowing where we were going. I could tell we were leaving Butare City as there were no streetlights and the houses were getting further apart, but for all I knew the soccer player could have been taking us to a remote spot to execute us. The two young guys traveling with us looked as terrified as my cousins did, which oddly helped me to feel calmer, I guess because it validated my own fear. After a long time—too long, really—the soccer player spoke. “ We ’ re going to a wedding party,” he said.

“ Sorry, where?” I asked, certain I ’ d misheard him.

“ We ’ re going to crash a wedding.”

I started to think he ’ d lost his mind. Did he understand that our lives were in danger? Why would we be going to a party?

“ I ’ m sure officials are going to search my house tonight. We can ’ t be there when they show up, so we ’ re going to this wedding. It ’ s dark out and there will be a ton of people there. We ’ ll blend right in, so long as we all pretend like we ’ re supposed to be there. If anyone asks who you are, say you came with a friend.” He tapped his thumbs on the steering wheel as

he thought. “ Tomorrow I ’ ll find you guys another place to stay, and hopefully Zac will turn up.”

We drove and drove to this house in the middle of nowhere. Pulling up, we saw at least a hundred cars and motorcycles. It did indeed look like a wedding. In Rwanda, it ’ s tradition to have a huge party the night before the wedding proper. Friends invite friends and everybody celebrates. The last thing I felt like doing was celebrating, but I had to admit it made a good cover. From the time we arrived to almost five o ’ clock in the morning, we ate and drank and danced and smiled, acting as though everything was fine and we were supposed to be there. Anyone watching me would have thought I was having fun, but the whole time I was worrying about what the next day would bring. When the sun rose, we ’ d have to find another place to hide. I made a wish that time would stretch, that somehow that night could be longer than any other night.

But then the first rays of morning were burning purple and orange in the east, and it was time to get back into the soccer player ’ s car and drive away. He took us to the house of one of his friend ’ s parents. It was a small house, owned by an elderly and very trusting couple. The soccer player told them that we were university students in town for a conference, and they graciously agreed to let us spend the day, and possibly the night. He left us there and went back to check on his own house. If he could, he said, he would return and bring us food. I wondered if we ’ d ever see him again.

While we waited for the soccer player to come back, I began preparing myself for the worst. *You ’ re still not in the clear, Henriette* , I counseled myself. *Burundi and freedom must be nearby, but you ’ re not there yet. If you get caught, what are you going to do?* I thought about it and decided that I would ask my hypothetical captors for a chance to say one last prayer. What happened after that would be in God ’ s hands.

“ Maybe this was a bad idea,” I said to my cousin Francoise. “ Maybe we should have listened to Rugema when he chased after us on his bike.”

“ It ’ s too late for that now, Henriette,” she pointed out. “ We ’ re going forward, or not at all.”

Around six p.m., the soccer player returned! He had another guy with him who turned out to be the missing Zac. According to Zac, five policemen had stormed into the soccer player ’ s house the night we left, only to find no one there but the housekeeper. “ They searched every room,” Zac said, “ and then they went house to house asking if anyone had seen anything.” Apparently, they ’ d questioned Zac, too, who ’ d been walking up to the soccer player ’ s house at that precise moment. “ I told them that the homeowner ’ s sisters and brothers had been visiting, but that they ’ d left,” Zac said, smiling.

Wow! I could have jumped for joy. God had spared us. It was a miracle we hadn ’ t been caught!

The soccer player gave us the food he ’ d brought, and said we ’ d be leaving with Zac first thing in the morning. “ Don ’ t worry, this guy knows what he ’ s doing,” the soccer player promised. “ Good luck.” We hugged him goodbye, [26] grateful to have a plan but anxious about how it would all play out. Would we make it across the border the next day? Would we finally escape the hellhole that home had become?

Chapter Eight

WELCOME TO BURUNDI

The morning we left Rwanda was a Sunday. I remember because it was market day. Zac ’ s “ grand plan,” we found out, involved disguising us as shoppers from Burundi who ’ d come north over the border to patronize the Nyaruteja market. After “ shopping,” we ’ d “ return” with our purchases to Burundi, and that would be it. We ’ d be free!

Since six people shopping together seemed too conspicuous, we split into two groups, guys and gals. Francoise, Uwimana, and I went shopping for pineapples and bananas, and Zac and the two RPF guys did their own thing. I kept an eye on Zac, watching as he chatted with various people he knew about when the best time for us to cross was. As the morning wore on, the market got busier and busier, then Zac was there whispering in our ears. “ Now,” he said.

We followed him out the south side of the market to the banks of the river Akanyaru. *River?* It looked more like a lake to me. I ’ d never seen that much water in my whole life. Yet, people apparently crossed it all the time —whether because they were coming to do the marketing, or because, like us, they were fleeing to safety!

As I stared, the two RPF guys were already walking toward it, showing no hesitation at all. The three of us followed with our pineapples and bananas, still pretending that we were like anyone else, like we ’ d made this journey a hundred times before. Once again, I felt sure that passersby could read my mind. That they ’ d realize I was escaping and prevent me from leaving. I was sweating and scared the whole time. The river looked deep. How would we get across? Did Zac intend to rent a boat?

No, Zac did not intend to rent a boat. There was an alternate way. Those who couldn ’ t afford a boat hired men to carry them through the water on their shoulders. (I ’ m not kidding.) Before I could fully comprehend this part of Zac ’ s plan, three strange men were making their way toward me and my cousins. They turned around, knelt down, and waited for us to crawl onto their backs. Francoise jumped on immediately. I watched her like she was in a movie. The man stood up, adjusted her on his shoulders, and took off toward the water. They started wading in, and still I wasn ’ t moving. The water began to creep over Francoise ’ s legs, yet I could not force my own legs to move.

“ Your turn,” Zac said, breaking my reverie. “ Hurry, before we get caught.”

Startled, I jumped on the waiting man ’ s shoulders, shaking and praying that everything would go well in the water. I think I had my eyes squeezed shut the whole time, because I don ’ t remember much beyond getting wet. Next thing I knew, my human ferry was setting me down on Burundian soil. By the grace of God, we ’ d made it! I was free!

I was also, for the first and only time in my life, a refugee.

No one *wants* to be a refugee. It ’ s a last-resort label, the option you give in to when you have no other options. While I felt safer in Burundi, I felt sadder, too, because I did not deserve to be a refugee. My own government

had pushed me out. The day we crossed the Akanyaru River, I looked back across its murky depths to Rwanda and I cried. I cried for the family I ’ d left behind; for the Tutsis who wouldn ’ t make it; because I was too young to be in charge and responsible for two of my younger cousins. We stood on the border of an alien country and had nothing to our names but each other. Well, that and a few bananas and pineapples!

Noticing my tears, Francoise pulled me in for a hug. “ We have seven hours to go, yet, Henriette,” she reminded me. “ Let ’ s start walking.” So, we did.

Zac had accompanied us across the border. He led the way into a dense copse of bushes and tall trees. The path we were walking was not a real path, but an uneven footpath worn by the feet of countless refugees to Burundi. It was narrow, hemmed in on both sides by plants that snagged at our clothes and our skin. As the only place to go was forward, I concentrated on placing one foot in front of another and not tripping into the person in front of me.

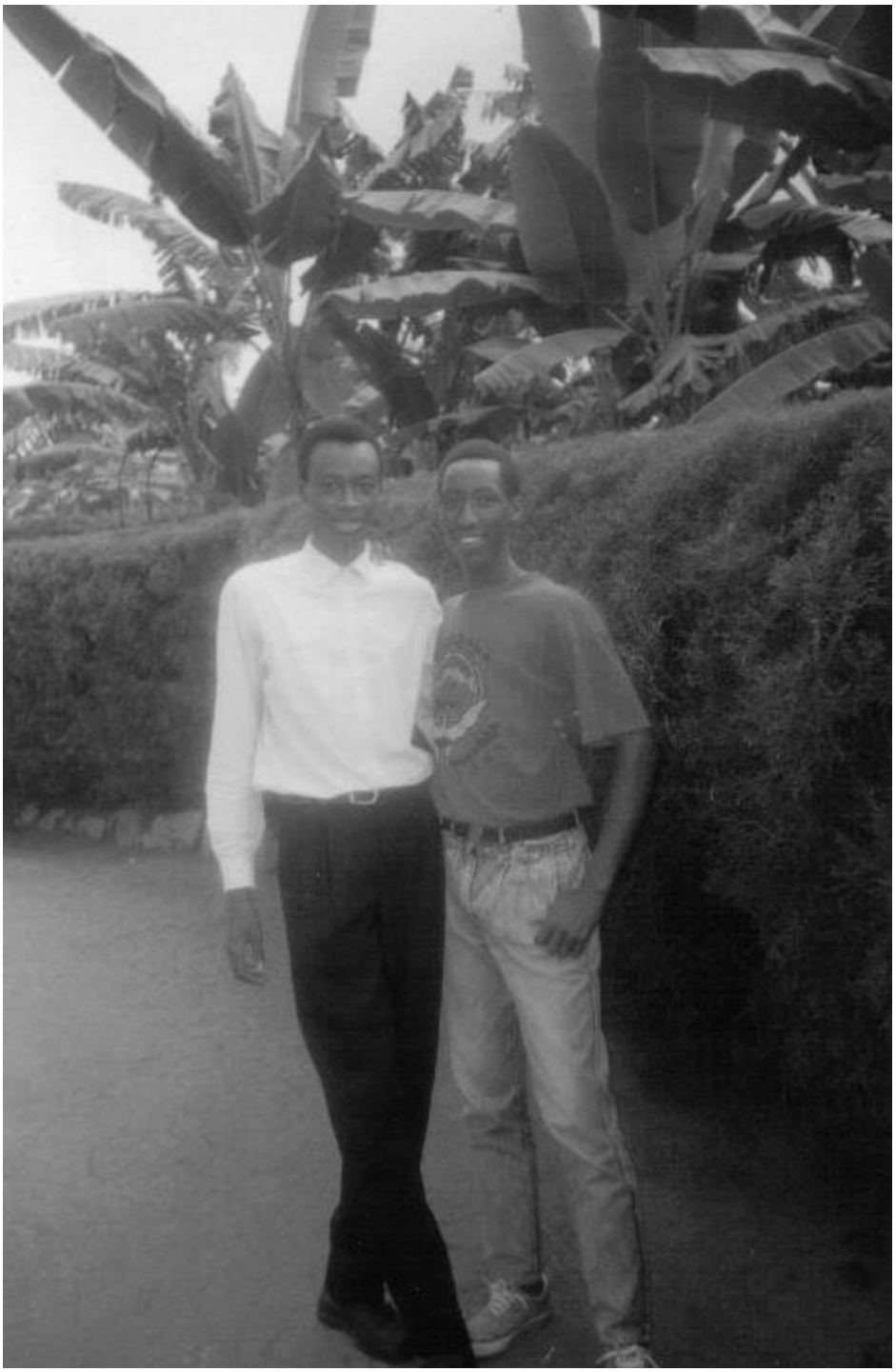
For a while, no one spoke. Then one of the two guys we ’ d fled with tried to strike up a conversation. He started by asking Zac what he did for a living.

“ I save people ’ s lives,” Zac said.

He listed the names of people he ’ d helped to escape, or those he could remember, anyway. The list was long. I asked if he ’ d ever helped a guy named Gatali.

“ What did he look like?” Zac asked.

“ Tall, skinny, light-skinned,” I answered. “ It would have been several months ago now.”



The last known photograph of my cousin Gatali (left), just before he joined the Rwandan Patriotic Front.

“ I don ’ t know. I ’ ve helped so many people, sometimes their faces blur together.”

I nodded. That made sense. “ Have you ever gotten caught?”

Zac smiled. “ Two days ago, as a matter of fact. That ’ s why I was late picking you lot up.”

Huh? My head snapped up to look at him. That was not the answer I ’ d wanted to hear. What if we all got arrested?

“ Then why are you still smuggling people in?” I accused. “ Why didn ’ t you stop?”

Rolling his eyes, Zac said, “ Because I ’ m making a living and I ’ m good at it. Did I or did I not get you into Burundi?”

He had, so what could I say? Zac was right: He was a professional lifesaver.

“ Thank you,” I finally said, hoping to smooth over my earlier words. After all, Zac could up and leave us at any moment, and then we ’ d have to find our own way through the woods. “ Thank you for saving my life, my cousins ’ lives, and these two young men ’ s lives.”

“ You ’ re welcome,” Zac said. No one spoke again after that.

Despite my naturally athletic frame, the days when I ’ d been able to run all over a volleyball court blocking spikes and digging out jump serves were long gone. I was in no condition to make the long walk from the Akanyaru River to our destination of Ngozi, especially after walking all the way from Mugusa to Butare City a few days previous. My feet were covered in blisters, my arms and legs were livid with mosquito bites, and our food and water were limited to what we could carry. At one point near the end of our journey I got so dehydrated that my cousins had to walk to either side of me, helping to hold me up! [27] Underscoring all of it was my constant fear that we would be caught. It weakened me and stole the rest of my energy.

Eight interminable hours later we made it to Ngozi. Zac had arranged for a family there to host Francoise, Uwimana, and me. They were one of a dozen families who regularly took care of new arrivals until the refugees could be sent to a refugee camp. As for the boys, one of the RPF recruits had a sister who lived in town, so the two of them went to stay with her. I gratefully accepted a bowl of food and a jug of water from my host family, then immediately passed out. I was too exhausted that night for even my fear to keep me awake.

The next morning, we were eating breakfast in the kitchen when the Burundian police showed up. Our host family told us to hide, so we ran to the bedroom. Through the window I could see a couple police cars, and in the back of one car I recognized our two young male traveling companions. Right away I knew we were screwed. The policemen ended up loading my cousins and me into the back of the second car and we all drove down to the station. They knew we were in the country illegally, they said. How exactly had we entered without passports?

To get a straight answer, they took us one by one into the interrogation room. It was awful; what was I supposed to say? Should I tell the cops about Zac or not? If I did, and my cousins or the boys didn ’ t, and Zac got in trouble, it would be my fault! But if I didn ’ t, and someone else had already ratted him out, I ’ d likely be imprisoned for lying. As in Rwanda, in Burundi there were no good options, only bad ones.

I decided to tell the truth. Burundi was facing its share of political unrest, but things were better there than in Rwanda. I told the cops that our families were in danger, and that we ’ d left home without our IDs in the event we got caught by Rwandan officials. They wouldn ’ t know who we were that way.

After listening to my story, one policeman said to his partner, “ Let ’ s send them back to Rwanda.”

“ No, you can ’ t!” I begged. “ They ’ ll kill us and everyone in our families!”

The other policeman studied me. “ Get the commander in here,” he said.

I don ’ t know what the commander ’ s name was, but his nickname was Rupiga, which means Always Ready to Fight. He was a tall, strong man of whom everyone was scared. Rupiga always got the last word.

Yet, when he came in to talk to us, I found him to be the opposite of his reputation. He was nice to us. Disarming, not intimidating. “ I know all about what ’ s happening to Tutsis in Rwanda,” he said compassionately. “ We ’ re not going to send you home. We ’ re going to make sure you ’ re safe. Welcome to Burundi.”

The commander was an angel, sent to us by God. His comforting words made me very emotional, as here was a policeman known far and wide for his brutality, yet he was showing us mercy. I was reminded of Jeremiah 33:3: “ Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.” It was but one of many times I ’ ve seen God ’ s mighty hand at work in my life.

Rupiga asked the other policemen if they even knew what was going on in Rwanda. “ If you did,” he said, “ you never would have suggested sending them back. They would be killed, and their blood would be on your hands.”

Instead of deporting us, Rupiga called some friends of his—Rwandan refugee families who ’ d been living in Burundi for many years. He asked them to come to the station and meet with us. When they did, they brought all kinds of food and clothes for us; essential, since we ’ d left home with next to nothing. That afternoon, we were released back into the care of our original host family.

Three days later, I got wildly sick. It could have been the unfamiliar food and water, but initially anyway, I thought it was more likely pure exhaustion. I was tired all the time, throwing up, and had a fever—classic signs of dehydration and overwork. My host mother gave me cold towels and encouraged me to rest.

Weeks went by and I didn ’ t get better. Rupiga and some of the other police officers came to check on me. They brought me fruit, but when Rupiga saw that I still couldn ’ t keep anything down, he suggested I go to the hospital.

“ I don ’ t have any money for a doctor,” I admitted.

“ Nonsense,” Rupiga said. “ I will take you.”

Good thing he did, because I had malaria! Thanks to the police commander ’ s generosity, I was treated for free until the doctors declared me cured.

One of the worst parts about being sick, in my opinion, is that it gives you too much time to think. All those days I spent lying in bed, I wondered about and prayed for my family in Mugusa. Was everyone still alive and well? Was the RPF holding their own against the Interahamwe? It was harder than I ’ d expected to get news from home in Burundi. The newspapers rarely mentioned my country ’ s conflict, and it was still too dangerous to write letters asking for updates. For that reason alone, I made no progress at all on getting my siblings out. Acknowledging that fact made me feel extremely guilty. There I was, receiving free healthcare in a country that offered me sanctuary, and who knew what horrors Fraterne, Chantal, Claude, Asoumpta, and Cadette were facing? I felt like I had failed them.

By the time I was well enough to move about, months had passed since we ’ d left Rwanda. Francoise, Uwimana, and myself were still living with our host family, caught in something like purgatory. We couldn ’ t go home until the war ended, and we couldn ’ t stop impinging on our host family until we could go home. We tried to help our host family out by doing chores and sharing the cooking, but still we felt bad. These people were taking care of us out of the kindness of their hearts. Were we going to be dependent on them forever?

One December day, Francoise and I went to the market to buy food. There we met a man in his sixties, an accountant named Mugaragu. He looked very professional dressed up in a white shirt and tie, but more importantly, he looked Tutsi—and he was! Mugaragu told us how he ’ d left Rwanda in 1959, after his parents had been murdered in the ’ 59 massacre. He ’ d been young then, just a child, and upon fleeing to Burundi he ’ d been adopted by a local family. “ They were wonderful people,” he said. “ They educated me, and I learned all about the Rwandan politics that I ’ d never understood while living there.”

We were curious. Did he have any siblings? Had he been back to visit?

“ I have never been back,” Mugaragu said sadly. “ I have memories of Rwanda, but because I was an only child when my parents were killed, I lost my whole family there. It would be too painful for me to return.”

“ And your adoptive family?” Francoise asked. “ Are they still alive?”

“ My adoptive parents have since passed, too,” Mugaragu said. “ But I am an old man now. It was expected.”

He asked about our families. Was everyone doing okay?

“ Last we knew, yes,” I said. “ I have five siblings—Francoise does also—and other than her dad who died last year, everyone was fine when we left.”

Just thinking about them made me tear up. “ I ’ m sorry,” I apologized, wiping my eyes. “ It ’ s so hard not to know anything.”

Mugaragu nodded. He understood. “ What are your parents ’ names?” he asked me.

I told him, and his eyes lit up. “ I know them!” he exclaimed.

“ What?” I said, beyond shocked.

“ Before I came to Burundi,” he explained, “ I stayed for a time with some family friends. Your dad ’ s uncle helped to raise me. I know your dad, Antoine, and I knew his father, Rugagi, and all of your father ’ s family!”

Now both of us were crying and we hugged joyfully.

“ You must come meet my wife and kids,” Mugaragu decided. He closed up his stand and took us home with him right then.

After learning who we were, Mugaragu ’ s wife asked, “ Please, will you come and live with us?”

