

A close-up portrait of a Black man with a slight smile, looking towards the camera. He is wearing a white shirt with intricate lace detailing on the shoulder. The background is dark and out of focus.

Um'Khonde Patrick Habamenshi

Where Souls Turn to Dust

Rwanda

My Journey from Exile to Legacy

RWANDA

WHERE SOULS TURN TO DUST



My Journey from Exile to Legacy

UM'KHONDE PATRICK HABAMENSHI

iUniverse, Inc.
New York Bloomington

Rwanda, Where Souls Turn to Dust
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ISBN: 978-1-4401-6083-7 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-4401-6081-3 (cloth)
ISBN: 978-1-4401-6082-0 (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America

iUniverse rev. date: 8/14/2009

I dedicate this book to the million of lives we lost during the 1994 Genocide, and the millions more, who, for the last 15 years, have been trying to cling to the belief, against tremendous odds, that we can be one again if we really want to.

To Antoinette, Flora, Agathe, Cedric, and Papa: thank you for always watching over me.

I often wonder what happens to the souls of the departed when the living are so consumed by hatred, so busy destroying and killing one another that they forget to care for the dead.

Do their poor souls turn to dust like the thousands of bodies buried in Rwanda's mass graves?

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful beyond words to my parents, Callixte Habamenshi and Callinie Kayisenge, for teaching me that the noblest fight of all is the fight to bring about more justice and freedom for humankind. I want to thank you, and thank my brothers and sisters, Olivier, Liliane, Imanzi, Aimé, Umutoni and Kayitesi, for seeing me through the darkest days of my life, the days when justice and freedom were almost taken away from me. My love goes to my nephews and nieces, Sigrid, David, Loick, Ineza and Malcolm-Emmanuel, for always showing me that the future is worth fighting for.

In my life, I've often come across people, who, without knowing me, saved me in more ways than one, changing my life forever. I will always be indebted to the people who alerted me of my imminent arrest in May 2005. For your own security, I will not print your names here, but be assured they are engraved in my heart in gold letters.

My thanks to Me Protais Mutembe, for taking on my unusual case, and all the friends and relatives who stayed by my side during my last year in Rwanda, helping me stay strong with unquestioning love and priceless moral support. I want to express my utmost appreciation for the Désiré Rubayiza, Aloys Nkundiyenze and Vincent Gasana families, Tante Immaculée, my extended family on the Damien Kinyoni side and the Sylvestre Bulingufi side, my friends, Laura, Betty, Innocent and Mama Jeanette, and all my friends at St. Michael Parish in Kigali.

I am thankful to Ambassador Jacques Laberge and Julie Fournier of the Canadian Embassy in Kigali for giving me sanctuary for a few but most precious hours on the longest day of my life.

Starting everything over in Canada would not have been possible if it wasn't for all the people, my friends and even people I didn't know, who kept showing me that my life was worth something after all the months where it didn't seem to amount to much. Many thanks to Umwali Sollange, Kevin Johnson, B. Harris, Kiambi ya Vanga, Kodzo Olympio, I.B. Data Akangbou, Nduduzo, A. Tanga, J. Noble, J. Priso, Ingrid and David Schilling, all my friends around the world, and my friends at the Toronto Food Policy Council and the YMCA.

My regards go to my friends and colleagues at the International Fund for Agricultural Development in Rome for believing in me and giving me a chance to continue contributing to Africa's development. I want to especially acknowledge Benoit Thierry, Claus Reiner and Sylvie Arnoux for being there for me when I most needed them.

Special thanks to my exceptionally gifted mother, Callinie Kayisenge, for graciously allowing me to publish one of her poems in my book. I owe my love and passion for writing to her. Thank you to the iUniverse team for helping me step into my dream of becoming a published writer.

PROLOGUE

If you ask me what the most beautiful country in the world is, I will answer without a hint of hesitation, that Rwanda is the most beautiful of them all.

I describe my native country in one of my poems as a cheerful, unchallenging, welcoming world, with breathtaking scenery, magnificent emerald mountains, lavish copper-coloured rivers, steamy waterfalls and crystalline azure lakes! A dream place where the wildlife was elegant: giraffes dancing with cassias, orchids mingling with gorillas, ibis with jacarandas, eagles with palm trees and all birds of paradise claiming their birthright to majesty!