So, we did. And just like that, we had a real family, one who knew our family, in Ngozi.

Chapter Nine

ANY COLOR OTHER THAN RED

Mugaragu was a good man, loving to his two precious daughters (who, at six and three years old, respectively, reminded me so much of my younger sisters) and extending the same care to us. As with our original host family, however, I did not want to overstay our welcome, so when Mugaragu said he also knew my father ’ s cousin in Burundi, the man I called Uncle Jeff, I decided we should meet him. The next Saturday morning, Mugaragu drove Francoise, Uwimana, and me four hours southwest to Bujumbura, the capital city of Burundi. The drive was amazing: tons of trees against a backdrop of misty-peaked mountains. It seemed a good omen for meeting a relative we ’ d never seen before.

We got to Bujumbura around four p.m. Uncle Jeff lived in a beautiful neighborhood, quiet and dotted with nice homes. I was surprised, in a good way. Clearly, Uncle Jeff was doing well for himself.

When we pulled into the driveway, Uncle Jeff came out to greet us. He was ecstatic to see Mugaragu, and curious about who his old friend had brought with him. Apparently, Mugaragu hadn ’ t told him about us yet. Uncle Jeff would be as shocked to learn that Mugaragu knew his “ nieces” as we had been to learn that Mugaragu knew Uncle Jeff!

None of us even made it inside before Mugaragu spilled the beans. “ Jeff,” he said, “ meet your cousin Antoine ’ s daughter, Henriette, and her cousins Francoise and Uwimana.” It took Uncle Jeff just a second to put it all together. Then he was swooping in for hugs from all three of us, and yelling for his mother, who was outside in the kitchen cooking, to come join us. Later, he picked up the phone and called every one of our extended family members in Burundi to share the good news. Uncle Jeff was the happiest, most joyful man I have ever known. You would have thought he ’ d won the lottery, so greatly did he rejoice in our presence.

After a long day in the car, we were pleased to spend the night with Uncle Jeff, and to meet some more of our extended family. A bunch of his nieces and nephews came over to see us, [28] and three of them spent the night as well. They were thrilled to meet people from Rwanda, as they ' d heard stories of their ancestral homeland but had never been themselves. Uncle Jeff and his parents had also left in 1959. They ' d lost contact with family in Rwanda almost immediately and had spent the intervening years hoping against hope that everyone had survived. In Burundi, Jeff had become a preacher. He went from church to church sharing the Good News, and he ' d said a prayer every day since leaving for all the Tutsis in Rwanda. The night we stayed, he gave a touching prayer of celebration, thanking God for bringing us together.

By the time we visited at the end of 1993, Uncle Jeff ' s father had passed away and his mother was old. She nevertheless made us the best meal for dinner that night, one we shared with several of their neighbors. She made us feel at home and told us that the house she and Uncle Jeff lived in was also our house—that we should visit as often as we could and ask for anything we needed. We did not go to bed until two a.m. There was too much to talk about over bottomless cups of coffee and tea.

The love and connection I felt with Uncle Jeff ' s family reminded me of my family back home. It was just like any other evening with my uncles and aunties and cousins—only I was in Burundi and they were still in Rwanda. That night, I felt closer to my family than I had since leaving four months before, and also impossibly far away from them. Especially because I was given my own bedroom to sleep in … at once a luxury and the epitome of loneliness.

Having stayed up so late, everyone slept in the next morning. Around eleven a.m. on Sunday, I heard Mugaragu and Uncle Jeff talking in the living room and knew it was time to get up. We needed to head back to Ngozi, and I had to make sure my cousins were up and about as well. I found them snoring soundly and shook them awake. " I ' m going to take a shower," I told Francoise. " Get ready, you and Uwimana are next."

After showering and dressing, I joined Uncle Jeff and Mugaragu for breakfast. Their housekeeper had gone all out. The table was loaded with

bread, cheese, fruit, eggs, coffee, milk, and other good things to eat and drink. Famished, I sat down and dug in. Soon Francoise and Uwimana found us, too. Uncle Jeff hugged each of them good morning and asked them how they ’ d slept. I thought both of my cousins looked relaxed and happy, and that brought joy to my heart.

Laughter and jokes abounded around the breakfast table, until Uncle Jeff got quiet and looked at us seriously. “ Mugaragu,” he said, “ with your permission, I have a question.”

“ Of course,” Mugaragu said, nodding and gesturing for Uncle Jeff to continue.

He began: “ Growing up, I always wanted to go back to Rwanda. But history has never allowed me to do so. I always wanted to see the family members we left behind, but history has never allowed that, either.” He started crying, and we all started snuffling. “ I can ’ t tell you what a blessing it ’ s been to see my cousin ’ s children this week. If I die today, I will go as a happy man, for God has answered my prayers.”

Mugaragu smiled.

“ But please,” Uncle Jeff went on. “ These children are my blood. I want to be the one to take care of them. They have cousins here of the same age. I promise to put them back in school. I promise, Mugaragu, that you could come to visit them anytime. May they stay here? With me?”

Mugaragu was quiet for a moment. “ Girls?” he asked. “ What do you think?”

Francoise, Uwimana, and I looked at each other. Huge grins broke out over our faces. We nodded vigorously.

Mugaragu got up from his chair and walked around the table to Uncle Jeff. The two men hugged each other tightly but didn ’ t say anything.

Is that a yes or a no? I wondered. Here were two men who shared a country and a history, and more than that besides: They knew what it was to have

everything, including the people you loved, taken away. For a moment, I felt bad. Mugaragu had no one but his wife and daughters. Should we have chosen to stay with him instead? But as Mugaragu pulled back from Uncle Jeff, he said, “ You ’ re right. These children are your blood, and if they so choose, they should stay with you.”

Uncle Jeff ’ s mother, who ’ d been listening from the doorway, chimed in. “ Why don ’ t the girls just stay here starting today? We can bring them to Ngozi sometime next week to pick up their stuff. In the meantime, we ’ ll take them shopping.”

Shopping sounded great to us, but understandably, Mugaragu wanted us to say goodbye to his wife and daughters. So, we loaded up and left Bujumbura, knowing we ’ d soon be back to stay permanently. Or at least until the Rwandan civil war ended—if it ever did.

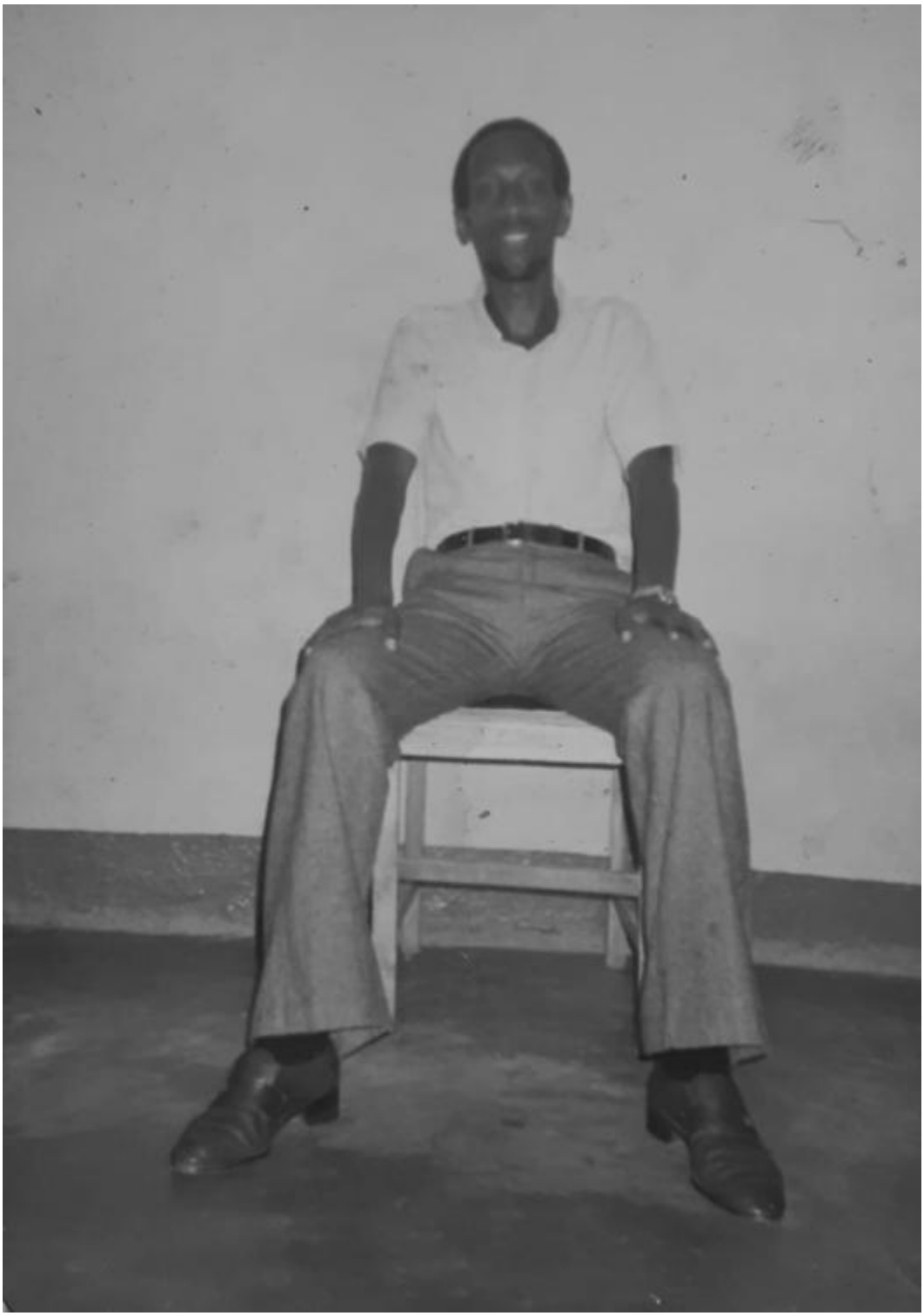
I was glad that Francoise and Uwimana wanted to live with Uncle Jeff, too. I wouldn ’ t have been able to bear it if the three of us split up; I needed them too badly. Uncle Jeff called to check on us and pray with us every day after we left Bujumbura. Two weeks later, he picked us up from Ngozi, and we went to start our new life in the capital.

There was so much to do and explore in Bujumbura. Uncle Jeff, realizing how important it was to keep us busy so we wouldn ’ t worry, made sure we did and explored it all. He introduced us to his friends and other young people in the neighborhood, took us shopping and to restaurants and to church. We studied the Bible and saw the sights—Lake Tanganyika, for example, is the second-oldest, second-largest, and second-deepest freshwater lake in the world. Uncle Jeff and his nieces and nephews drove us there on weekends to play at the beach and eat fish and chips. I didn ’ t know how to swim, but my cousins did, and they enjoyed the clear, cool water. A tourist hot spot, there was also always some festival or other event going on at Lake Tanganyika. It attracted people from all over the world, creating a diverse, exciting ambiance in that city that I loved to be a part of.

I also loved just spending time with Uncle Jeff. He was an exceptional man who dedicated himself to his family, a family that now included me. As we got to know each other, he entrusted me with information or tasks that made

me feel special, much like my father had once done. He showed me where he kept his cash, telling me, “ You and I are the only two people who know this hiding spot,” and said that if I ever needed money, I didn ’ t have to ask —I just had to use the money “ wisely.” I was honored by his trust and generosity and promised never to take advantage of him.

In every way but one, life was wonderful in Bujumbura. The lingering dark stain, of course, was that my heart was still in Rwanda. I missed my parents, grandparents, and siblings, my cousins and all the friends I ’ d grown up with, and still had no way of knowing if they were okay. I wanted so badly to write them a letter, to tell them that by the grace of God we ’ d found a family who loved us like their own. I could picture them all around the table, eating dinner and laughing as my father read aloud my riveting tale of exile, wedding-crashing, and the men who ’ d carried us across the river on their backs, only for us to meet Mugaragu and Uncle Jeff. But I didn ’ t dare; for if such a thing was intercepted, my family would most certainly be killed. With Uncle Jeff ’ s help, his daily reassurances and prayers on their behalf, I learned to believe that everything was okay with them. It didn ’ t stop me from wishing day and night, though, that we could communicate—that I could just know, once and for all, that they were safe.



Uncle Jeff was a blessing on earth. I'm so grateful he gave us shelter in Burundi.

Meanwhile, refugees from Rwanda continued to pour over the border. As their numbers increased, so did the stories of violence and torture. It seemed that things were getting worse at home, not better. The Rwandan government was continuing to persecute Tutsis. Roadblocks remained in full force, and the previously " random" attacks and killings were becoming more calculated and intentional. New Tutsi refugees reported that it was harder than ever to escape. At the same time, it was also more urgent than ever to escape, because Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines and other media outlets had doubled down on their propaganda and attempts to unite the Hutu majority against the Tutsi " common enemy." While the foreign press had at last taken an interest in my country, the international community kept stubbornly ignoring our plight. No one outside Rwanda was doing anything to stop the madness inside Rwanda, and as a result, I started to hate those countries who could have done something but weren ' t, as well as my own. I hated Rwanda for taking away my family, my rights, my identity, my life. I hated everyone else for not helping me to get them back.

Uncle Jeff tried to discourage me from listening to the news. " It ' s too stressful," he said, rightly pointing out how I ' d started having trouble sleeping. " Instead, you should pray and let God take control." I ' ve often heard this approach referred to as *Let go and let God* , and it ' s a good one. But back then, anyway, it felt like surrender, and I just wasn ' t ready to give up.

On nights when I couldn ' t sleep, I ' d flip on the TV or the radio. I ' d watch or listen to the coverage and think about going back. *Whatever happens* , I rationalized, a *t least I ' d be with my family.* These were the thoughts that were keeping me up into the wee hours of April 6, 1994—the morning that President Habyarimana ' s plane was shot down. The morning the Tutsi apocalypse began.

Crazed, I ran to wake up Uncle Jeff and my cousins. I was crying so hard they couldn ’ t understand me at first. Uncle Jeff talked me through several deep breaths, then asked me to repeat myself: “ It ’ s started,” I blubbered. “ The mass killing of Tutsis. The government apocalypse. Uncle Edward told me it was coming … ” I trailed off, lost to the horrors I ’ d heard the CDR describe in Auntie Marie ’ s Kigali kitchen.

Uncle Jeff called everyone into his living room. He turned on the TV, but muted it, so we could pray as the headlines flashed across the screen. We didn ’ t need to read them to know what we were seeing. Streets full of bodies. Bodies full of machete wounds. Chinese machetes littering Rwandan streets. A tenth of the Rwandan population dead or next in line. People being killed as we watched.

How do you absorb that information, knowing that your family is in the thick of it?

Answer: You don ’ t. You go somewhere else in your mind. Somewhere they can ’ t hurt you. You squeeze your eyes so hard you see colors—any color other than red. You grip your own body so tightly that some of those knots will never come undone. You scream so you can ’ t hear the screams of the dying.

Or worse, the cheers of the killers.

Chapter Ten

HAUNTED

It ’ s easier to see the big picture, the full extent of the hatred and violence and damage, when you ’ re outside of it. When you ’ re in the middle of it, it ’ s too crazy. There ’ s too much noise and chaos and misinformation. The pure adrenaline coursing through your body prevents you from being an objective observer. You ’ re stuck somewhere between fight and flight. Those lucky enough to make it out, sometimes they stay stuck there in their minds, forever on the brink of fight or flight. They keep reliving the violence and the trauma. It ’ s up to the rest of us to validate their

experiences. To help them understand what really happened. To remind them they survived.

A month after President Habyarimana ’ s plane was shot down, I went back to Ngozi. I had to be close to the border, to see the refugees flooding across with my own eyes. By and large they were hollow people, ghosts of their former selves. They were missing limbs. They were missing children. Some of them, it seemed, were missing souls. These were the zombies I ’ d been afraid of becoming. These were the haunted bodies I nevertheless hoped to find my own family among. Because if I saw my mother and my father, it would mean they had survived. If I saw just one of them, or one of my brothers or sisters, at least they might know what had happened to the others. And then I could stop wondering. Even if they were definitely dead, I could quit fearing the worst, which is always larger in our imaginations than it is in reality.

The chance that anyone in my family had survived, I figured, was less than one percent. My parents were wealthy. They were well-known. Those facts alone made Antoine and Theresia Tutsi targets. By the same token, however, they were well-known for the right reasons. I mentioned my father volunteered with Caritas, a Catholic charity. Through them, he ’ d been distributing blankets and baskets of food to the needy for years. “ Loving our neighbors,” he used to call it—as in, “ Let ’ s go love our neighbors.” Some of those neighbors were Hutu. Maybe they ’ d remember his generosity and show mercy. Maybe they ’ d protect my family like we had protected them. Maybe my family lived close enough to the Burundi border that they ’ d make it out anyway, like I had. Like Gatali and Francoise and Uwimana had.

When I left Bujumbura for Ngozi in May 1994, my girl cousins chose to remain behind with Uncle Jeff. I didn ’ t blame them. I was glad they would be safe. But I was inexorably pulled to the border. There I became an unwitting relief worker while I waited to see my family ’ s faces again.

My daily routine went like this. Wake up at first light. Breakfast with the host family who ’ d graciously taken me in. Walk to the center of town, where new refugees were dropped off by the humanitarian aid personnel who ’ d picked them up from the border in large trucks, or where they ’ d

gathered after walking across the border to try to reunite with their families. Scan the triage station to see if I recognized any of those needing immediate medical attention. Do the same at the makeshift morgue, hastily constructed for those refugees who ’ d made it across only to die on Burundian soil. From there, I ’ d head to Ngozi ’ s only hospital, which was so overwhelmed that most of their patients were on cots outside in tents. I ’ d give my parents ’ names, my grandparents ’ , my siblings ’ . Had anyone seen a cute little girl named Cadette? When no one had, I ’ d help where I was able. I handed the understaffed nurses needles and rolls of gauze. I screamed for them to come when a pregnant refugee went into labor. (It was the very first birth I ever witnessed!) I watched other volunteers tear the shirts off their backs to staunch gaping neck wounds. I connected lost children and parents. I prayed that someone would do the same for me.

Weeks went by. The death toll mounted. That less-than-one-percent chance that my family had survived shrunk even further.

Between April 6, 1994, when President Habyarimana ’ s plane was shot down, and July 15, 1994, when the Rwandan Patriotic Front captured Kigali, more than one million Tutsis were murdered in what the world now agrees was a genocide. Hutu extremists and the Hutu moderates they managed to recruit slaughtered their fellow citizens at a rate three times faster than German Nazis slaughtered the Jews. [29] And it wasn ’ t just the numbers alone, though they are repugnant. It was the particular brutality of the Rwandan genocide. The fact that more machetes were used to mow down Tutsis than any other kind of weapon. The fact that Tutsi women were raped—two, three, twenty times, sometimes in front of their husbands and children—before they were killed. For far too long, the rest of the world stood by and did nothing while the Hutu Power contingent told everyone exactly what they planned to do and then did it. Still, no one called it a “ genocide,” no one stepped up to stop it (beyond a woefully small UN peacekeeping force *not authorized to shoot*), until the damage was done. Until one in every ten Rwandans was murdered. Until it was harder to find a live Tutsi than a dead one.

France, Belgium, and Italy all sent troops—not to stop the killing, but to rescue their own citizens then stationed in, vacationing in, or otherwise

located in Rwanda. The United States declined to get involved because their congressional elections were coming up, and they feared losing votes over an “ unpopular” cause. Instead of intervening, they sent rubber rafts and boat hooks after the fact to fish bodies from the water. They would not even jam Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, stating that to do so would have violated freedom of speech. Four years later, in 1998, President Bill Clinton would finally visit Rwanda to apologize, and when he did, he would use the word “ genocide” nine times in his speech. [30] In 2003, the UN would establish an “ International Day of Reflection” (celebrated on April 7) in memory of genocide victims, and amend the title in 2018 to the even more explicit “ International Day of Reflection on the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.” [31] It was all too little, too late, though. The international message was clear: Human lives are worth less in Africa.

Although the Tutsi rebels *did* ultimately win, and although most Hutu extremists fled west to Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), and even though the terms “ Hutu” and “ Tutsi” are now banned from everyday usage—ethnicity is no longer taught in schools—the price Rwanda paid for this “ freedom” was too high. My landlocked, savanna grassland country, my ancestral home slightly smaller than the state of Maryland, has never really recovered. Its denizens—many of them now grown children originally born of rape—remain the products of division. They still struggle with poverty, with a lack of jobs and opportunities. The economy, the country ’ s infrastructure, its public welfare systems, all of it had to be rebuilt after the genocide. Mostly, though, Rwandans are still haunted. There are too many ghosts in Rwanda.

Including the spirits of my family members.

One day in mid-late 1994, I received the letter that no one wants to read: a condolence letter from my father ’ s cousin. Your entire family was killed, he wrote. Your mother and father, your grandmothers on both sides, the cousins you grew up with. It was the single worst moment of my entire life, because once I knew for sure that they had died, the last vestiges of my hope died, too. I looked around at the makeshift camps in Ngozi, the hospital I ’ d been helping out at while waiting to see my family, and I realized it was all for naught. They weren ’ t coming to Burundi. They

would never leave Rwanda; they couldn ’ t. I read the letter twice, folded it and stuffed it back in its envelope, and I made a decision. I would not return to Rwanda. There was nothing for me in that country anymore.

Uncle Jeff and my cousins did not agree. As soon as the genocide was over, Uncle Jeff had packed up his mother, his nieces, and his nephews, and they ’ d all moved back to Rwanda. [32] Francoise and Uwimana were equally eager to return. They tried to convince me to go with them, but I would not be persuaded. “ Why?” I asked. “ Why would I go back to a place where once I lived surrounded by people who loved me, where once I was a daughter and granddaughter—and where now I would be an orphan? Without a house, or animals, or friends to boot, as the militia destroyed them, too?” Francoise did not have an answer for me. She only knew, like every other displaced refugee in Burundi, that President Habyarimana ’ s regime—and with it, the Interahamwe—had been defeated. Rwanda had a new government. For the first time since 1959, it was safe for Tutsis to be there. Rwandans who hadn ’ t seen their country in decades, or who had in fact been born in exile outside Rwanda, couldn ’ t wait to go back across the border. They ’ d given their money and their sons to the RPF, and now the RPF had returned their homeland to them. It was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream! I, on the other hand, believed I could never dream there again.

Months passed. Uncle Jeff, Francoise, and Uwimana all made it safely back. Francoise sent the occasional letter to my host family ’ s house in Ngozi, just to ask if I was holding up okay and keep me informed of life in Rwanda. I didn ’ t always answer these letters. I was happy for her and Uwimana but had little of note to share from Burundi. Life (and I did have a strong desire to continue living, at least) felt utilitarian. Eat, sleep, repeat. Do chores. Pretend to smile.

Underneath it all, I was still afraid. I was afraid of the past, the present, the future. I was just afraid.

In January 1995, Francoise came back to Burundi. “ I have news for you, Henriette,” she said, “ about your family. I thought you ’ d want to hear it in person.” Back in Mugusa, Francoise had reconnected with those few extended family members who ’ d survived and found out from them more

details about my parents ’ , grandparents ’ , and siblings ’ deaths. She ’ d also visited the ruins of my family ’ s house, which had burned to the ground, and talked to Tutsi neighbors in the area who ’ d variously challenged or supported rumors about what had happened to my family. “ It sounds like they were killed by Hutu neighbors,” Francoise told me, “ with some help from government officials and the militia when they resisted.” I listened to her but did not react. Some part of me, I knew, was still in denial, refusing to believe that everyone was really dead.

“ Then there ’ s this,” Francoise said, handing me another letter. The envelope was blank on the outside.

“ Who ’ s it from?”

“ Just open it,” she said.

I did, and found a letter from Chantal, my fourteen-year-old sister.

What … how … ?

I read her words so fast they didn ’ t make sense at first. I read them again. And again.

“ Chantal ’ s alive?!” I screamed. “ Why didn ’ t you lead with that?” I wanted to punch my cousin, but I hugged her instead. Suddenly, there was something to live for, something to celebrate. Something worth returning to Rwanda for.

“ Let ’ s go!” I said, shoving my clothes back into the backpack I ’ d carried with me from Rwanda to Burundi. “ Come on, slowpoke!”

Francoise was laughing and both of us were crying, but they were happy tears, the kind I never thought I ’ d cry again.

In her letter, Chantal had confirmed that our parents and the rest of our siblings were dead. Auntie Marie had survived, though, thanks to her Hutu husband, and Chantal was living with her in Kigali. Uncle Edward had actually been arrested after the genocide for war crimes, only to pass away

(before his conviction) from an unrelated illness, so the ladies were holding down the house now. “ It ’ s only the two of us in this crazy world,” Chantal had written. “ Please come stay with us. I miss you.”

Those lines, and not the ones about our sister ’ s and brothers ’ last moments on earth, stayed with me as Francoise and I rode the bus to Kigali together. So much for crossing the Akanyaru River on a stranger ’ s back! I avoided looking at the water as our bus went over the bridge.

Then we were in Rwanda. Like my family, my country had not fared well after the genocide. The land itself looked dead, a bleak and burned-out hull. As the bloodstains on the ground had faded, becoming the color first of rust, then of dirt, before finally disappearing all together, it was obvious that the hard work of rebuilding the country was just beginning.

It didn ’ t take long to reach Rwanda ’ s capital city—certainly not the days it ’ d taken us on foot. We made a pit stop in Butare province to visit Uwimana (who ’ d gotten married!), and then showed up unannounced one afternoon at Auntie Marie ’ s house. She and Chantal couldn ’ t have been more surprised! I think my sister would agree: It was the single most joyful day of our lives—one I will never forget. We cried so many tears of happiness! In the days that followed, though, there would be countless tears of grief, as Chantal told me piece by piece the story of our family in the genocide.

According to Chantal, the family had just sat down for dinner on the night of April 24, 1994, when our father ’ s cousin, a man named Chrysante, stumbled into our house. He was covered in blood, missing an eye, and could barely walk—but he could talk, and he had a bone-chilling story to tell. Just a few hours before, the Interahamwe had attacked the house where Chrysante lived with his mother, his wife, and his kids. The militiamen had beaten the family, scattered their cows, and burned their house to the ground. They ’ d left Chrysante for dead in a ditch. As soon as they ’ d moved on, Chrysante had limped and crawled the forty-five minutes to our house, both to warn our family and to ask for shelter.

While Chrysante was telling his story, his wife and kids, as well as his other siblings—plus some of our father ’ s brothers and sisters—arrived at our

family ’ s house. Thankfully none of them were injured as badly as Chrysante, and of course our father invited them all to stay. The killing hadn ’ t officially begun in our village, but out of an abundance of caution, our dad decided that the men and boys should sleep in the bush that night. (At the time, the Interahamwe was targeting Tutsi males specifically, as tribe was passed down through the men.) By day, it was safe enough for them to be in the house, but at night, everyone—our dad and oldest brothers included—went out to sleep among the trees. Our youngest brother Claude they left at home disguised in a dress, hoping to pass him off as a girl.

“ Three nights later,” Chantal said, “ on April 27, the killers showed up.” They took everything but the clothes on my mother ’ s, sisters ’ , aunts ’ , and cousins ’ backs. “ But they told us we didn ’ t even need the clothes we were wearing,” Chantal commented, “ because we were about to die anyway.” The militiamen took the women and girls, plus the disguised Claude, outside to the street, made them kneel in the dirt, and bade them say their last prayer at machete-point. “ Mom held up her hands to pray for mercy,” Chantal recalled, “ and one Hutu slashed at her hands with his weapon, cutting her.” She screamed, and in that moment, it was like they changed their minds. “ They told us to get up and go back inside—that they ’ d come to kill us the next day instead.”

When the women and girls did as directed, they found two bodies. Alex, Uncle Callixte ’ s son, was lying dead in the front yard. He must have come out from hiding for some reason and been caught. Auntie Adela, our father ’ s sister, was dead in the backyard. She ’ d run in the opposite direction when the Interahamwe had shown up, and obviously she hadn ’ t made it very far.

“ After that,” Chantal said, “ we knew it was just a matter of time. They were going to kill us all, one by one.”

And they did. That night, some Hutu neighbors killed our father in the bush. They hit him over the head with a club and chanted that they were “ killing a snake.” They killed his cousin Chrysante, our uncle Pascal (who ’ d likewise joined our father in hiding), and our boy cousins Ejide and Evaliste. It ’ s likely that all four of them were tortured before they died. The next day, they killed seven more members of our family—a fact we

learned when the mass grave they ’ d been thrown into was exhumed several months later.

I couldn ’ t help it; I had to interrupt my sister. “ What did you do?” I asked. “ Did you think they were coming for you next?”

“ They would have,” Chantal said, “ but the police came.” Guns drawn, the police rounded up all of the women and girls and said they would protect them, but that they had to go to ISAR (Institut des Sciences Agronomiques du Rwanda), a government-run agricultural center in the middle of the woods. Our mother, siblings, aunties, and cousins began walking in that direction, meeting up with hundreds of other Tutsis as they went. They picked up Grandma Mutamba along the way. Over the next few days, thousands of Tutsis, many of them wounded, gathered at ISAR. There they had shelter but no food, and everyone was tired and hungry. “ The crying never stopped,” my sister said, “ until one day, we woke up surrounded by both soldiers with guns and Interahamwe with traditional weapons. They started shooting and slicing, left to right. Those who were able to run, ran, but the oldest and youngest among us perished … including Grandma Mutamba.”

Tears filled my eyes. She was hunted, my grandmother. Like she was an animal.

“ And Cadette?” I asked, imagining the three-year-old girl I ’ d waved goodbye to on that long-ago morning.

“ We don ’ t know for sure,” Chantal said, “ because we ’ ve never found her body. But they got mom, and Auntie Hilary, and I doubt Cadette made it out that day, either.” [33]

“ Well, how did you escape?” I asked.

Chantal sighed. “ That ’ s another long story. How about some tea first?”

Chapter Eleven

IDENTIFYING DETAILS

After several cups of tea, Chantal continued. “ So, we were running away from ISAR, into the woods, and everyone got split up, right?”

I nodded. I wanted to know every detail.

“ Well, I saw two of our cousins [who were just toddlers then] crying on the ground. Their mom was nowhere to be found, and I knew they ’ d be killed if I left them there, so I scooped them up, one in each arm.”

Chantal held her bent arms out in front of her, reenacting the moment, and my heart melted. She was such a tender soul.

“ But some militiamen noticed me. They ran after me and tore the boys out of my arms.”

Her arms dropped back to her sides, empty.

“ They killed them, those little babies. And there wasn ’ t anything I could do.” While the men were thus distracted, Chantal ran. She ran and she ran, looking back occasionally to make sure no was chasing her, until she ran smack into the chest of another man!

It was one of our father ’ s employees, a young Hutu man, probably twenty years old. “ Shh!” he whispered before Chantal could scream. He indicated that my sister should follow him quietly.

Chantal didn ’ t know what to do. Did this young man mean her harm? He was a caretaker on the farm who fed and looked after the cows. He ’ d known and been a friend to the family for years. But then, the same was true of the men who ’ d just killed our father. Reluctantly, Chantal crawled after him through the brush.

“ He could have killed me,” Chantal said, shuddering. “ But he didn ’ t. He dressed me up in banana leaves so I looked like a militiaman, brought me to Auntie Belethilida ’ s house, and made sure I was safe.”

“ I knew it!” I crowed, feeling vindicated. “ I *knew* there had to be some good karma in the world. Dad gave jobs to all those Hutu men on our plantation, gave milk to their children, treated them all so well for years. I prayed that one of them would look out for you, and this guy did. I am so thankful!”

Chantal nodded, but added, “ We almost gave Auntie Belethilida a heart attack, though.” Apparently, Auntie Belethilida had seen Chantal and the strange young man coming through the trees, and reasoned that Chantal had been captured, and that this man was either going to kill my sister in front of her or kill her in front of my sister!

Once they got it all sorted out, Auntie Belethilida said sadly, “ Are you really still alive, Chantal?” She ’ d almost convinced herself my sister was an illusion. When Chantal assured our aunt that she was indeed alive and well, Auntie Belethilida looked even sadder for a moment. “ I ’ d come to terms with everyone being dead,” she explained. “ Now that you ’ re not, I don ’ t think I could handle losing you a second time.”

The genocide, of course, was not yet over. Thanks to our father ’ s employee, Chantal had made it to our aunt ’ s house—but would any of them survive the night … or the weeks to come?

Luckily, like Auntie Marie, Auntie Belethilida was also married to a Hutu man. What ’ s more, Uncle Ndamage was kinder than Uncle Edward; he loved us like his own kids. The night that Chantal showed up at Auntie Belethilida ’ s house, Uncle Ndamage went to the leader of the neighborhood militia and pleaded with him to bypass their house. He knew the militiaman was likewise married to a Tutsi woman and made an appeal to his better nature. Whatever Uncle Ndamage said must have worked, because the militia really did pass over Auntie Belethilida ’ s house that night.

“ But we couldn ’ t stay safe there forever,” Chantal said. The Rwandan Patriotic Front was fast approaching, and although the RPF were the “ good guys,” they were likely to take one look at Uncle Ndamage and kill him for being Hutu. At least that ’ s what the voices on RTLM were saying, and what Uncle Ndamage believed—that the Tutsi rebels had come to “ take

their revenge.” In reality, the RPF was working to get people out of hiding and into hospitals, reunite families, and restore the country. As the fear-mongering continued, though, many Hutus were fleeing. “ So, after a few weeks, we decided to leave for the Congo,” Chantal recounted. “ Me, Auntie Belethilida, and Uncle Ndamage.”

They got stopped at every roadblock. Each time, Uncle Ndamage said, “ Yes, my wife and my niece are Tutsi, but I am Hutu, and if you want to kill them, you ’ re going to have to kill me as well.” His bravado protected them for a while, but then they got to Kibeho. The killing was especially bad in Kibeho, and making the most painful choice of her life, Auntie Belethilida decided the threesome should split up. “ Here, Chantal,” she said, handing my barefoot sister the shoes off her feet. “ Take these and go with those people over there.” She pointed to a group of French troops staffing what was known as the Turquoise Zone in Kibeho—a large refugee camp for Hutus attempting to escape to the Congo as RPF was approaching. Auntie Belethilida spoke with a Rwandan woman in the camp named Christina, who was acting as translator for the French troops. Christina explained that they were going around picking up kids without parents. Praying that Chantal would be all right, Auntie Belethilida gave away her precious niece.

Chantal didn ’ t want to go. In the few weeks that she ’ d lived with Auntie Belethilida and Uncle Ndamage, they ’ d become like parents to her. They ’ d cooked and laughed and cried together. Auntie Belethilida was the mother Chantal needed after having witnessed our mother ’ s death. How could she lose Mom twice? How could Mom tell her to go, then walk away?

“ Uncle Ndamage wasn ’ t very happy with Auntie Belethilida for that,” Chantal laughed. “ He told me later that he was worried the French people would kill me. That I would die and he and Auntie Belethilida wouldn ’ t know it. But the French people were very nice.”

“ And Auntie and Uncle? What happened to them?”

“ As far as anyone knows, they made it to the Congo. But we haven ’ t heard from them.” [34]

Here's Chantal with Auntie Belethilida, who rescued her from certain death during the genocide. My sister is so beautiful with her super light skin, the legacy of our father.

" How long were you in the Turquoise Zone?" I asked.

“ A few days. Then Christina took me to her house in Kigali. After the genocide was over, someone told Aunt Marie that I had survived, and she came to get me at Christina ’ s house. I ’ ve been here ever since.”

I turned to Auntie Marie with such gratitude. “ Thank you for giving Chantal a home here.”

“ Don ’ t be silly,” Auntie Marie said. “ It ’ s your home, too, for as long as you need.”

I smiled at her, troubled. “ I ’ m sorry about Uncle Edward.”

“ Me, too,” Auntie Marie said, patting my hand. “ Me, too.”

At least the three of us had each other.

One morning I went downtown in search of food. Rwanda ’ s food supply chain had been totally disrupted, so we depended on bags of corn and beans and packets of milk powder from humanitarian organizations then. I rounded the corner and who did I see but my cousin Etienne! He was wearing a military uniform and looking quite handsome. “ Etienne!” I squealed, jumping into his open arms and hugging him like I would never let go. “ You ’ re alive! Oh, my God! It ’ s so good to see you!”

Etienne looked well, considering he ’ d enlisted in and served with the Rwandan Patriotic Front (which had since become the national military). No missing limbs or obvious scars or anything. “ How ’ s your family?” I asked. “ Did anyone survive?” [35]

“ They all survived,” Etienne said, smiling.

“ Oh, my God!” I said again, beaming and jumping back into his arms. It was a miracle, the best news I ’ d heard all month!

“ You must come visit Chantal and Auntie Marie. They would love to see you,” I pleaded.

Etienne agreed, and we set off at once. My sister was going to be so surprised!

Back at Auntie Marie ’ s house, though, I was the one who got surprised. After hugging and kissing Chantal and my aunt hello, Etienne sat me down and said, “ There ’ s something I need to tell you.”

“ Okay,” I said, curious as to what had my cousin so serious all of a sudden.

“ I owe you an apology,” Etienne said. “ In the street, I told you my family had survived, because I did not want to make you cry. But only one of my sisters survived. My parents, my other sisters, my brother—they ’ re all dead.”

I started crying, and Etienne hugged me, though he did not cry at all. *What happened to Etienne?* I found myself thinking. *Just twenty years old and he ’ s stronger than me!*

Still, I felt grateful for his thoughtfulness and his presence. I would need Etienne ’ s strength to get through my own family ’ s funerals. [36]

After the genocide, the first body my surviving family members found was that of my mother. Her sisters, Marie and Aurelie, took her body to their parents ’ house and buried her alongside Grandpa Dionise. I was still in Burundi when this happened, or I would have attended the burial with Chantal. As it was, Chantal had to describe to me the way Mom ’ s hair had kept growing even in death. She ’ d always had long hair, but by the time they buried her properly, it was longer than it had ever been in life. They put off having a Christian funeral for her until more bodies were uncovered and they could have one funeral for everyone. That ’ s the event I made it back in time for.

In order to deliver the bodies to their rightful resting places, though, the mass graves they ’ d been thrown into initially had to be exhumed, and the bodies identified by the families. The process of finding, exhuming, and identifying the bodies took a very long time because many of the mass graves were not even marked. The Hutus who ’ d dug the graves didn ’ t want to tell us where they were, either, since they feared retribution. In the

end, there was a lot of trial and error, a lot of digging of holes that led nowhere, until the government got involved and gave us more manpower to help speed the process along.