Tragically, Rwanda will also be forever associated with the worst Evil known to mankind, an Evil that started long before the world we know today, an Evil that made Cain raise his hand against his own brother Abel, an Evil that made Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery, an Evil that takes parents away from their kids and kids away from their parents, an Evil that slaughters the defenseless and the elderly, an Evil that sent millions of Jews to the gas chambers. That Evil had been lurking in my country for decades, hiding in the darkest nights so the world wouldn't see it. It is an Evil that claimed a million innocent souls in 1994 and still claims victims today, in Darfur, in Congo and, sadly, in Rwanda too, despite the never-ending resolutions, cries and communiqués stating that this should never happen again.

This is an Evil fueled by greed, corruption, shady politics and indifference, an Evil fed by the world's hunger for diamonds, gold and precious wood, an Evil filling refugee camps by the millions.

This Evil is called Prejudice. I met it face to face, and, by God's grace, I lived to tell my story.

My name is *Um'Khonde* Patrick Habamenshi. I am a son of Rwanda.



**INTRODUCTION:
MY EXILE**

*There are things I never say in my poems
Probably because I am scared to immortalize my pain
I am scared of letting my guard down,
Scared of letting anyone know
That my Exile hurts as acutely as Prejudice,
That the Evil I saw in my life still haunts me,
Even when I look up to God,
That Hatred has barricaded me for life
In a cage of doubts about humanity,
That I have scars deep in my soul that you would see
If you only took the time to look me in the eyes*

Excerpt from “*Things I Never Say,*”
The Poetic Journal of Um’Khonde

MY EXILE

My exile is about contradictory emotions: the joy of finding a new country and the sadness of knowing that it came at the cost of forgoing my native land. My exile is about opposing motions: moving forward while pulling myself back, swimming to the shores while fearing to set foot on the ground.

My exile is made of hope for a better life ahead tainted by the fear of forgetting the life I left behind.

My exile is filled with echoes of songs and stories heard by the fire at night, songs of lost times, nostalgic memories of the black dust and high mountains of my native Gisenyi, the sunset turning Lake Kivu into a red and orange bonfire on waves.

My exile is filled with warm houses and lonely refugee camps, loud laughter and silent tears, wounds that never quite heal, waiting to bleed through the ache and pains of the world's least fortunate. My exile is filled with phantoms, ghosts of all my countrymen and women, those whom I loved and those whom I didn't get a chance to know, all claimed by hatred and war. I see them everywhere and in everything, the happy and the sad, so sorry that they will never be there to share the journey with all of us who did not die.

My exile is filled with sounds of freedom strangely mixed with cries of agony: the Berlin wall tumbling down while war started in Rwanda, Apartheid ending as the Genocide unfolded, innocents

dying while the world looks away, unpunished mass murders on the road to oil, gold, diamonds and colombite-tantalite. My exile is a world of unwanted tribes and uncounted casualties in an ever-repeated history of never meant *Never-agains*.

My exile is filled with phone calls and telegrams announcing countless losses. My exile is filled with attempts to reverse the course of time, attempts to chase the ghosts out of my head by walking those once happy hills, clinging to the cruelly unreal illusion that if I could but stand in the playgrounds where we once ran together, under the trees that we once climbed, they would miraculously reappear and heal my crippled heart.

My exile is filled with attempting to forget my tears by going back to the moments where I knew nothing but happiness.

My exile is filled with broken hopes, with land mines hidden in playgrounds and ready to blow up our last dreams, with forests turned into deserts, songs turned into sobs and demons chasing ghosts.

My exile is filled with double visions, a déjà-vu of solitary roads traveled before, of shelter and fear of shelter, of wanting and fearing to want.

My exile is a Road of No Return.

THE LEGACY JOURNAL OF UM'KHONDE





PART I:
WALKING WITH ONE MILLION GHOSTS

Shout it with me: Never Again!
Shout it till there are no more mass graves! Never Again!
Shout it till there are no more rapes! Never Again!
Shout it till there are no more mutilations! Never Again!
Shout it till there are no more land mines! Never Again!
Shout it till there is no more indifference! Never Again!
Shout it till Darkness becomes Light! Never Again!
Shout it till it hurts not to shout! Never Again!
Shout it Everywhere and Every Time
So they know we finally mean it: NEVER AGAIN!
Let's shout it together so the dead can finally rest in peace!
Let's shout it together so it stops happening
Ever and All over Again!

Excerpt from "Never Again,"
The Poetic Journal of Um'Khonde

CHAPTER 1

Mon journal, 2 Octobre, 1997, Les feuilles d'Automne. Free, free! I am finally free! I never wanted to admit to myself how much I missed these wonderful words for all these years!

You never truly realize how precious freedom is till you lose it. And you never remember how sweet and soft it was till you have gained it back.