Chantal and I assisted the exhumations. We helped to dig, and we helped to catalogue identifying details on the bodies—specific pieces of clothing, for example, or a wedding ring engraved with clear initials—that would allow our fellow Tutsis to recognize their loved ones. One grave we opened had more than a hundred bodies in it. Some were mothers who ’ d died holding their babies in their arms. Others had the weapons that had killed them still stuck in their heads or their chests. The smell was gag-inducing and unforgettable. I still think, every once in a while, that I smell it on the wind. It was terrible, stomach-turning work, but it was necessary work. It underscored the level of hatred that human beings can feel toward one another, *and* it began for me the long process of healing. There ’ s nothing more powerful than being there for other victims—than demonstrating to the killers that despite their best attempts, they did not win.

Once a body was identified, the surviving family members typically wrapped their loved one in a bedsheet and took them home. They often cried the whole way there. Their pain was palpable. Individuals with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) sometimes suffered flashbacks at the sight of the bodies. They ’ d think the genocide was happening all over again and run and hide as if someone was chasing them. In a country that didn ’ t understand PTSD, such individuals were unfairly stigmatized. They were called “ crazy” or “ possessed” or worse. Because I didn ’ t know anything about PTSD at the time, either, I ’ d run after these people and pull them in for a hug. A hug, of course, was not enough. Their wounds were deeper, where a hug could not reach.

At the end of trying days like these, all I could manage was a hot shower and a cup of tea. I did not want to see or talk to anyone. Often, I burst spontaneously into tears. Their pain, I thought, is my pain—and so I took on their pain, too. I carried it and it grew heavier every day. Meanwhile, I grew lighter. Too light. Soon my 6 ’ 1” frame, a Tutsi trademark, weighed less than 125 pounds. One day I found myself crying on the shoulder of another volunteer, a stranger. She asked me where I lived so she could take

me home. I sat on the curb for thirty minutes, trying to understand what was wrong with me, then walked home alone. The rest of that week, I did not eat, and I barely slept. The bodies in the graves and the cries of the survivors, they followed me and gave me no rest.

Unsurprisingly, I sank into depression. I recognized the symptoms from watching Grandma Mutamba. Life didn ’ t mean anything anymore. I started to feel jealous of the victims of the genocide, as I believed they were in a better place than me. “ You were so selfish,” I even said aloud to my dead family members. “ You were selfish to leave and not take me with you.” But then I would think about the people crying in the street, and I knew they needed me. For some of them, a hug would help. Eventually, I got back to digging.

It wasn ’ t always digging, either. A lot of Tutsi bodies were never buried, but simply stacked in the churches where they died. During the genocide, groups of Tutsis had gathered in churches hoping they ’ d be safe there, but the holy ground had not dissuaded for a second the hellbent Hutu extremists. In many places (including St. Famille Catholic Church in Kigali, Nyamata Church in Bugesera, and Nyarubuye Church in Kibungo) the house of God had become a house of death. Militiamen would go down the list of names, and if they found anyone in the church who was on the list, they would take those Tutsis outside and execute them. At the height of the chaos, they stopped bothering with the lists altogether and opened fire inside, threw grenades into, or flat-out bulldozed the churches indiscriminately. More than 32,000 people were murdered in just the three churches mentioned above. Where the priests who ran the churches were also Hutu Power sympathizers—like Father Wenceslas at St. Famille—they, too, participated in raping and/or killing Tutsi women.

During the genocide against Tutsis, my uncle Charles hid in the chapel next door to St. Famille Catholic Church with his son Emmanuel. The militia found them, took them outside, and slaughtered them. Many Catholic churches in Rwanda are memorial sites today.


NANJYE NZAJYA NKWIBU
BONNE ET HEUREUSE

My deceased uncle Charles. His wife and two children (pictured here) survived the genocide; his son Emmanuel (not pictured) did not.

Despite the bloodshed, I continued attending Mass at St. Famille in the years following the genocide. You may be thinking, *Did all that killing not shake Henriette ' s faith? How did she reconcile a loving God with a God who would let such a thing happen?* And, my friends, you would be right: I did struggle with a deep, deep crisis of faith. But we ' ll tackle that bit in another chapter.

For now, suffice it to say that on one beautiful Sunday morning, I was walking home from church and actually feeling better about the world and my role in it. We were expecting some family friends for lunch, people I was very excited to see. When I got back to Auntie Marie ' s house, I entered through the kitchen, which was in a small addition attached to the main house. There I expected to find my sister preparing food. I thought I would say hi to her before I went into the big house to greet our guests.

To my surprise, though, Chantal was not in the kitchen. Only the housekeeper was there by herself. " Where is everyone?" I asked.

" They ' re talking in the living room," the housekeeper said.

Before leaving, I opened every cooking pot and inspected what Chantal and Auntie Marie had made. It all looked and smelled great—a real treat for our visitors and for me, too!

I walked into the main house buzzing to see our friends. Francis and his wife were a young married couple with two kids. They ' d made Auntie Marie the godmother of their firstborn. " Hello!" I called in Kinyarwanda while still in the hallway. I was already grinning; we always had such fun together!

But then I rounded the corner and saw more than ten solemn-faced people gathered in the living room. Most of them were strangers. Francis and his wife were among them, but they were not their usual jolly selves. Auntie

Marie and Chantal, I realized next, were crying on the sofa. “ What ’ s going on?” I asked them.

“ They found them,” Auntie Marie said slowly. “ They found your dad ’ s remains, and those of your cousins, Evaliste and Alex.”

I had been praying for this moment, but now that it was here, I didn ’ t know what to do. So many competing thoughts flew through my mind, so many confusing emotions. Everyone was staring at me, as though waiting to see how I would react. Overcome, I ran into my bedroom and started sobbing.

In that dark and empty room, my wishes were dark, too. I wanted to go to every remaining Hutu home and scream at the parents and their kids about how evil they were, how God would surely destroy them the same way they ’ d destroyed my family. When at last I opened my eyes, my sister was sitting on the ground next to me. She was lost to her own grief, and I wondered, *Who is supposed to comfort the other in this situation?* Chantal was just fifteen. As the older sister, it was my duty to be strong for her. I never wanted her to worry that she would lose me, too.

After I got myself together, I went back to the living room. I learned that ten of my family members ’ bodies had been found. Officials needed a family member to be present while the bodies were exhumed. That duty likewise fell to me. Chantal was too young to be in charge of such a thing.

That very afternoon, I and two of my surviving cousins, Rugema and Aphrodice, made the three-hour drive to Butare province. Having helped to exhume other bodies, I had some idea what to expect, though there were always a few unknown variables. For example, the bodies around the edges of a mass grave, the ones in contact with the soil, tended to decompose faster. They were often little more than skeletons. Whereas the bodies sandwiched between other bodies usually retained more flesh, though it would be dried and stretched. What condition would my father and cousins be in? I hoped they would still look fresh, as though they ’ d died two days ago instead of a year ago. I wanted to be able to touch them. It was an impossible hope, I knew. No matter how it went, I was committed to

making sure they were treated with respect and that they received the burial they deserved.

Chapter Twelve

AN OATH

The exhumation went as smoothly as something that grim can. It was weird being back in the village where once all my aunties ’ and uncles ’ homes had been to watch as their bodies were lifted out of the earth. My greatest fear was that the volunteers would get to my father ’ s body, and he ’ d still have the weapon that killed him lodged in his skull. I didn ’ t want to see that, didn ’ t want to know just how much he had suffered. Dad was only forty-four years old when he died. Mom was forty-two.

As it was, the volunteers had several other bodies to remove before they got to my family members. No one could believe how many Tutsis were in just one grave. I recognized a few of them, including two friends I ’ d grown up with and their brothers. One of their mothers sobbed and cried out their names as her children were unearthed. Some of the bodies belonged to people who ’ d been missing for quite some time. No one knew how they ’ d ended up in that particular mass grave. Still others went unrecognized and unclaimed altogether. It was the government ’ s responsibility to bury those individuals.

While the exhumation was ongoing, a handful of exceptionally bold Hutus stood on their porches and watched. A couple of them, moved by shame and embarrassment, approached and asked to help. I felt disgusted by their presence. I wanted to shout, “ You tried to murder us all, but God protected us and here we are.” Instead, I coached myself to remember that not every Hutu was a murderer; some had risked their lives and the lives of their children trying to protect Tutsis.

And then there was Dad. I ’ ll spare you the details; no one needs that kind of image burned into their mind. Auntie Hilary lay beside him. Three of my cousins were under their mothers. All told, they filled ten coffins. Many,

many more people than that—almost two hundred and fifty—came out for their funerals.

As anyone who has lost a loved one knows, funerals cost money. And in the years after the genocide, money was in very short supply—not just for my family, but for most Tutsis. In order to raise the funds to give my father, siblings, and cousins a proper burial, then, I asked surviving family and friends to contribute what they were able. A few francs here and there added up. Eventually I could afford coffins and flowers for everyone. My mother ' s cousin ' s son, who was a Catholic priest, offered to preside over the ceremony free of charge. Father Welars had been born outside of Rwanda and only recently moved to Kigali post-genocide. He was eager to connect with family members he ' d never met before and donated his services whenever possible.

The morning of the burial, I asked Rugema to take me to Mugusa. Before we re-committed my family members ' bodies to the ground, I wanted to see the place they ' d last walked, laughed, loved, one final time.

Looking at the ruins of Mugusa, I remembered what Grandma Mutamba had told me. How her house had been burned to the ground in 1959 while she ' d watched from the hillside opposite. Now, both of her new houses and both of my family ' s houses had burned to the ground as well. There was nothing but a black smudge where they used to be. The street leading to the houses was completely gone. One avocado tree (the one I used to climb as a child) and a few coffee plants were all that remained of my father ' s plantation.

Our Hutu neighbor ' s house, on the other hand, was still standing, completely untouched. It hadn ' t even been raided, as so many abandoned homes had, for the TV or other items of worth. (While still in Burundi, I ' d watched many locals come back across the border carrying goods looted from Rwandan homes.)

" I ' d like to go give that man a piece of my mind," I said to Rugema. " I ' d like to ask him why—why our family and not his. Why our home and not his." My cousin understood but knew there was nothing we could do about

it. That neighbor, like many Hutus, had fled to the Congo. There would be no justice. No revenge.

In the distance, we could just make out another Hutu family watching us from afar. Their children stood with them—all of their children. Like they were saying, *We have the right to life,* when my family had not. *Do they feel guilty?* I wondered. *Or given another chance, would they kill us all over again?*

It was too dark a prospect. Angry, I swore an oath I would live to retract: “ I will never, ever forgive the Hutus until I go to my own grave.”

I wished anew that I ’ d asked my mother and grandmother, while they were still alive, more about how they ’ d handled their pain in the wake of the ’ 59 massacre. Once upon a time, their experiences had been but family stories; now they were my reality as well. *Did they, like me* , I thought, *wonder what they ’ d done to deserve this pain? If so, what had made them keep going? How had they recovered? Why* , I questioned, *did they not raise me to hate Hutus? They could have. Instead, they taught me about forgiveness … though I don ’ t feel like forgiving anyone now* . I also wanted to apologize to them. As a child, I hadn ’ t paid enough attention to their stories, I realized. I hadn ’ t given them enough hugs to comfort them and thank them for their sacrifice. My last, most painful musing was: *Will my own daughter inherit the family “ legacy”—of fear, resentment, and doubt?*

After Rugema and I walked around for a while, I started to feel nauseous. It was a general sense of wrongness, with the land and all the blood it had absorbed. I told my cousin I was ready to leave, and we drove silently back to the church in Save. It, too, had been mercifully spared.

At the peak of summer, 1995, I found myself standing in dejected silence among the coffins of ten of the people I loved most in the world. My colorful traditional outfit, consisting of a long purple skirt and a long purple headscarf, seemed too cheery for such a dark occasion. So did the beautiful flowers we ’ d purchased for their graves—real graves, this time; not mass ones.

Slowly, and before they could take him away from me again, I opened my father ’ s coffin. I wished to speak to him one last time. “ Hi, Dad,” I said, staring at what remained of his handsome face. For a moment, I had the strange urge to ask him how he was. But that was an old habit, and anyway, wherever he is now he ’ s surely better. So quiet that no one else could hear, I told him how much I loved him; that he ’ d been a great father and husband to Mom; that I knew how much he ’ d sacrificed for us in a very tough time. “ Remember going to church together on Sundays?” I asked. “ Those are some of my favorite memories with you.” I said he ’ d done nothing wrong. He hadn ’ t deserved to die. “ The only thing you were guilty of is loving the people who killed you.” I reminded him that the Bible tells us to forgive our trespassers. Really, I was reminding myself.

From there, I moved to Grandma Mutamba ’ s coffin. I whisper-recalled the nights when, as a young girl, I ’ d stayed at her house and shared her bed. Listened to her stories. “ You taught me about our family history,” I thanked her. “ You were young yet when you lost your husband the same way you died. But you raised your six kids very well, modeling for all of them, and for your grandchildren, how to be strong and forgiving.” Tears rolled down my face. “ Now I have just one final question for you, Grandma. Can you please forgive me? For leaving the country without telling you?” She didn ’ t answer, but I hoped that she ’ d heard me.

Walking toward my cousins ’ coffins, I saw Chantal following me. I wiped my tears and pulled her in for a hug. Just then, Auntie Marie ’ s voice rang out above the crowd. “ Everyone ’ s here,” she said, focusing our attention. “ It ’ s time.”

The service lasted about an hour. It was a typical Catholic ceremony. Someone read from the Old Testament, Father Welars gave a beautiful sermon, and Chrysante ’ s daughter Alice recited a poem she ’ d written. [37] Afterward, we buried the coffins at a genocide memorial site in Gikonko. [38] The eating and reminiscing went late into the night. It was the sendoff my family deserved.

My sister Chantal laying flowers on our father's grave at his funeral.

Sometime the next day, I went to hang up my traditional outfit and paused. It was the first funeral I ' d had occasion to wear it to. It would not be the last. *How many more funerals will there be?* I wondered. *How many more bodies will they find?*

Although listening to the stories was hard, after we buried ten of my family members, I made it my personal mission to find out what had happened to the rest of them. My cousin Olive, Auntie Adela ' s daughter, had died in the genocide, but Olive ' s daughter Leticia had survived. She filled in what Chantal could not, including the harrowing tale of how she and other teenaged girls had been singled out to be " housekeepers" in the militiamen ' s homes, which really meant sex slaves. Leticia didn ' t want to talk too

much about that, which I respected. It meant she left me with more questions than answers, though—like what had happened to the rest of my family?

The first Christmas without them was the worst. Followed by the " first" of everything else. The first time I realized my parents would never see me graduate. The first time it hit me my dad would not be there to walk me down the aisle. The first time I acknowledged that my still-missing, presumed-dead siblings would never grow up, graduate, or get married themselves. When friends commented to Auntie Marie how " quiet" I had become, she ' d tell them I got it from my father ' s side of the family, as both he and his siblings were reserved. She knew, though, like I knew—and let ' s face it, likely our friends did, too—that my quietness was different. It ' s what remained after everything else was taken.

More than a decade later, three of my siblings were discovered in a different mass grave in Butare province. Chantal had them buried in 2012. Because I had already moved to the US, I could not attend. Cadette, my five-year-old sister, was not among the bodies. Her remains have yet to be recovered. [39] Gatali, my cousin who ' d left to join the RPF, has never been found, either. It is assumed he died in battle. His loss hurts me as much as my blood brothers ' and sister ' s deaths, though I know he went out fighting for our freedom.

The thing is, Gatali and others like him only had to fight for our freedom because the Rwandan government was trying to take it away. The only reason my parents and my siblings died was because they came into this world Tutsi. What I mean to say, and what I want you to know beyond a shadow of a doubt, is that *genocide does not just happen* . It is planned. It is a deliberate attack on one group by another, and not because of something the first group did, but because of the way God made them. That *difference* , that *diversity* —it ' s meant to be beautiful, meaningful, intentional. But some people are offended by anything " other." They want to subdue, or worse, wipe out, what they don ' t understand.

And so it starts … often with the parents, who teach their kids words like " cockroach." *They are foreigners. They moved here from another part of the world* . Who model how to treat second-class citizens. *They don ' t look like*

you. They are enemies of the country . Little by little, the hatred gets fed. Lies spread. *They ' re not even human. It ' s okay to kill them* . Tempers flare. *They have nice things—cars and houses. Those things can be yours when they ' re gone* . A plan develops. *There will be no consequences* . Someone places an order for ten thousand machetes. *You have your government ' s blessing* . Ten thousand more. *Wait for the signal* . There ' s a code word. A trigger event.

And then? Then there ' s an apocalypse.

It takes time, generations even, for that much hate to build and reach the tipping point. Genocide does not happen overnight. Again, I will say, it is *planned* .

By the same token, however, genocide can be prevented. Where people can be taught to hate, they can be taught to love. Where they can learn to hurt, they can learn to forgive … even, as it turns out, me!

Chapter Thirteen

NEW HENRIETTE

Thanks to my family, I ' m a lifelong Christian. But it wasn ' t until 1996 that I invited Christ into my heart. I was living with Auntie Marie in Kigali, taking computer classes to fill the time, and reading the Bible like it was the only book ever written. My dad had taught me to turn to God and the church any time I needed help, and now that he was gone, the gospels felt like the last remaining link between us. Although I ' d read the Bible cover to cover many times before, I dove back in with something like extreme hunger. There was a hole inside me where my family had been, and I needed to fill it. I needed answers and the nourishment that only Jesus provides.

Two passages in particular stuck out for me during this time. The first was John 8:12. In it, Jesus says, " I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." This promise spoke to me because I very much felt like I was walking in

darkness. Or drowning in it, maybe. I was drowning in an ocean of pain, fear, and anger, and I did not know how to sail in those waters by myself.

When Jesus proclaims that he is the light of the world, however, we are reminded that we are never alone. We may have a limited capacity to understand the things we see in this world or the events that happen in our lives, but He is always by our side.

The second passage to resonate with me was the story of Job. If you ' re not familiar, Job is described as a " blameless" and " upright" man who feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, plus thousands of sheep, camels, oxen, and donkeys—a " very great household" indeed. Job himself is called " the greatest of all the men of the East." Well, one day, a messenger appeared while Job was having dinner. The messenger said that a neighboring tribe had attacked! They ' d stolen Job ' s livestock and killed his servants. What was Job going to do?

Before Job could respond, a second messenger appeared. He, too, said Job ' s livestock and servants were dead, but he blamed " the fire of God fallen from Heaven" for the attack.

A third messenger contradicted the first two: Yes, Job ' s livestock and servants were dead or gone, but it was the work of a different tribe than the first messenger had named.

While he was yet speaking, a fourth messenger showed up with the worst news of all. Not only were the livestock gone and the servants dead, but the house where Job ' s children were had collapsed, killing them all instantly.

In a matter of moments, this man of God had gone from having everything to having nothing. He ' d been arbitrarily punished by the Heavenly Father for doing what God asked of him—remaining humble and avoiding evil—or so Satan wanted Job to think.

Every time I ' d heard or read this story in the past, I was skeptical that God would let one good man lose everything all at once. Until, that is, the same happened to me.

Like Job, I had no control over my situation, the terror and death wrought by the genocide. In the wake of my family members ' deaths, I was left with one thing only: a simple question. Why?

I tried so many ways to rationalize it. *Maybe we sinned against the Lord* , I remember thinking. *Maybe it goes all the way back to Grandpa Rugagi ' s death in 1959.*

What re-reading Job helped me to accept is that God does not allow suffering in our lives simply because we are sinners. If that was true, Job never would have suffered; he was a " blameless, upright" man after all. Instead, suffering is a test of our love for and trust in God. It ' s the fire that refines us, that prepares us for the day we will walk with Him in the light.