I'm free. Comme ce vent d'automne qui se faufile dans les arbres, faisant tomber leurs feuilles l'une après l'autre, jaunes, oranges, ocres ou dorées, vertes, semblables à tous ces jours passés.

Je t'ai retrouvée et plus jamais je ne te laisserai partir. Comme je suis devenu au cours des mois passés, je n'ai réagi que d'un sourire, craignant presque qu'en bougeant un peu, mes liens relâchés ne se resserrent et mon cœur encore n'entaillent.

Mais rien de tout cela ne m'arrive. Je bouge, je respire. Je bouge. Rien ne m'atteint. Ou plutôt si: une légèreté, une ivresse et une joie qui de moi s'étaient éloignées. Je sens cette gaité me gagner et m'alanguir, faisant tomber une à une toutes les barrières que j'ai dressé autour de moi pour me protéger de toute peine.

Je ris à moi tout seul! Comme cet oiseau que j'ai toujours envié, je vole dans le ciel de ma liberté. Oh, liberté.

J'ai attendu avec impatience ce moment où je pourrai m'asseoir et mettre sur papier tout ce que ces moments, ces instants, cet instant magique signifient pour moi.

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J'ai cru que j'écrirai des pages et des pages, revivant mon chemin, jour après jour. Mais non. Tout ce que je veux écrire c'est: "Merci, mon Dieu." Merci. Et j'ai envie de pleurer, mais sans tristesse.

Aujourd'hui en quelques minutes, une signature dans un hall anonyme a passé ma vie de réfugié à résident permanent. Mais je sais que le réfugié en moi ne me quittera pas. Car c'est au cours de ces longs temps apatrides que j'ai rencontré le vrai Moi.

Thank you, my God. Thank you.

***Journal entry, October 2, 1997, Autumn Leaves.** Free, free! I am finally free! I never wanted to admit to myself how much I missed these wonderful words for all these years!*

You never truly realize how precious freedom is till you lose it. And you never remember how sweet and soft it was till you have gained it back.

I'm free. Like that autumn wind sidling through the trees, taking down their leaves one by one, yellow leaves, orange, copper or golden, green, so much alike all these days past.

Freedom, I regained you and will never let you go again. I have become so controlled over the last months, I've only reacted with a shy smile, almost frightened that if I were to move even a little, my bonds would tighten again and cut through my heart.

But nothing so gloomy happened. I move, I breathe. I move. Nothing affects me. Or should I say, a lightness, an euphoria, a joie de vivre that had shied away from me. I feel this joy overcome me and relax me, taking down all the barriers that I've built around myself to shield myself from pain.

I am laughing alone! Like those birds I've always envied, I fly in the sky of my newfound liberty. Oh, liberty!

I've impatiently waited for this moment, when I could sit and write down all those moments, all those instants, this instant and its magical significance for me.

Um'Khonde Patrick Habamenshi

I thought I would write page after page, reliving my journey. But no. All I want to write in this moment is: "Thank you, my God." Thank you. I want to cry, but not out of sadness.

Today, in just a few minutes, standing in some anonymous hall downtown, I will place my signature on the document that takes my life from refugee to landed immigrant. But I know that the refugee in me will never completely depart. For it was in those long stateless months that I found the true Me.

Thank you, my God. Thank you.

CHAPTER 2

Now that I was a permanent resident, or landed immigrant, as we say here in Canada, my head was filled with all sorts of projects that I couldn't even dream of when I still had refugee status. Nothing seemed impossible anymore: I was able to go back to school and apply for better jobs. The most important of all: I was allowed to travel abroad for the first time since I moved to Canada!

I could have gone anywhere in the world, but my heart was set on Rwanda. I terribly missed my country, a country I hadn't seen for four long years!

The last time I'd set foot in my native land was in August 1993. I had just finished my last year of veterinary medicine, and I was contemplating doing my thesis research in Rwanda. I wanted to conduct my research in Volcanoes National Park. The park's magnificent chain of five volcanoes stretches along Rwanda's northwest border with the Congo and Uganda. The park is a paradise for nature lovers like me, with its bamboo forests, its primates and its buffaloes.

The reserve was made famous by the 1988 film *Gorillas in the Mist*, which told the story of Dian Fossey, an American researcher who lived with the gorillas for eighteen years. It was the first major motion picture ever filmed in Rwanda. I remember the excitement surrounding the movie. My late sister Antoinette had landed a tiny supporting role, which gave her, like all the Rwandan crew, instant celebrity status. In fact, since we didn't have television in Rwanda at

the time, no one, in our little country of a thousand hills, had ever heard of Sigourney Weaver or Bryan Brown, the two main actors.