If life was only about what we " have" while on earth, whether family, livestock, fame, etc., it would make sense to take the loss of those people and things personally. But it ' s not. Life is preparation for what comes after. It is, first and foremost, *time* to work on our relationship with God and His son Jesus Christ. Because Job realized that truth, after losing everything, he was blessed many times over.

And in the years since the Rwandan genocide, I, too, have been blessed many times over.

In 1996, there were no jobs in Rwanda. It ' s not like you could walk to the nearest McDonald ' s and apply. McDonald ' s didn ' t exist in my country. The future of tech seemed promising, though, so despite not having a high school diploma (I ' d left for Burundi before I could graduate, remember) I enrolled in computer classes at the local community college. I went two hours a day, twice a week, catching the bus there and back. The rest of the time I helped the housekeeper cook and clean, fended off Paul ' s renewed advances, [40] or read the Bible in bed, the only place I felt safe and peaceful anymore.

One day I got off the bus from school and decided to take a shortcut home. It took me down an alley and past a new church in Auntie Marie ' s neighborhood, a small Pentecostal chapel that had opened after the genocide. [41] Without really realizing it, I started talking to myself out loud.

“ Oh, look at that church. I wonder when they opened? Can anyone visit them?” That ’ s when the young man who was walking in front of me turned around and said, “ Yes, of course. Everyone is welcome.” He turned up the sidewalk leading toward the main doors, and two other men, pastors by the looks of them, opened the doors and ushered first the young man and then me inside.

“ We are fasting and praying today,” one of the pastors explained. “ Will you join us?”

I said yes, and the other pastor asked me if I wanted to receive Jesus.

“ I do,” I said, not knowing exactly what that meant, but feeling called nonetheless.

Inside, the pastors and the congregation prayed over me. They asked me to repeat the prayer after them and accept Jesus Christ as my personal savior. Once I had, they handed me a calendar to make sure I knew about the service schedule, and then I went on my way. I remember feeling very happy walking home. Something had happened to my spirit in that church. I couldn ’ t explain it, but suddenly I didn ’ t feel so alone anymore. The King of Love was in my life again. The Father of the Fatherless had found me. The Healer of All Wounds had shouldered and softened my pain.

2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

“ New Henriette” went to church four days a week. Tuesdays and Thursdays were prayer sessions, Saturday was fasting, and Sunday was the regular service. There was “ praise and worship” before the prayer sessions, which in the Pentecostal church is exactly as loud and joyful as you imagine —clashing cymbals, lots of dancing, the works. It took some getting used to for this reformed Catholic. I enjoyed it, but I also wondered if it was the “ right” way to pray in the house of God. The Bible gave me the answer as it always does:

Praise the Lord.

Praise God in His sanctuary; praise Him in His mighty heavens.

Praise Him for His acts of power; praise Him for His surpassing greatness.

Praise Him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise Him with the harp and lyre,

praise Him with timbrel and dancing, praise Him with the strings and pipe,

praise Him with the clash of cymbals, praise Him with resounding cymbals.

Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord.

—Psalm 150

So, too, there is the story of King David, which our pastor loved to reference when dancing in front of God:

And David, wearing a linen ephod, danced with all his might before the Lord, while he and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting and the sounding of trumpets.

—2 Samuel 6:14

After that, I began believing strongly in dance as a powerful way to praise my King. Every time I did, I felt layers of pain peel away from my soul. The more I praised and worshipped God, the happier my heart became, until I was completely restored to myself.

He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for the sake of His name.

—Psalm 23:3

I officially decided to join the Pentecostal church, which meant getting baptized. My super Catholic sister and aunt didn ’ t support this choice, so on the day of the ceremony I left the house without telling anyone what I

was doing. No one asked where I was going or why I was dressed up; I didn ’ t even have to lie! I waited until I got my pictures from the baptism developed, then told them what I done. Auntie Marie wasn ’ t upset, exactly —she just didn ’ t understand what the Pentecostal church had to offer me that the Catholic church did not. When I fasted, she got after me for not eating, and when I sang praise and worship songs around the house, she thought them inappropriate. For a time, she let it go, until Chantal decided to join the church, too. “ You ’ re taking every person in this family!” she accused me. But we both understood that she was halfway joking, because after all, there are many denominations, but only one God.

After being baptized, I entered my new life with a profound sense of joy, a keen awareness of God ’ s presence in prayer, and gratitude for how deeply and thoroughly He listens if only we will talk to Him. In this way, prayer became my favorite activity. I prayed with my friends in church, where we shared testimony about God ’ s hand in our lives, and I prayed all alone in my bedroom—the same room where once I ’ d sobbed out of surety that life had no meaning. Now I still cried, but in thanksgiving for all God had done for me. He ’ d spared me when the rest of my family had died. He had plans for me, a purpose greater than I could fathom. Life wasn ’ t a burden; it was a blessing.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

—Matthew 11:28

One night, I was kneeling in prayer at the foot of my bed when a neighbor stopped by for a visit. This neighbor was a doctor and a man of faith both, so when the housekeeper told him I was praying, he asked her not to disturb me until I was done. They sat together in the living room, waiting for me and listening to my cries. After I finished, I walked out for a drink of water and saw the doctor. “ I hope it ’ s okay, Henriette,” he said, “ but I enjoyed listening to you pray. Would you pray for me?”

“ Of course!” I agreed, kneeling with him at once and asking God to bless him. “ Would you like to come to church with me?”

The doctor said he would, and sure enough, he came every Sunday he wasn ’ t at the hospital. Not only was Jesus working miracles in my life, but in the lives of my neighbors through me.

The Saturday fast was equally amazing. Those who wanted to participate gathered in the church at eight a.m. on Saturday mornings. We pushed chairs into a circle (or if you preferred, you could sit on a traditional floor mat), and without breaking we prayed ten hours straight, until about six p.m. We prayed for the church, for our friends and family members, for Rwanda, and for everyone affected by the genocide of Tutsis. If he was feeling inspired, the pastor might sermonize about spiritual warfare—how it was clear that my country had been invaded by the devil, as only Satan could engender the kind of hatred that saw a million people be killed in three months ’ time.

A year into my membership, I joined the church leadership team. I ’ d already been volunteering for some time, collecting offerings during services and using the limited Swahili I ’ d learned at Ecole Zairoise to translate the Congolese pastor ’ s sermons into Kinyarwanda for the Rwandan congregation, and decided it was time to up my commitment. It was an easy choice, since for most of my life (except when I was around my family) I ’ d felt outcast or invisible, and in the wake of their deaths, my church family members were the first people to show me love, to feed my spirit, to make me feel seen. They gave me gentle hugs when I needed them, visited Auntie Marie ’ s house to make sure I was okay, and overall let me know that I belonged. Men and women alike called me “ sister.” With their encouragement, my wounds scabbed over. I wasn ’ t lonely anymore.

From the moment I accepted Jesus Christ into my life, even before I knew what it meant to receive Him, He went to work on my spirit. He found me when I was not looking for Him, and He loved me when I did not deserve to be loved. Saying yes to Christ changed my life forever.

A decade later, in 2008, I ’ d say yes to an opportunity that would change everything all over again. Even then, I ’ d know it was the hand of God nudging me in the direction of my destiny.

Chapter Fourteen

SOMETHING TO OFFER

Two other things happened around this time that helped to restore my faith in humanity: my cousin Aphrodice found a wife, and I got a job at the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center.

Aphrodice, Uncle Callixte ’ s second son and Francoise ’ s older brother, survived the genocide but he was maimed. Prior to 1994, he ’ d run a successful grocery and beer business in Mugusa. When all hell broke loose on April 6, he used the money he ’ d saved to pay his way through the roadblocks lining the streets between Mugusa and Burundi and escape across the border. For a time, Aphrodice was safe. As soon as the war ended, though, he ’ d returned to Rwanda to help the RPF restore the country. The ground was still full of landmines then, and my cousin Aphrodice had the terrible misfortune of stepping on one. It exploded and claimed both of his legs in August 1994. After that, he was in a wheelchair.

Can you imagine? My cousin had survived the genocide intact, only to become disabled once things were “ safe.” Aphrodice was still single when he lost his legs, too. He had no family to take him in, so he got sent to a military camp for the handicapped. It was a terrible place, full of limbless casualties of war. He was traumatized and depressed, and even though I went to visit him as often as I could, it was obvious he wasn ’ t doing well there. He (understandably) had so much anger inside. It hurt me to see him in that much pain and feel like there was nothing I could do. I couldn ’ t bring back his business or his family. I certainly couldn ’ t bring back his legs. All I could do was sit with him, often in silence, and keep showing up when he had no one else.

Aphrodice didn ’ t really return to himself until the people who governed the camp gave him a cafeteria to run. They knew he had business skills and was very hard-working, and he didn ’ t need his legs to work a cash register. He started selling bread and beer again and made quite a bit of money. So much that he bought a house for himself in the city. He moved out of the camp and felt happier again. (Productivity, I think, is one of the keys to

battling depression! It ’ s the best medication, the best healer, available, because it empowers you to reclaim your joy.) Aphrodice then started buying things for me—dresses and shoes, little things. We became very close during this period. My cousin just needed someone to listen to him, to validate his experience and his story.

The next time I went to visit Aphrodice, he asked me to find him a girlfriend. “ I want to get married,” he said, “ but who would want a man with no legs?”

Although it was a tall order, I promised to try. Aphrodice was so sweet, and such a great provider. Surely some woman out there could see past his mangled body.

I talked to several female survivors I knew, thinking they would best understand his situation and have the most empathy. One after another, though, they said no … until Solange.

Solange is a beautiful and hilarious woman. She cracks me up like no one else, and she makes Aphrodice, who I never thought would smile again, laugh, too. Because she ’ s also a survivor, she “ gets” my cousin, and she honors his story. Today they are happily married and have many kids together.

Inspired by my cousin ’ s example of first accepting, and then overcoming, hardship, in 2004 I decided to put all the pent-up feelings I still had about the genocide to productive use. I ’ d failed to find gainful employment in the tech industry, and apart from church activities, had basically wasted the past eight years of my life. Chantal had moved out of Auntie ’ s Marie ’ s house and moved on. It was time for me to do the same. When a friend told me about the planned opening of Kigali ’ s first genocide memorial center, I jumped at the chance to start a career—a meaningful one at that! Work with survivors? Yes, please. Tell the story of my country ’ s history? Someone had to. Remind the rest of the world that the Rwandan genocide was indeed, despite repeated claims to the contrary, a genocide? It would be my honor.

The Kigali Genocide Memorial Center was founded by the City of Kigali in conjunction with the Aegis Trust on behalf of Rwanda ’ s National

Commission for the Fight against Genocide. It was designed by the same people who worked on the National Holocaust Museum in Nottinghamshire, England (a place I later had the honor of visiting). They sent a team down from England to oversee its construction, organize the archives, and create the initial exhibits. I joined the Center before a single photo was hung on the walls. I just walked right in and said I thought I ’ d be a great asset. It was Saturday; the director told me to report back on Monday. That was it. No resume or references needed. Now tell me God doesn ’ t work miracles!

The building opened to the public on the tenth anniversary of the genocide, in April 2004. Its goals are five-fold: to educate visitors about the causes and consequences of genocide; to preserve the testimonies of survivors; to support Tutsi orphans and widows; to provide a dignified burial placed for the more than 250,000 victims interred there; [42] and to prevent future genocides. Three permanent exhibitions document the 1994 genocide against the Tutsis, including a tribute to the thousands of children and infants slaughtered that year, as well as other international atrocities similarly ignored by the developed world. A 1,200-seat amphitheater hosts memorial events, workshops, and performances. The Center attracts upwards of 40,000 visitors a year.

This wall stands outside of the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center and includes the names of those who died in the genocide.

With other survivors at Bisesero Genocide Memorial Center, Kibuye.

A photo exhibit inside the museum.

I was privileged to work there for four years. It was the people I met during that time who stick with me still. We had a dedicated and generous staff, of course, but the visitors (Rwandan and otherwise) who came to the Center are what made my everyday experience. So many of them were still struggling with PTSD, and when they saw the photographs of victims ’ remains, their clothes and other belongings encased in glass, the video footage of survivor testimonies projected on the walls, they commonly disassociated from reality. Suddenly certain that they were back on the streets in the midst of the killing, they ’ d scream and look for a ditch to lay down in or a tree to hide behind. It was an automatic defense mechanism as much as a trauma response; they had to flee if they wanted to live! Never mind that ten years had passed since the “ apocalypse.” My fellow countrymen and women didn ’ t yet have the knowledge or the tools to understand what was happening to them, let alone to try and help others.

Fortunately, the Center staff had been trained, and I now knew better than to chase after someone in the throes of a flashback and try to hug them. We were taught to approach slowly and in a calm voice remind the person or persons where they were. “ It ’ s okay. You ’ re at the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center. None of what you ’ re seeing is really happening. You ’ re safe.” We had to talk them down and convince them there wasn ’ t any danger, and we had to be prepared if they tried to run again or fight back. Sometimes it helped to give cues like, “ Remember when you left home this morning? Remember eating breakfast, then coming to visit your mom here? That ’ s where you are. No one is going to kill you. I ’ m going to protect you.”

I remember pulling one trembling old man to my chest and saying, “ Come here. We ’ re going to hide. Let ’ s go hide together.” Because sometimes the only way out of a psychotic episode was through. Then we went and crouched in a corner until he calmed down. I asked him easy questions—his name and where he lived—and I could see the moment the flashback released him, and he returned to himself. After that, he let me give him some water and put him on the bus back home. It didn ’ t mean his trauma was gone. Some traumas, untreated, are forever.

There was the woman who bade me hide under the stairs with her. She lifted up her shirt and showed me where a machete had been used to hack her breasts away. Ten years later, the wound was still bleeding. The tissue of the breast is so soft, I ’ m not sure if it had just never healed, or if she had developed cancer or some other illness as a result of the trauma to that area. It was clear she ’ d never received medical attention. As if that wasn ’ t awful enough, of her thirteen children, she told me, only one had survived the genocide. I sat there with her on the floor, trying to comfort her, but sometimes there are no words. I couldn ’ t share my story with her, because hers seemed so much worse. Her story will live in my heart until I die.

Another time, I assisted a high school-aged girl having a seizure on the floor as the result of a flashback. I gently brought her back to reality, then took her to a private room to recover. Her name was Butoti, she said, and she ’ d lost her twin sister in the genocide. “ They killed all the rest of my siblings, too, and my father. My mother survived but they raped her, and

now she ’ s dying of AIDS.” We talked for two hours about how if her mother died, Butoti would be alone in the world, and how unfair that was. The next day I went to visit her and her mom in the hospital, sparking what became a longterm friendship. I enrolled the mother in one of the Center ’ s social programs, so she would get some financial support. With time and medicine, Butoti ’ s mom improved. She survived to see Butoti graduate from high school!

But we couldn ’ t always help. Sometimes we had to send visitors who were having flashbacks to the hospital. I took many there myself, as did the other staff, but on days when one visitor ’ s adverse reaction triggered a mass reaction among the visitors, like a contagion, there were too many people to help and not enough vehicles. At such times we ’ d run out to the street in front of the museum and flag down passing cars and buses, begging them to take people to the hospital. [43] The worst part was that, once at the hospital, these survivors rarely got the kind of professional help they deserved. The best most of them could hope for was an injection that would let them sleep in peace for a few hours. Like that old man, their trauma was still there when they woke up. For many of them, it was compounded by embarrassment, or distress at having lost their purse or wallet in our haste to load them into strangers ’ vehicles.

Not a day went by that someone didn ’ t have a breakdown. Not an evening finally arrived that I didn ’ t go home exhausted. I ’ d lie in bed and the stories I ’ d heard that day or the scenes I ’ d witnessed played on repeat in my head like a bad movie. On particularly trying days, I wondered if I was cut out for the job. Was I strong enough to do it all again for eight hours the next day? One thing that helped was taking a moment for myself in between rushing people to the hospital to sit in the Children ’ s Memorial exhibit and reflect in silence. The most moving part of the museum in my opinion, it features as many photographs as have been gathered of the beautiful, innocent kids killed in the genocide, along with, when possible, the kids ’ last words. Going there always reminds me of my sister, Cadette. Her image isn ’ t among those pictured since we still don ’ t know what became of her.

The day I put the fears of my inadequacy to rest for good was the day my boss called me into his office. I thought I was in trouble. Instead, he wanted

to know why people who ’ d never been to the Center before walked in already asking about me. I ’ d developed a reputation, apparently. Young and old visitors alike were being referred to me by their friends and family members as someone who would listen to them without judgment. My official title at the Center was Tour Guide (later I ’ d be promoted to Bookstore Manager), but unofficially, I was a counselor. Survivors trusted me with their stories, and I shared mine in return. Both of us benefitted, and it was the first time I realized I had something to offer. God sent me to the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center to comfort and to be comforted.

He also placed me in my small Kigali apartment for a reason. One night after this encounter with my boss, I was sitting on my couch and staring into space when someone pounded frantically on my door. I opened it to find the housekeeper from the house across the street. She looked worried and begged me to come at once.

“ What is it?” I asked. “ What happened?”

“ Mama Oscar,” the housekeeper said, naming the young wife who lived in that house. (In Rwanda, mothers are often addressed by their title —“Mama”—and the name of their child; in this case, Oscar. It ’ s a sign of respect for the social institution of motherhood. Same for fatherhood.) “ Something ’ s wrong with Mama Oscar,” she said again. “ Hurry, hurry!”

I ran across the street on the housekeeper ’ s heels. The first thing I saw was Papa Oscar, speechless at his wife ’ s unexplainable behavior. As for Mama Oscar, she was huddled beneath the kitchen table, screaming and lashing out at anyone who got near her. Baby Oscar was crying somewhere in another room.

Right away, I intuited what had happened. Although I ’ d pegged her age at around twenty-five, and figured she was too young to be a genocide survivor, Mama Oscar was indeed thick in the throes of a flashback. She was not, as her husband expressed fearing, psychotic, but she was mentally ill. She had PTSD. He couldn ’ t have known that because he was from Tanzania. He hadn ’ t been in Rwanda for the genocide. He hadn ’ t realized —until now, anyway—just how bad it had been.

“ Give me some time with her,” I said, and he did. Papa Oscar and the housekeeper went to see to the baby. I sat and talked and cried with Mama Oscar until she was all cried out. For that night at least. I thanked the housekeeper for coming to get me, and I told Mama Oscar ’ s husband that his wife was better, but not yet well. “ She needs professional help,” I said, “ if she is to heal. And if you want to keep her from transmitting her trauma to Baby Oscar. Pain like that is generational,” I explained, citing the research. “ But she is strong. She can heal with your support.”

With enough support, all of us can.

It was not and is not just survivors who visit the Kigali Genocide Memorial. After the Center opened, the whole world came to gawk at our tragedy. Many of them had never heard of “ Hutus” and “ Tutsis.” They were as confused as I had been in fifth grade about how “ tribal differences” could create the kind of utterly destructive division that led to genocide. While I appreciated their interest and sympathy on the one hand, on the other, I couldn ’ t help but wonder where that interest and sympathy had been when the genocide was happening. Yes, they wanted to learn, and many of them upon learning wanted to help. In almost every way that mattered, however, it was too late. Why did nobody come when Tutsis were being killed like cattle? How come no one was willing to save us? What good was “ I ’ m sorry” supposed to do us now? Not that apologies ever hurt—but a decade down the road, do they ever help?

Universities sent students on field trips. Humanitarian organizations sent new recruits on training missions. America sent its presidents, Bill Clinton and George Bush. And what did they see? Not my people. Not the goodness and vitality of the rich Tutsi tradition. They saw their remains. They crossed themselves in front of the mass graves. And in so doing, they taught me everything I know about privilege.

The Center attracted a lot of celebrities. Pictured: German recording artist Wolfgang Niedecken.

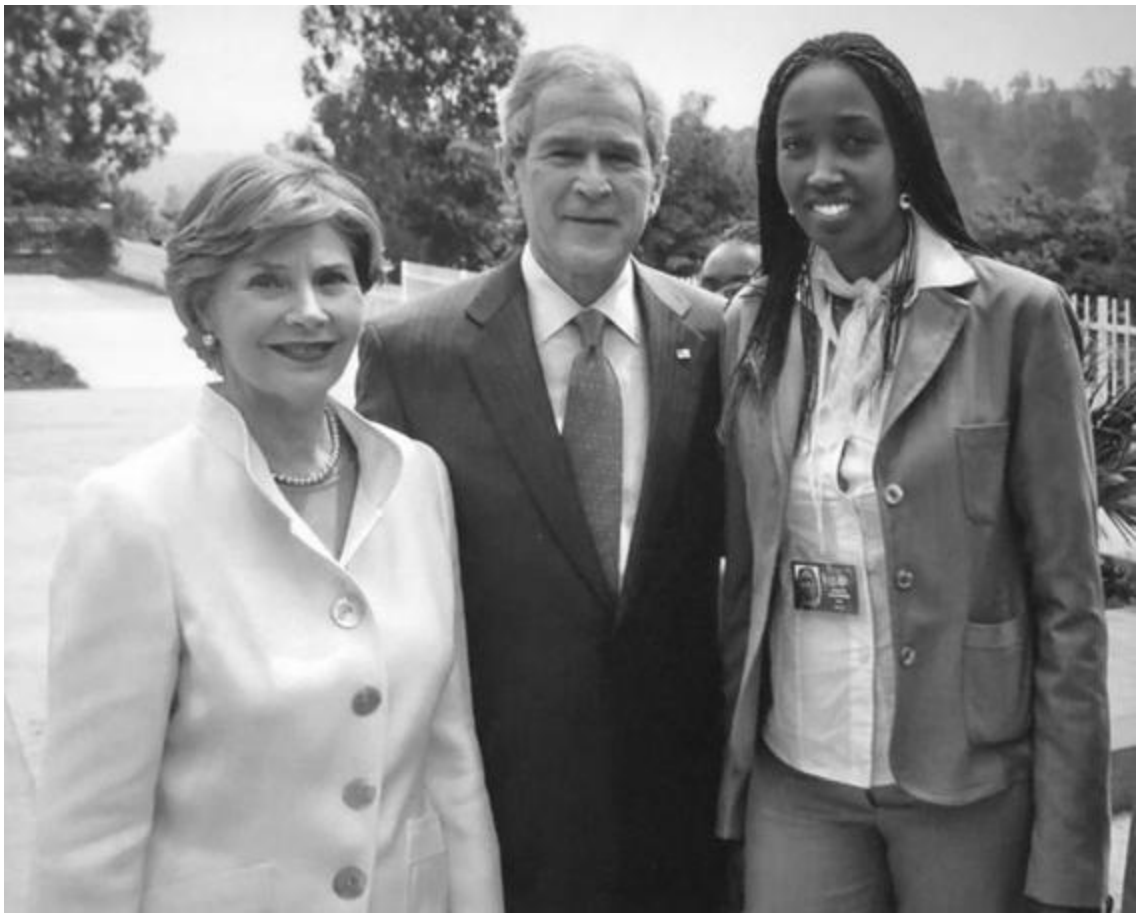
When George and Laura Bush visited the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center, they didn ’ t come alone. They showed up with an army. Secret security agents, each with more pistols strapped to their hips than they had hands, were stationed all over the museum grounds, while more circled in helicopters above. It didn ’ t matter that the Center was closed to the public that day, or that no specific threat had been made against the Bushes. Far from it: The president and his wife were guests of honor. But that ’ s how much their safety mattered. That ’ s how very privileged their lives were. An army to protect two people.

What if my family had been offered that kind of protection during the genocide? What if Rwanda had?

I wanted more than anything to ask George Bush this question. I almost got a chance to, too, when the staff were given individual photo opps with him. Before I could drop my forced smile and confront him, though, he and the First Lady were being whisked away. Two minutes would have done it. Instead, I got a two-second snap, the souvenir on this page. To his credit, the president did look genuinely sorry. I could see in his eyes that he was sad the United States had done nothing to intervene. Laura Bush expressed her regret and I believe she meant it. But they had another media appearance to make somewhere else that afternoon. We would be a footnote in their life story, as the Bushes are in mine.

I settled for challenging the president in my heart, for imagining the type of fruitful dialogue we might have had. “ Pay attention,” I would have said. “ People don ’ t just start screaming for help for no reason. But you didn ’ t listen, and there ’ s no excuse.”

There will never be an excuse—either for what happened, or for not having those same conversations today, with your family, your colleagues, your community. Be the army your people need, in the event that no other person or nation comes to protect them.



Yes, it really happened! Here's me getting to meet US President and First Lady George and Laura Bush.

At the same time, my years at the Center taught me just how privileged *I* am. Me, Henriette Mutegwaraba. Because although I lost every member of my family but one, I do have that one sister who survived. And unlike many of Rwanda ' s ~100,000 orphans, we were old enough to take care of ourselves when our parents died. Neither of us were raped. Neither of us are HIV positive today. We are healthy, not sick. We ' re not alone, we have each other. We have our faith. Crucially, we also have the words to talk about what happened. We are not trapped in the looping nightmares of our minds like the survivors I met at the Center—those for whom there are no words to describe their suffering.

Realizing this unlocked for me the last piece of the forgiveness puzzle. It did not happen overnight; it was a journey years in the making. My entire life, every church I had ever attended had preached the same message: Forgive your trespassers. The priests and the pastors had doubled down on this sentiment in the wake of the genocide, insisting it was the most important thing we could do as Christians. Forgive the Hutus. Let the hate and the anger go. I ' d sworn an oath, though, to God and to myself. I would not forgive the Hutu people. I could not. How could anyone, when they ' d sinned so grievously against God and His creation? I justified my refusal to forgive by telling myself, *You ' ll still go to heaven, Henriette. God can see how much pain they ' ve caused. He can see you and your sister, how much you hurt. He sees the orphans and the amputees. You don ' t have to forgive anybody who could cause something like that.*

So, forgiveness didn ' t come easy, and I wasn ' t willing. Any time the church or the government encouraged us to forgive, I got upset. I thought forgiveness meant sweeping the death and destruction under the rug. Letting bygones be bygones. Pretending, even, that the genocide hadn ' t happened. This thought was poison to my heart. *How dare they?* I raged. *How dare they talk about forgiveness, when everywhere I look there ' s another reminder? Houses gone, cattle gone, family gone, holidays ruined. No mothers left to hug their crying children* . I didn ' t want to hear it!

And yet—how dare I refuse to forgive? Who was I, but the person poisoning my own heart?

When you won ' t practice forgiveness, I ' ve realized, you hurt yourself and *only* yourself. The perpetrator walks away, free to enjoy their life. They may feel some guilt, which is not an easy burden, either—but the bitterness of not forgiving is infinitely worse. Hate destroys the human spirit. Forgiveness, on the other hand, bathes the human spirit in God ' s love.

One night, angry and desperate, I opened up the Bible in search of answers. *Okay* , I thought, *if forgiveness is so great, where are the instructions on how to do it? I want to do this quickly and I want to do it right, because I only want to have to do it once* . Well, I didn ' t find anything like that in the Bible. No one learns to forgive in a single night.

But as I kept praying and fasting and listening not to my mind but to my heart, my relationship with God grew deeper. I understood how much God loved me, and I wanted to love Him back. I wanted to give Him the one thing He kept asking of me that so far I had not been able to give. I wanted to learn to forgive.

As soon as I made the decision to try, to want to try, Jesus flooded my heart with His love. He took away my bitterness. And He held my hand on the day I was confronted, indirectly, by my father ' s killer. Auntie Belethilida was walking through the Mugusa market one morning when a Hutu prisoner, out that day on work duty, approached her wearing his prison jumpsuit. " I know who you are," he said. " And so that you know who I am, I will tell you that I am the man who killed Antoine. I heard that his daughter is still alive. Please, would you ask Henriette to forgive me? Please?" he begged, as my aunt, upset, walked away.

A few days later, she came to see me in Kigali. She told me about the encounter, said, " He wants you to forgive him."

" Auntie," I said, looking her in the eye. " When next you see him, please let him know: I forgave him many years ago."

Auntie Belethilida stared back at me. " What is this? Something that new church of yours has taught you?"

" Yes," I said. " And no. It ' s just the right thing to do."

She delivered my message. The prisoner was happy.

So was I.

It takes courage to ask for forgiveness. If someone asks you, find a way or a reason to forgive them.

It takes fortitude to break the cycle of hate, and to remember that doing so is a choice. God blessed us with the ability to forgive, but He also gave us free will. Be the example that shows others it ' s possible. It ' s the best

decision you ’ ll ever make, and the only way to drain the poison from your heart.

Through prayer, I learned to forgive God for taking my family, and myself for being spared. By interacting with foreign leaders from around the world, I forgave the blind eye of the international community. In bearing witness to hundreds of survivors who had it worse than I could even imagine, but who were nevertheless living examples of Christ on earth, I, too, came to forgive the Hutus who had committed such evil acts in Satan ’ s name. It launched me on a “ pilgrimage” of sorts, wherein I visited all of the major genocide memorial centers in Rwanda. There are six: Murambi Memorial Center; Bisesero Genocide Memorial Center, Ntarama Genocide Memorial Center, and others at Nyamata and Nyarubuye. This is in addition to the 2,000+ memorial sites around the country.

I did this work for my own mental health, but also because the Bible tells us to. Matthew 18:21-22: “ Then Peter came up and said to Him, ‘ Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’” And Jesus said to him: “ I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” Seventy times seven! That ’ s some huge number I don ’ t care to calculate at the moment, which is, in the end, the point. It ’ s not about the number because it ’ s not about keeping score. The idea is to forgive, and forgive, and forgive again, and when the old anger rears in your heart—as it may from time to time—to forgive for the two hundredth time. Forgive yourself for getting angry. Forgive your trespassers for making you so. Forgive because you were forgiven. Look for the ways in which you are privileged … even if only because you ’ re alive.

Chapter Fifteen

STRONGER THAN HATE

Three and a half years into my four-year stint at the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center, I went back to school. I started taking night classes—business classes, mostly—at a private university in Kigali with the idea that I might one day open a nonprofit. I paid my own way for the first semester, absorbing as much as I could about accounting, business administration,

operations management, and the like. Then, when I least expected it, my life took another one of those wild turns I never could have seen coming.

A church group of American tourists (these were common and frequent visitors to the Center, as many American churches sponsored or otherwise had relationships with churches in Rwanda) came in for a tour. I gave them the usual spiel, doing my best to answer their questions in my (extremely) limited English, and thought that was it. I had no idea that they knew Pastor Nathan, a friend I ' d made through the Anglican church in Kigali, or that together the Americans and Pastor Nathan had hatched a plan for me. In partnership with their home congregation in San Antonio, Texas, this church group wanted me to come study in the United States. The church would pay for everything—airfare, tuition, my books—in San Antonio. All I had to do was say yes.

You ' ll laugh, but the simple act of saying ' yes ' (in English) here was difficult for me, as at this time I knew only a handful of English words. They were the phrases everyone learns when in a foreign country or when working with foreigners—useful things like " Where ' s the bathroom?" and " How much does it cost?" Ironically, I didn ' t know the first thing about how much college costs in the United States (much less that tuition for international students is roughly double that for students in-state), even though (and despite the language barrier) I had been to visit the US twice already: once to participate [44] in an interview about the Rwandan genocide as part of CNN ' s twenty-fifth anniversary in Atlanta, [45] and once to visit the members of this San Antonio church, over Christmas 2007.

I ' d enjoyed that Christmas visit very much. Christmas in America is a much bigger to-do than in Rwanda. I stayed with one of the families from the church—a couple named Deedee and Perry. It was colder in the States than it was in Rwanda, but Deedee and Perry were warm. We ate together, prayed together, and opened presents together—or rather, I opened presents from them, since Rwanda has no Christmastime gift-giving tradition. Deedee and Perry showed me around the city, and I wasn ' t scared at all, probably because I knew the trip was temporary. Everything was new and exciting and fun, and I tried so hard to soak it all in, so I wouldn ' t forget a single detail. But *moving* to another continent? Was I ready for that? It

wouldn ’ t be like crossing the border into Burundi. I couldn ’ t just return to Rwanda any time I felt like it. If I moved to Texas, I ’ d be in it for the long haul. It would also mean leaving behind Chantal (who was alone now that Auntie Marie had passed in 2006), not to mention my absolute dream job. Hmm …

At the same time, I *did* have family in the US. Uncle Jeff ’ s niece and nephew, who ’ d gone to college in the States? Both of them had stayed in-country after graduating. One had her doctorate and was teaching in Nebraska; the other worked for Detroit Metro Airport. As far as I knew, they were happy and healthy—the very definition of success. Plus, I could now count Vicky and her boys among my family. They ’ d hugged me and told me they loved me multiple times over the course of my stay with them. Was I simply dreaming too small for myself, thinking I couldn ’ t hack it abroad? Was this God ’ s hand in my life again, showing me just how great His plan for me is?

With butterflies in my stomach—of nervousness, but also excitement!—I said yes. I would move to San Antonio and attend college on the generosity of the University United Methodist Church. Even today, the university I ended up at is one of the best in Texas. The education I received there cannot be compared to the education I would have received in Kigali. Who am I to have deserved such a gift? I don ’ t know. All I can say is that sometimes we dream small, while God is dreaming bigger for us.

Before I could start classes at the University of Texas at San Antonio, I had to improve my English. I enrolled at San Antonio Community College where I studied English as a Second Language for about five months. During that time, I settled into my volunteer host ’ s house. Vicky worked for the church and had two grown sons as well as a beautiful home in a gated suburban community. Only after living in the US for so many years now do I understand what a profound gesture Vicky ’ s hospitality was. Americans don ’ t seem to like hosting even their relatives for more than a few days, let alone someone they don ’ t know. Someone who ’ s also going to use their water and electricity, eat at their table, and sing African songs around their house. Especially someone who is Black. But Vicky kept me for years. She has such a big heart. We particularly enjoyed cooking

together—she loved the traditional Rwandan foods I made—and she introduced me to the rest of the members of the church that had sponsored me. Attending Sunday services and Bible study with this built-in community bolstered my conversational language skills and made me feel more comfortable in my new hometown. I still communicated with Chantal and Francoise every week over Facebook Messenger, telling them all about the friends I was making and the strange American cultural traditions (like eating gigantic servings of food at mealtimes) [46] I was learning. (Chantal, by the way, also lives in Texas now! Francoise owns a cafeteria in Kigali.)

There was just one problem when it came to living with Vicky. Her house was on the opposite side of the city from San Antonio Community College, and public transportation didn ' t extend to where we lived. Everyone in her very nice neighborhood had their own car, except for me. While I ' d learned to drive in Rwanda, I didn ' t have a US driver ' s license yet, much less my own vehicle. Short of expecting Vicky to chauffeur me all around the city, how could we surmount this latest challenge?

Vicky had a neighbor who worked at University United Methodist and commuted to her job every morning. This woman left her house at five a.m. to beat the traffic, but the church was located right next to a bus stop. We worked it out that I could ride to work with the neighbor, then catch the bus to SACC from there. It would still mean an hour-long bus ride each way, but at least I ' d arrive in time for class. I needed the extra study hour, anyway, to flip through my English language flash cards a few more times and memorize a foreign vocabulary.

Speaking of foreign vocabulary—the first time I rode the bus, I still didn ' t know enough words to really understand what I was doing. Nor did I know San Antonio well enough yet to really understand where I was going! Vicky had driven me by the SACC bus stop and pointed out some landmarks so I would know where to get off. On the big day (my first bus ride alone), I made it to school okay, but when it was time to ride back home, all the streets and buildings suddenly looked the same. I didn ' t recognize any of the signposts, and I was pretty sure I ' d been on the bus for longer than an hour.

That ’ s when the bus driver turned around. “ Ma ’ am,” he said to me. “ This is the last stop. You have to get off the bus now.”

Panicked, I tried to explain that I was going to the bus stop by the University United Methodist church.

“ But this bus doesn ’ t go there,” he said, not unkindly. “ You need the 95 north. This is the 95 south.”

Oh no! I ’ d been so focused on looking for “ 95” that I hadn ’ t realized there were two different routes. No wonder the sights outside the window had looked so strange!

“ What do I do?” I asked the driver.

Even though it was out of his way, he offered to drop me at the next stop where I could catch the 95 north. “ Then you ’ ll take it to the church,” he explained.

Well, the stop he dropped me off at was not one that I recognized. It was located beneath a busy overpass, and the number of cars zooming by scared me. I also saw a group of homeless people living under the bridge and wasn ’ t sure at the time what to make of them. We didn ’ t have homeless people in Rwanda. You could always move in with a family member or friend. I didn ’ t know that people in the States are homeless because they lack access to basic necessities; I thought perhaps they were bad people, shunned for some terrible reason by their own communities.

Unsure what else to do, I pulled out my cell phone. Vicky had programmed it with the numbers of everyone I knew in San Antonio. I started calling down the list, but another thing I ’ ve learned about Americans is that no one likes to answer their phone! I got through everyone but Ryan Harris, a young man whom I ’ d only met once, and no dice. Finally, I called Ryan, wondering if he ’ d even remember me.

“ Hey, Henriette!” he said when he answered and I explained who I was. Thank God! A savior!

“ Ryan, I ’ m lost!” I cried.

“ Lost? What do you mean, where are you?”

“ Under the bridge!”

“ What bridge?”

“ I don ’ t know!”

“ Okay,” he said, trying to calm me down. “ It ’ s going to be okay. Do you see anyone around you?”

“ Homeless people,” I whispered. I didn ’ t want them to hear me talking about them.

“ Ask them where you are, and I ’ ll come pick you up.”

Oh no. Steeling myself, I approached the man nearest me. “ Hi,” I said. “ My friend wants to talk to you.” I handed him the phone, not sure I ’ d get it back. But you never know who ’ s going to save you!

The man talked to Ryan and told him where we were. Soon, Ryan pulled up in his big white truck. He took me home. I learned a lot that day. You don ’ t just jump on any old bus, or you ’ re liable to end up in California! You also might just become best friends with a homeless person.

Overall, my first impressions of life in the States were very positive. People seemed so friendly, eager to give directions or answer my questions, which usually came out in garbled English. Everyone was so patient with me. I did not experience any of the discrimination that ’ s plaguing the States today. In Rwanda, I ’ d been persecuted by other people of color, those who looked just like me, but in Texas, I did not feel different for being Black. Mostly that ’ s because Vicky ’ s family and the church were so accepting of me. [47] I would never claim that my experience was or is the same as that of other Black Americans. Systematic discrimination is real.