I wanted to study the systems that had been put into place to ensure that both the people living in the areas surrounding the park and their cattle could cohabit with the endangered gorillas without any risk of exposing each other to devastating illnesses.

When I landed in Kigali in that hot summer of 1993, I immediately saw the first signs that this was not the best time for returning to Rwanda. Despite the recent signing of the Arusha Peace Agreement between the rebels and the government (incidentally, the former opposition has since taken control of the government, and the factions linked to the former government are now in rebellion), I could tell that the war was nowhere near finished. When I went through immigration, the agent took my passport and put it on a pile to the side.

“We are keeping your passport. You’ll have to go and get it at the Ministry of the Interior.”

It was strange. I’d seen others go through without having their passports taken, and I wanted to ask why I had to leave mine. I saw my Uncle Désiré Rubayiza at the international vaccinations counter. He worked in the World Health Organization’s office in Kigali. He is actually one of the people who would survive the Rwandan Genocide a few months later by taking refuge with his daughter Flora in the Hôtel des Mille Collines, which was featured in *Hotel Rwanda*. Rubayiza discreetly waved his head to indicate to me not to say anything and keep moving. When I presented my vaccine book to him, he just said, *“Don’t worry, you will get your passport back when they see that you’re a student.”*

I spent my whole holidays going back and forth to the Ministry of the Interior. First I had to present this paper, and this other paper, and then bring the paper they asked me for the first time. Some of

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the papers required that I go to my native district of Nyamyumba, almost three hours from Kigali. It was exhausting.

Because the tension in the country was so acute, especially in northern Rwanda where the Volcanoes Park is located, I finally gave up my research project. I immediately booked a flight to Dakar when I got my passport back (after two months of going back and forth to the Ministry of the Interior). When I look back at that event, I thank God for that decision. The Genocide would have found me in Rwanda had I remained and proceed with my initial research project.

CHAPTER 3

A few days after my return to Dakar, my life was affected by an event that occurred miles from Senegal. The date is marked in my head forever: October 21, 1993. We were having lunch in a classmate's room when the radio announced the assassination of Melchior Ndadaye, the president of Burundi, Rwanda's neighbour to the south.

We were all shocked. According to the report, he had been savagely tortured. His wife and three kids had escaped and found refuge in the French Embassy.

I made an unfortunate comment, which I didn't think much of at the time: *"This French government, they always find a way to be at centre stage in everything that goes on in our countries."* I was thinking of the French troops deployed in Rwanda since 1990. My classmate looked at me strangely but didn't say anything.

That evening, I went to a café near the campus with some friends. When we got there, all the Rwandan students who had arrived before us emptied their glasses, turned them upside down in almost synchronized fashion, and left the place. I was puzzled by their abrupt departure but decided that it was just a coincidence.

I got back to the campus and, as I often did, I sat on a bench in the courtyard by the dormitory. October was hot and damp, so I delayed going inside.

The bench was about 50 metres from the school's main gate, and I could see the gate from where I sat. I had been sitting there for a

few minutes when I saw the comrades who had left the café when I entered. The first two who approached the dormitory stopped when they saw me, said something to each other and went back to the gate. I couldn't hear what was said, but moments later I saw them coming back, all 10 of them, and they walked straight towards me.

There was something menacing about the way they walked silently and forcefully towards me. It wasn't the leisurely pace of students coming in from an enjoyable night out. The expressions on their faces were not joyful. Quite the contrary.

Before I could move, they formed a tight circle around the bench where I was sitting, leaving me no way out.

"Is it true what we heard?" one asked me.

"What did you hear?" I wasn't sure where this was going, but his voice gave me a clear indication that this was no friendly chat.

The same comrade continued talking while the others looked at me silently. *"Is it true that you say you hate the French because they saved Ndadaye's wife and kids?"*

"What? When did I say that?" I asked, completely taken aback by that accusation!

The student turned to the classmate I'd had lunch with when the radio announced Ndadaye's assassination. *"Isn't that what you told us he said?"* He nodded, cowardly avoiding making eye contact with me.

I vehemently protested: *"I never said anything like that. Why would I hate people just for saving Ndadaye's family? My God, why would I hate those poor people?"*

Another comrade stepped in: *"We know you hate the Hutus, and you wish all of us dead."*

I was astonished by that statement! I am of mixed Hutu-Tutsi descent, so how could I hate my own kind? I did not and will

never understand why people reject their own more easily than they embrace them. I was born in Rwanda, grew up there, spoke the same language and shared the same religious beliefs as my attackers. We were classmates, we played, partied and dined together, yet Melchior Ndadaye is killed in a foreign country just because he is Hutu, and suddenly my mother's ethnicity makes me the enemy!

How many times will I be tried for my ethnic origins? How many times will I be rejected by my own people? Ironically, years later, I would be accused of being too Hutu—or not Tutsi enough, depending how you look at it— by the new powers of Kigali.

“Why would you say something like that? I don't hate the Hutus! Why would I hate you to the point of wishing a poor woman and her kids had not survived the atrocities inflicted upon their father?”

They were taking turns to speak. I could tell by their anger that they had waited a long time for this occasion to tell me what they thought of me.

“You never say anything when we are talking about the Tutsis. We know you are on their side!”

I don't know why I kept trying to argue with them. It as though I was talking to a wall: *“Why should I say something whenever you are insulting the Tutsis? I know you couldn't care less about my opinion.”*

My words seemed to enrage them even more.

“You people think you are better than us,” the leader of the group said to me. *“You are always looking down on us. You think that because your mother is Tutsi, you are better than us.”*

They went on talking about the Tutsis and how they were bad people. One spit on me, and another insulted my mother with vulgarities I could never repeat and wish I had never heard! I tried moving, but one of them gripped my arm so tight that I couldn't move from the bench.

"You are going to listen to us, you cockroach!" Cockroach was the derogatory name they gave to the Tutsis. They also called me snake, another derogatory term they liked to use.

I was so shocked, I couldn't move. I wished someone would come so I could leave. They would never dare attack me in front of other students, especially non-Rwandan students. But the campus was almost empty, since school would not start for a couple of weeks.

At some point, I saw one of my friends, another veterinary student from Rwanda, walking through the gate. I became hopeful, thinking that he would ask them to leave me alone.

He took a quick look at what was happening, and, to my surprise, he chose to walk away. He obviously didn't want to stand up to this angry mob.

I'd never felt so small, so humiliated, sitting there, my own classmates spitting in my face, insulting me, insulting my parents!

At some point, a group of Senegalese students walked through the gates. I mustered all the courage I had left, stood up and walked away. The Rwandan students let me go, probably fearing that other students would see them.

I went to my room and locked the door. I didn't sleep the whole night. God knows what those inebriated students would do in the dark of the night.

Fortunately, nothing happened to me that night. From that day on, I avoided them as much as I could. I never wanted to have anything to do with them, but fate had other plans, and not in the way you might think.

CHAPTER 4

I will never forget what happened a few days after that assault. My alma mater, the International School of Veterinary Medicine, part of the renowned Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, announced the names of the graduate students who were awarded teaching assistantships for the upcoming year. The candidates were ranked according to the average of all the scores they'd received since their first year at the school. I was proud to see my name in the fifth position on the list! It was a great academic recognition!

I was going to be a T.A. in the department of parasitology and zoology. The news sent a wave of panic among my Rwandan classmates. Nine of the 10 students who assaulted me the previous week were going to be in two of my classes! They were scared that I was going to retaliate by failing them, but that was the furthest thing from my mind.

Hours after the list of T.A. was announced, they sent an emissary to see me. He was also a student at the school, but he hadn't taken part in the attack.

"They told me you don't talk to them anymore. They are afraid you are holding a grudge against them. They told me it was just a harmless discussion."

I looked at him, surprised that he would even dare bring up the subject. *"A harmless discussion? If it was just a harmless discussion, why do they think I want to get back at them? Anyway, I do not talk to these people anymore. I realized then that I have never known*

them, and I am behaving as such: I do not know them. Tell them to leave me alone! I advise you to never talk to me about them if you don't want me to ban you too."

I kept thinking about this situation. Of course I wasn't going to fail them deliberately, but I knew that if they failed, they would blame it on me.

I went to see Professor Louis Joseph Pangui. He was the head of the department at the time; he is now the director of the school. I didn't want to tell him about the assault, but I needed his counsel on how to deal with my compatriots.

"Professor, you know that the Rwandan war has generated many ethnic tensions in our community. I'd like to ask you if someone else can mark the exams of the Rwandan students."

Professor Pangui, who was originally from Congo-Brazzaville, a country with its own share of civil conflicts, understood my request without me having to give him the specific details of my own ordeal. He just asked me one question: *"Do you think you will be biased against them, Patrick?"*

I answered without any hesitation: *"No. I will be fair to them as I am to everyone else."*

"Then the matter is solved. You will mark all the exams, including the exams of the Rwandan students. Patrick, I trust you, and that's all that counts."

I was deeply moved by his words. Pangui was a great professor, and it was a true blessing to work with him. Needless to say, those students were so scared of failing that they worked twice as hard in my classes as they did in the other classes. And in the end, they all passed on their own merits.