By the end of that first semester, I knew enough English to pass the ESL exam. Now I could start taking regular classes, like music and political science. With the language barrier, I still struggled somewhat. People around the city, including the Harrises (Ryan ’ s family) and the Minors (another wonderful family from University United Methodist) tutored me. Any success I ’ ve had is thanks to them. I was so worried about disappointing the people who were paying for me to be there that for two years I did nothing but study. I didn ’ t watch TV (even though listening to American news and sitcoms is how a lot of immigrants learn English) because I was too busy reading schoolbooks. To this day, it takes me three times as long as a native speaker to read and comprehend a page written in English. I also still frequently mispronounce words! But as I reminded myself all the time, I ’ d left my country to earn a degree. I was there to work hard and would do whatever it took to graduate.

One extra cool thing I got to do at SACC was contribute to the school library system ’ s Genocide Archive of Rwanda Collection. A joint project of the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center (yes, the same one I worked at in Rwanda!), the Aegis Trust, and Rwanda ’ s National Commission for the Fight against Genocide, this collection of oral history testimonies, photographs, publications, documents, and related materials is, amazingly, archived on the website of the University of Texas at Austin, [48] and some of the materials are themselves housed in Austin! While I didn ’ t get to work with these artifacts directly, I did help the team that was then engaged in re-mapping Rwanda.

In 2006, the Rwandan government had abolished the old system of provinces, like my home province of Butare, with the goal of decentralizing power and weakening old tribal divisions through the deliberate creation of more “ diverse” pieces of the geopolitical Rwandan pie. Where they had been twelve provinces, today there are five. They have such colorful names as “ Northern,” “Eastern,” “Southern,” “Western,” and “ Kigali.” Accordingly, UT-Austin ’ s researchers needed help updating their maps, which showed the locations of significant massacres as well as mass graves. Fortunately, it was work I could do remotely, negating the need to commute back and forth from San Antonio. It also led to a few public speaking opportunities for me. While I wasn ’ t paid to speak, theArchive project did

come with a small stipend, which I used to buy my textbooks. Since I didn ’ t have a social security number, the school paid the church on my behalf, and the church in turn paid me.

I was the guest speaker at this San Antonio Community College event.

After three more semesters at SACC, I got all of my prerequisites out of the way. I received nothing lower than a B grade, ever. It took me almost that same amount of time to master the public bus system. Some days it would be raining, and I ’ d show up to class soggy, my shoes and jeans soaked from the walk from the bus stop. It didn ’ t matter; I was still my father ’ s daughter and determined to make him proud. It did mean, though, that when some of my church family members volunteered to teach me to drive in the States, I jumped at the chance both to be more independent and to arrive at school a little drier.

Vehicles, of course, operate the same way in America as they do in Rwanda —but the size of the vehicles, and the volume of traffic, is much greater in the States. At least in Texas. In Texas, no one drives a tiny car. They all have giant, Texas-edition trucks. There also aren ’ t any super highways in Rwanda. You won ’ t find a roadway bigger than two lanes, or a speed limit greater than forty miles per hour. I ’ d been on San Antonio ’ s interstates, but as a passenger. When Dave Harris told me to “ merge left” while we were practicing driving one day, I was therefore unprepared to take the ramp. “ You mean, the highway?” I screeched, eyes wide with fear. “ Yep,” he said, rather calmly for a man putting his fate in the hands of a novice. I didn ’ t relax again until we pulled back into his driveway.

“ What happened?” Dave ’ s wife [49] asked when she came out to greet us and saw my terrified face.

“ Dad took me on the highway,” I said. (I called him Dad like he called me Daughter.)

“ Oh, my God,” she said. “ Dave, what were you thinking?”

With Meda and Dave Harris, my American parents, the day I became a US citizen.

“ She made it, didn ’ t she?” Dave asked, grinning. I guess it ’ s like throwing a child in the deep end. They quickly learn to swim, or they sink. That day, I swam.

The plan was to transfer to the University of Texas at San Antonio for my last two years. But come 2010, it was the middle of the Great Recession. The University United Methodist Church was hurting as badly as businesses and organizations everywhere. One day, the pastor called me into his office. “ We have news,” he said, genuine sorrow in his voice. “ It ’ s not good news.”

The church, he said, could no longer afford to pay my way. Either I had to find a new funding source ASAP (my student visa stipulated that I carry a full course load), or it was back to Rwanda for me. They would, at least, buy me a ticket home—but once there, what could I do with an associate ' s degree? Nothing. It was devastating to know that I ' d almost made it, only to have my dream snatched away again.

I left his office speechless. No words came to me again until I was back in my bedroom at Vicky ' s house, kneeled on the floor in prayer. I spread a blue scarf that I ' d brought with me from Rwanda across the bedspread and cried as I prayed facedown into it. " Lord," I said, " I ' m going to pray until You answer my prayers, because that ' s who You are. I ' m not going to wash this scarf until You do. Every night You will see my tears on this scarf, and know how earnest I am." I recalled the Book of Esther, in which the Jewish wife of King Xerxes I persuades the king not to kill the Jewish people by praying for his conversion of heart. She prays and fasts for three days, asking her cousin and the Jewish people to do the same, and at the end of that period, the king offers her anything she wants. He listens to her and agrees not to kill her people.

It ' s what the Bible promises us: that prayer can reach to the places we can ' t. We have only to ask Christ for what we need, and we shall receive it. I needed that education more than anything. While I was not willing to ask Vicky or anyone else in the church for it, having been raised to value my friendships over asking for something that could jeopardize those relationships, I was willing to fast and to pray for it. I did just that through the crazy last days of finals, and then I had my associate ' s degree, and then God let me know I was not done.

One of the families in the church who ' d been tutoring me and had helped teach me to drive, the Minors, wanted to help. They ' d heard about my situation and decided that as all three of their adult children had flown the nest, they had love (and some money) to spare. After serving me a delicious homemade dinner Sunday night, Jesse and Sue Minor wrapped me in their arms and told me I wasn ' t going to back to Rwanda without finishing. " We love you so much," they said. " We want to sponsor your last two years

of school.” More than that, they would pay for an apartment for me, all my utilities, food, and some new clothes!

The Minors were warm and loving. Jennifer Minor (bottom right) adopted this little boy from Rwanda.

I was floored. I didn ’ t think any individual family could afford to pay my international tuition. But God ’ s love has no price tag. He gave His only son for people like me. Finding the money to send me to school is nothing for Him. His power knows no bounds.

Back at Vicky ’ s house that night, I shared the good news with her. Then I once more fell to my knees—in thanksgiving.

That crisis averted, I started my junior year as a Roadrunner. In the fall of 2010, UTSA enrolled roughly 30,000 students. That ’ s one-third the size of the total population of Butare province. It was an overwhelming number, to be sure, and an experience I had to breathe my way through. I took school seriously and treated it like my full-time job. No partying (I didn ’ t and don ’ t drink, anyway). No movie nights with friends until my homework was done and my papers checked over by the writing center. Afternoons I spent visiting with professors during office hours or working out in the gym. Weekends I spent at church or visiting Vicky, the Harrises, and the Minors. I made all As and didn ’ t take a single second for granted. And in May 2012, I graduated with my bachelor ’ s degree.

Upon earning a bachelor ’ s degree in Public Relations, I wound up working for multinational corporation Costco. I can ’ t believe it, either. After I lost my family, I never thought I ’ d be able to afford to attend college. I definitely never imagined it would be in the United States. Not only did I graduate from a great school, though, I also finished up with zero debt. The way God provided for me, and the way He worked through the people around me, connecting me with two families who loved me effortlessly, without regard for my color or background, is nothing short of a miracle. Discrimination is real, and it can be deadly. But not everyone is racist. And love is stronger than hate.

Love is stronger than hate.

With Jesse and Sue Minor on the day I graduated from UTSA.

Eight years ago now, I moved to Houston for my job as a Marketing Specialist with Costco. I like the work very much. It gets me out on the floor and interacting with customers, like I used to do at the Genocide Memorial Center. As happened there, the people who walk through Costco ' s doors also seem strangely compelled to tell me their life stories. It ' s a privilege and an honor to be a vessel for them, and I ' m glad I ' m not as " strong" (meaning, stoic) as I used to be. Instead, I wear my emotions on my sleeve, and I cry with my customers at their tales of hardship, divorce, and death. It heals us both. My favorite customers are the first-generation kids who accompany their immigrant parents as translators. When I see a child translating for an adult who only speaks Spanish or Japanese, I feel tremendous love for that child and so much respect for that adult. I tell those young people, " You ' re doing such a great job," and make an extra effort to help them however I can.

Houston itself is a large, wonderful, very multicultural city, one I quickly made my own. I started a group for survivors of genocide, which meets monthly at the different members ' houses for story-sharing and snacks. It ' s a safe space where people can feel free to speak their truth. I also invite those international students from Rwanda studying in Houston to spend Christmas with me and Chantal every year, as it meant so much when Vicky did the same for me. We go all out on the decorations and make more food than we will ever eat, and always I look around at the mess afterward and wonder if my mother made me help the housekeeper when I young because she knew that someday I ' d live in a country where few people can afford a housekeeper. (Love you, Mom!) Finally, my terrible driving skills help me fit in perfectly in Houston. No one else knows how to handle this sprawling city ' s ten-lane highways, either.

Although I am happy here, I do miss school and learning. I tell myself I ' m not done yet—someday, I will go back for an advanced degree!

Conclusion

BE ROYAL

There ’ s one part of my story I haven ’ t shared yet. In many ways, she ’ s the biggest part of all: my daughter, Mickaella. Beautiful, strong-willed, huge-hearted Mickaella. I love you, Mika, more than words can say.

It ’ s funny. I used to worry about the family “ legacy.” *Will my own daughter inherit the family legacy—of fear, resentment, and doubt?* I wondered in chapter twelve of this book. When Mickaella turned six years old, I had the privilege of finding out.

We were sitting in Auntie Marie ’ s living room, talking and drinking tea. “ Mom,” my little girl asked me. “ Why don ’ t you have a mom or a dad?” It was a question I ’ d been expecting for a while, but even so, in the moment, I wasn ’ t sure how to answer. Did I tell her the truth about Rwanda ’ s awful history of hatred? Should I soften it somehow? She was so young yet.

Mickaella ’ s question also came at a time when my own outlook on life was not so rosy. I was still in that dark place of fear, resentment, and doubt myself. I hadn ’ t yet learned to forgive, to come to terms with the past. Heck, with my country struggling to rebuild amidst grief and lingering tribal turmoil, I wasn ’ t even sure I had a future. Another genocide seemed imminent. If the worst happened, what would become of Mickaella? Could I leave her unprepared to face, like my sister Chantal and I were right then facing, a potentially parentless childhood? Didn ’ t she deserve to be informed?

So, I told her. I explained as best I could to my six-year-old daughter something that most adults can ’ t even understand: how, despite the facts that God made everyone, and that everything God made is good, evil exists, too. And evil can turn human hearts against each other. “ It happened in 1959, and it happened again in 1994,” I said. “ My father lost his father. Then I lost my father.”

Taking Mickaella ’ s hand, convinced that honesty was the best policy, I continued: “ And someday, you may lose me, too.”

Her brown eyes got big and her grip grew tighter. Instantly, I regretted my decision. Yes, it was statistically unlikely in Rwanda that Mickaella would reach adulthood and still have one or both of her parents around. But why

fill the head of an innocent girl with that anxiety? Perhaps the new RPF-led government really would save the country. Maybe Mickaella ’ s generation could be the lucky ones, spared from (however far-fetched the idea felt at the time) seeing war in their lifetimes.

“ Which is why,” I added, in an attempt to course-correct, “ it ’ s so important to stand up to evil, to fight for the right and the good, and to be kind to one another.” I smiled at her. “ My grandfather Dionise, your great-grandfather, called it ‘ being royal. ’ He was a king,” I said, which made Mickaella ’ s eyes get big again for a different reason. “ But royalty or not, all of us can still treat each other with respect.”

She nuzzled into me, and in that moment, I ’ d never loved her so much, or hated myself more. I was a terrible mother, I thought, so concerned with not passing on my pain that I ’ d transmitted it to her directly. When I was a child, my father had told me truthfully how his father had been killed every time I ’ d asked. But he ’ d never “ warned” me that he himself might meet the same fate. My mother had never made me worry she wouldn ’ t be there when I grew up. Their love made me feel invisible to war. Their message had always been one of hope.

Later, once Mickaella was a little older, I tried again. I repeated the story that Mom had told to me, using the words she ’ d used. “ There was a genocide,” I said. “ Bad people killed my mother, my father, my brothers, and my sisters.”

She processed this, then asked, “ So I ’ m never going to meet them?”

“ You will,” I assured her, “ when we go to heaven.” Although she looked confused, she also looked more peaceful, content in the knowledge that death is not forever.

The Bond We Share

Twenty-seven years have passed since the Rwandan genocide against Tutsis. In some ways it feels like a long time ago, and in others it feels like yesterday. On hard days, when I ’ m tired from work and I miss my family, it does seem that death is forever. I want to come home to them, to share a

meal together, to hear about their days, their weeks, their lives. I ’ m lucky that technology allows me to FaceTime Francoise and Auntie Belethilida in Africa, and even luckier that Mickaella, now a grown adult herself, has settled nearby me in Houston, so that we actually can share meals together on occasion. She would tell you that she ’ s the luckiest one of all, however. When I was her age, I no longer had my parents. My parents no longer had their parents. Mickaella, though, still has me. And the bond we share is the kind that death can ’ t defeat.

When I look at my daughter, I see my father. I see how almost-a-Catholic-priest Antoine spent weekends distributing blankets to the needy. Mickaella is that giving and that selfless. She ’ s been known to give away the bedsheets out of our closet and the blanket off the back of the couch. She never asks me for permission, either—just does what she knows is right.

With my beautiful daughter, Mickaella. Her last name means "consoler," or "one who consoles." I gave her that name because she was born after I lost everything and almost everyone.

Mickaella reminds me of my mother. She feels as deeply as Theresia once did. Every reunion with friends and family is, for her, an occasion worthy of joyful tears. She is the one who brings people together and who will never let too much time pass apart.

My daughter is like her great-grandmother, Grandma Mutamba—whip-smart, resourceful, and fiercely independent. She doesn ' t need knotted bedsheets to know when to pay her employees, but she can do anything she puts her mind to. She will also, like my grandmother, be the storyteller of the family. I await your own book soon, my love!

Finally, if ever Grandpa Dionise had a direct descendant, it is Mickaella. Ever since hearing his tale as a child, she, more than anyone I know, has embodied his self-styled principle of " being royal" to all living things. She bears no ill will toward anyone. There ' s not an ounce of hate in her heart. She does not believe that Hutu people were or are " bad people," because she seeks out (and always eventually finds) the good in everyone.

It is this trait, more than anything else, that makes me proud of her.

Dear Reader

Dear reader: Be like Mickaella and Grandpa Dionise. Be royal in all that you say and do and in every interaction with acquaintances and strangers alike. Just as you would not know by looking at me that I am a survivor (I guarantee that some of my co-workers picked up this book having no idea that I am a survivor. Surprise!), you often cannot tell based on the superficial alone what someone else is going through at any given time.

Educate yourself. Read books and watch movies about current events. Listen to those who have experienced or are experiencing injustice firsthand, who are saying, " Hey, this is happening in my country; what are

you going to do to help?” Take a stand on issues that move you. Demand that your leaders do the same. Register to vote [50] and exercise your power. Don ’ t let someone else make all the decisions that matter.

Cherish your body—its height and its curves, your long nose, your beautiful hair. When you are unjustly treated as less than, forgive your oppressors by any means necessary. Forgive them seventy times seven times, then work to make things better for the next generation. Release the bitterness. Raise children who don ’ t see “ difference” as a bad thing, but as the source of beauty and richness—no matter someone ’ s color, level of education, church affiliation, or background.

Believe victims. To this day, there are people who deny that the genocide against Tutsis ever happened. It ’ s scary, but true. It ’ s scary because to the victim it means her attacker has the opportunity to attack her again, since he has not learned from his mistake. It ’ s scary because she is being silenced. All anyone has to do to know that it happened is to look at the evidence: thousands of children born of rape; thousands of raped women with HIV; thousands of people with PTSD; and at least 93 killers indicted by the UN ’ s International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda [51] —though there were thousands of them, too. When there is no evidence, believe victims, anyway. Know that there ’ s always more to the story. And trust me when I say you don ’ t want it to happen to you. However bad it sounds, the reality is worse.

Our annual family photo, taken at Christmas 2020. That's me, my daughter Mickaella, my sister Chantal, and Chantal's children. Photographs like this one mean so much since all of our old family pictures—including every one of my baby pictures—were lost in the Rwandan genocide.

Finally, if you are a victim, remember that you are not *just* a victim (… of genocide, rape, domestic abuse, divorce, disease, systematic discrimination, or whatever your personal apocalypse may be …), but also a child of God, which is a *victory* . See yourself as God does—as being worthy of love, worthy of life. We are not members of unwanted tribes. We belong to God ' s tribe.

You belong to God ' s tribe. You are wanted.

Afterword

MILLION LIVES GENOCIDE RELIEF FUND

If reading my book has inspired you and you want to help further, please consider donating to Million Lives Genocide Relief Fund.

Million Lives Genocide Relief Fund is the nonprofit that I founded in 2017 to serve individuals suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of the Rwandan genocide against Tutsis. The name Million Lives honors the roughly 1,000,000 Tutsis and Hutu moderates slain in my country between April and July 1994. We partner with other nonprofits and their dedicated staffs of professionally trained counselors—since while there ' s nothing prayer can ' t heal, God answers our prayers by working through His vessels on earth—and while the bulk of our combined outreach lies in trauma education, the most important service anyone provides is listening to and validating survivors ' stories. To date, Million Lives has, through our sister organizations, helped more than 3,000 beneficiaries.

Just because I no longer live in Rwanda does not mean my heart isn ’ t still in Rwanda. And just because you don ’ t live in Rwanda does not mean the “ problems” of my country are not your problems, too. Systematic discrimination is real. PTSD is real. Both issues affect people everywhere. They ’ re a human problem, and we need humankind to unite in support of our cause. Like we all need to mean it when we say, “ Never again.”

In the course of three months, I lost more than sixty family members and friends. I hope you never know that pain; but should you (and chances are, you do, since no one is exempt from pain of some sort), I hope you have someone with whom to talk it out. I pray you feel God ’ s arms around you, for His power is great! And I pray He moves you to pay it forward whenever and however you are able.

millionlivesmatter.org

Acknowledgments

THANK YOU

To my cousins Francoise and Uwimana: We took the journey together. We hid in the bushes together. We survived together. You are the only ones who know what it was like. I will always think of you like sisters.

To Chantal, my only surviving sibling: You are resilience incarnate; a testament to the power of God. Thank you for never giving up, and for always believing that we would find each other again. I love you, sis.

To Auntie Marie: You looked out for me, you sheltered me, you loved me. Thanks for being my home.

To Uncle Pascal (“ Uncle Ndamage”): While other Hutus were killing Tutsis, you protected and loved my sister like she was your own daughter. I can ’ t thank you enough.

To Mickaella: When words fail me, please reread the Conclusion chapter of this book, and know how dear you are to me—child of mine, child of God.

To everyone who read early drafts of this book, blurbed it, or helped spread the word: Every dollar raised for Million Lives Genocide Relief Fund is thanks to you. You ’ re the change the world needs.