I recently met Professor Pangui in Burundi. We were coincidentally staying in the same hotel in Bujumbura. It was great to see him again, some fourteen years later! We spent some time reminiscing about those days when I was his student. I found myself so nostalgic.

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I was such a dreamer then. I didn't know that this incident with the other students would be just one of many other such ethnically motivated incidents, the worst of which almost cost me my freedom in 2005.

“Patrick, we were all fond of you at the school, and anyone who knows you and your beliefs was deeply saddened by what happened to you in Rwanda.”

CHAPTER 5

No Rwandan in the world will ever forget where they were when the Genocide started, a mere six months after I was assaulted by my comrades.

On April 6, 1994, we were in the veterinary school's cafeteria celebrating the birthday of a friend, Fidèle. Around 7:30 PM, the party had just started when another student rushed in and pulled us aside.

"They just announced on the radio that the plane carrying President Habyarimana crashed as it was about to land in Kigali!"

Somehow, we had a hard time believing that story. That's one of the psychological effects of dictatorship: Juvénal Habyarimana had ruled the country for the last twenty years with an iron fist, so we had a hard time believing that he would die like that. I remember thinking of another infamous African president of the time, General Gnassingbé Eyadéma of Togo, who was rumoured to have faked assassination attempts so he could arrest his enemies under the pretext they conspired to kill him.

However, after listening to different newscasts reporting the event, there was little doubt left that President Habyarimana had really died. We also learned that Cyprien Ntaryamira, the president of Burundi, had also been aboard the plane. Apparently, the Burundian leader had the misfortune of asking his Rwandan counterpart for a plane ride. Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time!

We spent a restless night, not sure what was in store. We didn't want to say it, but we knew that something bad was about to happen. However, none of us could have anticipated the horrors that were going to take place in the Land of a Thousand Hills over the next hundred days.

We were up the whole night, scared of what might happen after the brutal death of the Rwandan president. The killings started in the wee hours of April 7, 1994. Mrs. Agathe Uwilingiyimana, the country's prime minister, was one of the first to be murdered. We had heard her just moments before being interviewed on the radio, not knowing it would be the last time.

The hundred nights that followed were horrible. We sat there powerless, listening to the radio, watching the brutal, uncensored images of our people being killed on live television. To this day, I cannot understand how foreign reporters could keep their cameras rolling while our loved ones were being massacred. It was horrible to see people we knew getting brutally murdered on live television!

It was the strangest of times. And as time goes by, those memories, instead of fading away, become clearer, as though it happened yesterday.

You could tell that each one of us was trying very hard not to cry, despite the fact that we learned of loved ones dying every day. We knew we needed to stay strong, to cling to the living, the survivors, almost fearing that giving in to tears would rob them of the love they needed from us.

The phones weren't working well, but I kept trying calling my parents house. I managed to get through two days into the Genocide. My young sister Liliane answered the phone. Paradoxically, she was the one trying to reassure me. *"Don't worry, it will pass."*

I called home every day, just to hear their voices for the last time. I had little doubt that they would soon be killed, for my family lived only a couple of blocks from Agathe Uwilingiyimana.

One day the phone kept ringing, and no one would pick up the

phone. I became restless and kept trying. At some point, my sister answered and told me they had disconnected the phone so as not to alert the militia that there were still people in the house. I begged her to keep the phone on.

I would ask whoever answered the phone to call all the others so that I could hear their voices. I would become anxious if any of them couldn't come to the phone, thinking that they had been taken away by the militia or the soldiers.

I managed to talk with them many times. I don't know where I found the money to buy the phone cards, but I did. One day I had a horrible premonition, feeling sick to my stomach. I went to pray at St. Dominique, a church just next to the university. I was scared, but at the same time I knew I had to accept whatever happened. I went back and dialled my parents' number: 00-250-73946 and waited. It rang and rang for a long time, but no one ever answered.

We tried to get news from the neighbouring church, and the priest told us that it was likely my family had been killed.

For many days, I didn't want to think about it. There was always someone else who needed us around them. Classmates and other people in the community were losing family members, close or distant relatives, and friends. It was horrible!

One day when I got to my room, I found a note that a friend had slipped under my door. I was about to have the biggest shock of my life: *"Patrick, I got news that your parents and siblings are well and alive. They fled to Burundi. Courage!"*

I was so shocked, I was shaking! I didn't want to believe it. They were dead, I thought, and I didn't want to believe otherwise in case it was a mistake, in case the message was meant for someone else and was sent to me by mistake.

I never prayed so much in my life! I recited Hail Marys, rosaries, Our Fathers. I kept my chaplet with me all the time.

I asked my best friend, Gilles Vias, to come with me when I went

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to dial the number of the house where my family was staying in Bujumbura. There was a phone booth just 50 metres from the dorm. It was the longest walk of my life. My hands were shaking so much I had to dial the number several times.

When I finally got it right, I listened nervously to that dial tone. I still didn't want to believe that it was going to change my tragic reality. Someone finally picked up, and I heard the voice that I love more than any other voice in the world:

"Patrick, ni Mama! Nous sommes au Burundi, nous allons tous bien!"[Patrick, it's Mom! We are in Burundi, we are all doing well!]

"Oh, Mama!"

I had forced myself not to cry since the horrors started, even when I thought that all my family had perished in the Genocide, but when I heard her beloved voice, I couldn't hold my tears any longer. I fell on my knees in that phone booth, near the bench where I'd been assaulted by my comrades six months earlier, and broke into unstoppable tears mixed with laughter!

"Thank you, God! Thank you, God!"

My family had survived the tragedy that would eventually steal one million of our loved ones from us.

When they realized my family had managed to escape, the militia pillaged all our personal belongings in the garden and set them on fire. Months later, when my parents returned home, all they found was a pile of half burned pictures, clothes, books, and other things our family accumulated over the years, and an angry message in one of my father's old travel documents. *"You had everything, why did you choose to betray your country?"*

CHAPTER 6

I started my journal immediately after that phone call to Burundi. Till the Genocide, I had never really realised that every second of our life, every moment, and every instant could be the last one. Now, I was tragically made aware that it only took a second for our passage on earth to end and be erased from humanity's collective memory forever.

Journal entry, April 25, 1994. The wait is unbearable as the days go by. Our morale is going up and down like a roller-coaster; the low points get deeper and deeper.

This morning, the radio announced a failed military coup in Burundi. I am worried for my family! They fled Rwanda and now they are trapped in another war!

Yesterday, one hundred and sixty people were slaughtered in the university's hospital in Butare, the hometown of the interim president of Rwanda, Théodore Sindikubwabo.

We are powerless witnesses to the biggest Genocide since the Holocaust. Every day, images of my loved ones flash through my mind. I am scared of never seeing them again, scared of mourning them for the rest of my life.

Prayers are our only source of strength. There is no more laughter or tears, just anguish and desolation.

Journal entry, May 28, 1994. My friend Alexander received news of his fiancée's death. She was living in a parish called Musha, near

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the capital. They had been hiding in a church since the beginning of the Genocide. She gave a letter for Alexander to a priest from the Czech Republic who was going to be evacuated.

The letter was dated April 11th and was completed April 13th: "We are still alive, but we learned that they plan to come and burn the church. Know that I will die happy to have known you. As you always said, it's only death that will keep us apart. I love you."

Musha's church was burned down. She died with 15 other members of her family.

The letter was mailed from Zagreb: two conflicts, two human tragedies united through one lost love.

Journal entry, May 31, 1994. *Death surrounds us like a thief waiting in the night, waiting to rob us of all that is left.*

Agnès lost her two kids. They were killed along with their Aunt Florence.

Journal entry, June 13, 1994. *I never thought all I would ever see of the Rwanda I once knew would be the images in my book, Visages du Rwanda, Perle de l'Afrique.*

Latest news: Flora and her father were evacuated from the Hôtel des Milles Collines to Kabuga, in the outskirts of Kigali. Wicliff, Thérèse, Monique and Vita were evacuated too.

Aunt Leocadie, Anita and the kids are said to still be alive.

Aunt Agnès Rubayiza is missing; no one knows where she is. May God protect her.

Here at school, I have wonderful moral support from everyone, the profs, especially Pangui, Oudar, Gongnet and, of course Diop, as well as the staff and the students. Every day, someone stops to ask me how everything is going.

Last Thursday, the radio announced that Msgr. Vincent Nsengiyumva, the archbishop of Kigali, Msgr. Ruzindana and Msgr. Thaddée Nsengiyumva, the bishops of Byumba and Kagbaya, had

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all been killed by the Rwandan Patriotic Front. I am disappointed in the RPF!

On the radio, they keep talking about the future of Rwanda, but I can't see any future for a country with a now-stolen past.

The father of Philo Thiam was killed.

Journal entry, June 17, 1994. *Today the whole world will be following the opening match of the Mundial 94 in Los Angeles, Germany versus Colombia.*

The sports frenzy will make the world forget our war and all its violence and hatred.