Born in Butare province, Rwanda, Henriette Mutegwaraba lived through the harrowing days leading up to, and the inconceivable aftermath of, the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Although today she is happily employed as a marketing specialist, her former role as a counselor at the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center remains some of the most important work she has ever done. Henriette still enjoys speaking to colleges, church groups, and human rights organizations about the consequences of systematic discrimination, and as the founder of Million Lives Genocide Relief Fund, is an ardent advocate for racial justice, PTSD awareness, and community healing. In her free time, Henriette likes to travel and exercise. She and her daughter live in Houston, Texas.

for more information:

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[1] One way I give back is through my nonprofit, Million Lives Genocide Relief Fund. Founded in 2017, it serves individuals suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of the Rwandan genocide. Every copy of *By Any Means Necessary* sold benefits the organization—so if you ' re reading this, thank you!

[2] A funny aside: Mom initially objected so strongly to the idea of arranged marriage that when her mother took her to meet her would-be husband for the first time, she did everything she could think of to turn him off. First she tried whistling, which women were not allowed to do, especially in front of a man! When my dad just smiled, charmed by her impudence, she whistled louder and harder. She couldn ' t have known that he found her rebellious spirit attractive. Afterward, Mom went to the priest of their parish, who was European, and asked him to intervene—but Grandma Terese wouldn ' t even listen to Father Branchale. She insisted that it was " great" to get married at a young age, especially since my father belonged to a " good" (read: wealthy) family. They were Catholic, too; in fact, my father had just

dropped out of seminary upon deciding against the priesthood after all. Just when it seemed like all hope was lost, Dad started writing my mother love letters. They were genuine and heartfelt, and when Mom responded in kind, my parents realized they actually had a lot in common … enough to (very happily) get married and have six children together!

[3] Uncle Pascal was a dedicated professor who adored books. Every single day he would sit under the tree in my grandma ’ s garden and read French books aloud in a booming voice. We kids couldn ’ t understand a word he was saying, but we loved to gather around him and listen to the lilting language.

[4] Like Uncle Callixte and Uncle Pascal, Auntie Adela lived just a few blocks from our house. All three of her children were older than me, so we weren ’ t especially close, but as Auntie Adela was known to be the best cook of Grandma Mutamba ’ s kids, I did spend quite a bit of time at her house. The nieces and nephews often ate lunch or dinner at her place, and even stayed over when my mother and Auntie Hilary went to the market.

[5] After she got married, Auntie Gasengayire moved three hours away from Mugusa, so we only got to see her once or twice a year. She had six daughters, two of whom (Jeanne and Claire) were older than me, and four of whom were younger. As they lived in the “ big city” of Kigali, I loved visiting them for a small taste of their urban lifestyle. Auntie Gasengayire ’ s girls grew up with movies and TV and cars—luxuries to which we in Mugusa didn ’ t have access. More than that, though, I appreciated the opportunity for “ girl talk”! Don ’ t get me wrong, I loved my five boy cousins (Uncle Callixte ’ s sons), but there were some conversations I just wasn ’ t going to have with them.

[6] Under President Kayibanda, an ethnic “ quota” system was installed whereby the proportion of Tutsis in schools, civil service, and other employment sectors was officially limited to ~10%, their under-estimated proportion of the general population. Hutu vigilante committees were tasked with ensuring that the quota was being respected. Violations were often punishable by death.

[7] The following year, in 1973, Uncle Callixte and Auntie Hilary would finally have a girl: my cousin Francoise, named for our deceased uncle Francois. Auntie Hilary ’ s heart was at peace after that, for it was widely condemned as a “ shame” for a woman to have kids of only one sex—and it was always the woman ’ s fault.

[8] My mother clearly learned this from her father. On several different occasions when I was a child, I came home from visiting a cousin to find strangers (often nomadic basket weavers and other craftspeople passing through as they hawked their wares) in our kitchen or taking a shower in our bathroom. Mom literally opened our doors to anyone who needed anything from her, whether food, clothes, a bath, or a bed. “ If someone comes to the house asking for salt or cooking oil or anything,” she told me, “ you can give it to them without asking me.” She was a light to our family and our neighborhood.

[9] Of my mother ’ s five siblings, two were living and working in Kigali (the capital of Rwanda) while I was growing up: Uncle Charles and Auntie Marie. The rest lived on Grandpa Dionise ’ s land and worked his farm. I loved visiting Uncle Charles and his three kids and Auntie Marie whenever we went to spend summers with my father ’ s sister Auntie Gasengayire and her six daughters in Kigali.

[10] Grandpa Dionise was one of very few old people I knew who could read and write, having learned from some Europeans when he was a chief. He was accordingly eloquent!

[11] Poisonous snakes are numerous in Rwanda, and they ’ re generally seen as dangerous, undesirable animals—same as Tutsis were throughout the 1900s. Case in point: There was a Hutu girl in my class who often walked home with her brothers. One day, her brothers asked her which way she wanted to go: the long way, which circled around the village, or the shortcut, which ran through my family ’ s property. “ Not the shortcut,” the girl said, scared. “ That ’ s where the snakes live!” Clearly, she ’ d overheard her family calling my family snakes, and misunderstood. But that ’ s how pervasive the stereotype was.

[12] Even though the school was Protestant, it ’ s important to note here that Remera Rukoma was still a public school. Most Catholic boarding schools were public, too. No matter which public school you got into, you paid the same tuition and wore the same uniform. Private schools were few and far between, and often prohibitively expensive. You did not have to take the government test if you wanted to (and had the money to) attend private school. It was generally agreed that public schools in Rwanda offered not only a better value for the money, but a better education as well.

[13] In cases of intermarrying, the Hutu was always the man. You wouldn ’ t see a Hutu wife, Tutsi husband combination because any children born of that union belong to the husband ’ s family and inherit his tribal affiliation. A Hutu woman, therefore, would not want her children to be Tutsi by default; though a Tutsi woman might want her children to be Hutu.

[14] Remera Rukoma had approximately six hundred students, all of them girls. The students were divided into three dorms according to grade. Year 1 and Year 2 students lived in my dorm, Year 3 and Year 4 students lived together in another dorm, and Year 5 and Year 6 students lived in the third dorm. As Rwandan high school is six years long, Year 5 and Year 6 students were typically nineteen and twenty years old—grown adults.

[15] Although Remera Rukoma was a relatively small village, it had one of the best hospitals in the country. People came from all over Rwanda to be treated at that facility. Most of the homes in the village housed the doctors and nurses who worked there.

[16] The first Roman Catholic church in Rwanda was established in Save, forty minutes ’ walk from Mugusa, by missionaries in 1900. Every Saturday, the sound of the drums as the band rehearsed was carried to our home on the wind, and every Sunday the same greeted us as we walked through the church doors.

[17] You ’ ll recall that my father ’ s brother, Uncle Francois, became a Catholic priest and was killed. In addition, my father ’ s two sisters originally entered the convent to become Catholic nuns. Not one of the three of them stuck it out, however, at Grandma Mutamba ’ s urging. To my

knowledge, she never stepped foot inside a church herself; she swore that “ the celibate life” was the Hutu-affiliated Catholic church ’ s way of preventing Tutsis from procreating, and she wanted lots of grandchildren! Antoine, Adela, and Gasengayire all eventually got married and had kids. For Auntie Gasengayire, in particular, it was widely said that she was too light-skinned and beautiful not to get married!

Later, one of my mother ’ s aunts, who did become a Catholic nun, tried to get me to join the convent. My mom and dad said no, though, and in Rwanda, what the parents say goes!

[18] In Rwanda, the only people who owned guns were police and military. It was a shock, therefore, to learn how many Texans carry guns! I remember when, in 2020, long after moving to Houston, I learned to shoot a gun for the first time. The young man teaching me told me he owned twenty guns —“and I ’ m buying more,” he said. He went on to joke that I was probably the only one in my neighborhood who *didn ’ t* own a gun. In light of recent events, like the January 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol, it would seem he ’ s right.

[19] A thriving trade in falsified IDs (ones that said you were Hutu instead of Tutsi) emerged at this point. There was good money in it because people would pay a lot to feel protected—especially if they looked very Tutsi. Someone approached my father about buying a fake ID, but he refused. “ I am proud to be Tutsi,” he said. I was never prouder of him, or of my heritage, than when he stuck to his guns in this way.

[20] These were horrifying proclamations about the superiority of Hutus over Tutsis. See https://www.rwanda-nogreaterlove.com/hutu-10-commandments for a complete list of commandments.

[21] If you did your math right, you know that I was twenty years old already. Being twenty in Rwanda, however, is not the same as being twenty in the United States. A single, twenty-year-old Rwandan woman has no agency. She can ’ t get a job, an apartment, or even a significant other without her family ’ s consent. Her parents tell her what to do and when, and she follows the path prescribed for her without question. If she does not, she risks her reputation as a “ respectable woman.” People may ask her

why she doesn ’ t love her parents more. In Western cultures, it ’ s common for eighteen-year-olds (considered adults) to strike out on their own, but in Rwanda, grown children live with their parents until they get married, and even then, both sets of parents have a say in just about everything a young couple does.

[22] It ’ s worth noting here that I was not the only family member to seek refuge with Uncle Edward leading up to and during the genocide. One of Auntie Marie ’ s sisters, Auntie Aurelie, also stayed with them for a time, hoping that Uncle Edward ’ s Hutu affiliation and designation as a CDR commander would protect her. Later, once things got bad, Auntie Aurelie was told that she had to find another place to hide; her brother-in-law could no longer protect her. Step one foot outside their door, though, and she risked being killed on the spot—so she let Auntie Marie arrange for her to live with another CDR man named Danny. Auntie Aurelie moved into Danny ’ s house, where she told me she was raped every night. I knew Danny from when I ’ d lived with Uncle Edward. He was a tall, quiet guy with an afro. I never imagined he would rape or kill anyone, but he did both. A lot.

[23] There was a convenience store catty-corner to Ecole Zairoise; this is where we sometimes bought lunch. One time I was standing in line at the register waiting to purchase my milk when I felt a hand touch my bare legs beneath my uniform skirt. I whirled around to see a man who looked like he was on drugs—all crazy-eyed and spit flying from his mouth as he yelled “ I am touching the legs of a Tutsi girl! Her skin is very soft. Does anyone else want to feel her skin?” I ran out of the store and back to school without paying for my milk. I was crying and felt so violated. Also disappointed, as here was another man who did not see me as a human being or as someone ’ s daughter, but as the product of my race alone, and therefore deserving of humiliation.

[24] We didn ’ t wear shirts, but we did pass underground music along. The RPF was amassing support in African countries outside Rwanda and getting their musicians to become activists for our cause. Those musicians recorded pro-RPF songs that functioned to oppose the anti-Tutsi messaging in Rwanda ’ s media, and which became secret anti-government battle cries

for Tutsi youths. Any time one of us got our hands on a new song (often via a long-haul truck driver, who crossed the border transporting goods), we ' d invite our friends over and we ' d listen to the music on low in a locked room or in someone ' s car. It gave us so much hope and lifted our spirits in a way that nothing else did back then.

[25] My cousin Alex married a generous, wonderful woman named Regina. The cow-exchange party (wherein Alex officially offered cows to Regina ' s family in exchange for her hand) and their Catholic wedding and wedding reception all took place over the summer break, so I got to attend them all. It was very exciting since Alex was the first of my " brothers" to get married. He and Regina moved into a house near my parents. One night in 1990, some of Alex and Regina ' s Hutu neighbors (believed to be the brothers of Mr. Wilson, my terrible fifth grade teacher) surprised Alex while he was riding his bike home. They knocked him off the bike, stabbed him several times, and left him for dead on the side of the road. Alex ' s parents found him and took him to the hospital. Stitches criss-crossed his entire 6 ' 6" body by the time the doctors were done sewing him up. Sadly, there would be no justice for my cousin. We knew what had happened, and we knew who had done it, but not so much as a report was filed, let alone an investigation begun.

[26] To this day, I do not know if the soccer player was Hutu or Tutsi. I don ' t know if he survived the genocide or not. I know he played for Mukura, the biggest team in the country, and I know he helped a lot of people. If you ' re reading this, kind stranger … thank you. To me, you are a hero.

[27] My dehydration grew so severe that a few miles from Ngozi, we dared to venture out of the woods in search of water. We found a roadside shop, but they only sold beer, not water. Desperate, my cousins and I bought and split a bottle of beer—a first for all three of us. It made me feel weird and sick, and ultimately made walking even harder! Lesson learned.

[28] When Uncle Jeff ' s older brother died in Burundi, he left Uncle Jeff in charge of his kids. So, while Uncle Jeff only had one son of his own, he had lots of nieces and nephews who adored him and considered him a second father. He eventually sent as many of them as he could to college, including

to universities in Europe and the United States. They all did very well for themselves—a reflection on Uncle Jeff!

[29] Gourevitch, Philip. “ After the Genocide.” *The New Yorker* . 18 December 1995.

[30] “ Text of Clinton ’ s Rwanda Speech.” *CBS News* . 25 March 1998. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/text-of-clintons-rwanda-speech/

[31] “ General Assembly Designates 7 April International Day of Reflection on 1994 Genocide against Tutsi in Rwanda, Amending Title of Annual Observance.” United Nations. 26 January 2018. https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/ga12000.doc.htm

[32] Uncle Jeff enjoyed a few ecstatic years in his home country, which he spent gladly spreading the Good News, before he got sick and passed away. I ’ m glad he and his mother got to see Rwanda again.

[33] All told, the following individuals perished in the genocide:

On Mom ’ s side: Grandma Terese (Grandpa Dionise had died of natural causes two weeks before the genocide); Uncle Charles and one of his sons; my mother, her husband, and four of her kids; Auntie Thaciana; Uncle Vital. Auntie Marie, Auntie Belethilida, and Auntie Aurelie survived.

On Dad ’ s side: Grandma Mutamba; Auntie Adela and her two kids; Auntie Hilary and four of her kids; all six of Auntie Gasengayire ’ s daughters (Auntie Gasengayire had died the year before unrelatedly); my father, his wife, and four of his kids; Uncle Pascal, his wife, and three of their kids.

[34] For three years, we feared that Auntie Belethilida and Uncle Ndamage were dead. We didn ’ t hear from them in all that time. But then the RPF-led Rwandan government started encouraging exiled Hutus to return. “ This is your country, too,” they said. As Uncle Ndamage was innocent anyway, he and Auntie Belethilida finally came back. Auntie Aurelie went to meet them in Butare, then escorted Auntie Belethilida to Auntie Marie ’ s house. We didn ’ t know they were coming, and when Auntie Belethilida walked in

the door, Chantal and I fell to the ground crying. It was always the best day ever to find out someone you thought was dead was still alive.

I asked Auntie Belethilida to sleep in my bed that night, so she could tell me all about the Congo. She described how she and Uncle Ndamage had lived in a Hutu refugee camp, and how scary it had been for her since she was Tutsi. Every day, Uncle Ndamage had gone to work for some Congolese families, and she had sat at home in the camp waiting for the Hutu men to kill her. They would brag about their conquests in Rwanda because in the Congo they knew there would be no reprisals. For Auntie Belethilida, the suffering went on all that time. Our fear had ended with the genocide, but she basically had three more years of the same. She ' d lost weight. Her skin was dull and dark from malnourishment.

The next day, Auntie Marie took her to buy clothes and shoes. We fed her good food for two weeks, and soon she recovered. She went back to her husband in Zivu, close to Save, where she lives today. We still FaceTime and WhatsApp and she ' s doing great!

[35] This question may sound blunt, but in fact it ' s the first question with which we all greeted each other. In many ways, it was the only thing that mattered.

[36] Eventually, we also reconnected with Etienne ' s sister, Karigirwa. Etienne ended up moving to Brussels, where I got to visit him three or four times. Today, he lives in Rwanda. Etienne is still one of the strongest people I know.

[37] The poem included all of our deceased family members ' names, talked about who they were and how they ' d contributed to their communities, and insisted on their innocence. It was powerful and deep. With each name read aloud, I cried harder, until a volunteer escorted me out of the church and into a side room to recover. I ' m so grateful to Alice for writing and sharing her truth.

[38] The government created the site in reparation. It looks like a garden full of flowers surrounded by a low wall. Eventually, the names of the several hundred people buried there will be engraved on that wall, though the

project is not yet complete. (At time of writing, Rwanda is still finding and exhuming mass graves.)

[39] It ’ s possible that Cadette is still alive. She or someone who knows her may even be reading this very book, but because Cadette was so young in 1994, it ’ s unlikely that she or her friends would recognize her story in mine. After the genocide, several groups formed to reconnect lost children with their families. They sent search parties out and offered DNA tests. Radio programs broadcast names and physical descriptions; TV shows flashed photos. I listened to and watched these outlets for years, hoping for some sign of my sister. Cadette would be in her thirties today. If she ’ s out there, I hope she ’ s in good hands. If not, I know she ’ s in God ’ s hands.

[40] Yes, that Paul—the older man with whom Auntie Marie had earlier tried to set me up. He came back several more times after the genocide attempting to woo me, but I said, “ It ’ s not going to happen, Paul,” and sent him on his way. Now that I was twenty-two, I felt I could speak my mind. I never think about how my life might have turned out differently if I ’ d married him because two years later Paul passed away.

[41] While Christian denominations of every flavor had long existed in Rwanda, their numbers were always dominated by Catholics—until the genocide. After so many Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed in Catholic churches, and it was revealed that so many Catholic priests had participated in the raping and killing, the popularity of Catholicism sharply declined, making room for other denominations to flourish.

[42] Visitors were allowed and encouraged to bring their loved ones ’ remains for burial in the Center ’ s memorial garden. My uncle Charles is buried here, and his picture is in the museum. I loved getting to visit him at work every day.

[43] If we couldn ’ t find enough willing drivers, as a last resort we occasionally shut down the upstairs exhibits and used the space as a makeshift recovery room. One time I was attending to survivors upstairs and one of them came and grabbed my hair, yanking my braids. That same woman ended up crying on my shoulder later, leaving mascara streaks all over my shirt. It was a tough job, but one I felt proud to do. The impact I

was having was real. I could see it and feel it every day. I thought I wanted to be a teacher, but that work was my calling. It ’ s where God wanted me to be, 100%.

[44] “ Participate” may be a generous term here. I didn ’ t really speak English, the interviewer didn ’ t speak Kinyarwanda, and we did not have a translator. I don ’ t even know what I said—probably a lot of nonsense, since I didn ’ t understand the questions. But no one else understood me, either, though I think they later translated my answers in the captions.

[45] “ CNN Marks 25th Anniversary.” NPR. 29 May 2005. https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4671482

[46] I will never forget the first time I saw a thirty-ounce Big Gulp soda. *Jesus!* I thought. *I will stick to my little cup!*

[47] One way my host family made an effort to connect with me was by watching documentaries about the Rwandan genocide. We watched *Ghosts of Rwanda* (2004) and *Shooting Dogs* (2005) and we cried together. I have to be in the right mood to watch such movies. Most of the time I ’ d rather not. I lived that experience; I don ’ t need to relive it. But they help teach other people what it was like, and they show off my beautiful country. For those reasons, watching films about the genocide is occasionally worth the pain.

[48] https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/taro/hrdi/00004/hrdi-00004.html

[49] A shoutout to Meda Harris here. She was one of the first people to make me feel at home in the United States by inviting me to shower in the master bathroom, rather than the guest bathroom, whenever I stayed over with them. “ You ’ re family,” she would tell me, “ not a guest.” I loved their huge jacuzzi tub! She also took me shopping and to Wednesday night Bible studies at her church and gave me rides any place the bus didn ’ t go as though she was my own personal Uber driver. Not every person knows how to show love, even to their husbands or their children. But the families I met in San Antonio did, and their love empowered me to succeed.

[50] Having finally secured my US citizenship, I will be eligible to vote in the next election and I cannot wait!

[51] https://unictr.irmct.org/en/tribunal

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