A light at the end of the tunnel: today, St. Famille Church has fallen into the hands of the rebels. The Rwandan Patriotic Front is accumulating victory after victory, but all seems so slow.

They overtook Gitarama a few days ago, and the "government" was forced out, choosing Gisenyi as their new base! Gisenyi, my beautiful native town is now the world capital of these horrors.

I visited Philo Thiam last Wednesday. There is a requiem mass for her father today. He was killed with his wife and children in Butare.

I am scared for Aunt Agnès; no one knows where she is.

The interahamwe have been tracking her down. Radio des Milles Collines alerted them about where she was last spotted.

Journal entry, June 17, 1994. *Who killed JH? The death of the Rwandan dictator could inspire authors looking for new storylines.*

Today, the radio announced that the Belgian daily paper Le Soir is accusing two French soldiers deployed in Kigali and disguised as Belgians of having shot the presidential Falcon jet on April 6th.

France immediately refuted the allegations, making the argument

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that it was “grotesque” (ridiculous) to accuse them of killing a president whose regime they’ve been said to support.

So who killed Juvénal Habyarimana? France is accusing Belgium, the RPF is accusing the so-called “extremist Hutus” and Belgium is implicating two French soldiers working for the “extremist Hutus.”

Will we ever know who really killed Habyarimana? To be continued.

Journal entry, June 19, 1994. *It’s sad how Bella, François, Lyliose and I are in the same situation: Half-Hutu, half-Tutsi and yet neither Hutu nor Tutsi.*

CHAPTER 7

Kigali fell into the hands of the rebel forces on July 4, 1994. July fourth is now celebrated as the end of the Genocide, but in fact the killings continued in various parts of the country throughout the hot and dry Rwandan summer of 1994.

What we didn't know was that the next phase was going to be as painful as or even more painful than the Genocide itself. As soon as the Genocide was over, news of who had died and who had survived the tragedy started coming in, a horrible count that continued to rise, cruelly taking us back to those horrible hundred days that decimated our once beloved country.

The Genocide claimed my cousins Didier, Michel, Alain and Bosco, Bosco's young wife and newborn baby, my great aunt Dorothea, and countless other relatives, childhood and family friends.

It was going to be years before we realized the full extent of the Genocide. Even to this day, 15 years later, mass graves are being uncovered, and thousands of people are yet to be accounted for.

Another human tragedy was to take place in the immediate aftermath of the Genocide: millions of Rwandans fled the country fearing retaliation from the new powers of Kigali. In a matter of just a few weeks, more than three million people found their way to spontaneous refugee camps in neighbouring countries, mainly in the Congo and Tanzania. It was probably one of the biggest human exoduses and humanitarian emergencies of recent times. I was to

lose more loved ones in those overcrowded temporary shelters: my cousins Seraphin and Aloys, and my dear friend Nubaha.

In July 1994, my life was split between two parallel universes. In one universe, I was a Rwandan witnessing the decimation of his country; in the other universe, I was a doctoral candidate due to present and publicly defend my thesis to earn the title of Doctor in Veterinary Medicine.

I had finished my research, my thesis was being typed up, but I just couldn't find in myself the will to go on as though my world hadn't crumbled around me.

In the end, I missed the deadline for submitting my thesis to my school; I just didn't care about that degree anymore. I had spent the last six years preparing for that day, eager to go back and work for my country; and now my country had ceased to exist, practically all the people I knew were dead or had fled the country, and my parents were refugees in Burundi, a country as unstable as Rwanda!

The day after the deadline, the professor in charge of the doctoral candidates came to see me in the dorm. It was such a surprise to see Professor Malang Seydi standing at my door.

“Patrick, what is going on with you? You missed the deadline for your thesis.”

What is wrong with me? Hadn't he heard the news that my countrymen were killed by the thousands over the last three months?

“Patrick, it seems like it's the end of the world, but it isn't. You cannot give up all the efforts you've put into your education, not now, when you are at the end of the road. Trust me, when this is over, your country will need you even more than ever before.”

I was allowed to set a new date and this time, I met the university's deadline. On July 23, 1994, I defended my thesis in the Grand Amphitheatre at the Faculty of Medicine at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar. Professor François Dieng, one of the first

deans of the Faculty of Medicine, was presiding over my jury. It was an amazing honour for me that this elderly man I respected so much had accepted to momentarily come out of retirement to chair my ceremony. My dear teachers: Professor Hassane Diop, Professor Louis Joseph Pangui and Professor Malang Seydi had also accepted to be part of my jury.

I was almost unrecognizable. I had lost a lot of weight. I was skinny, and my now oversized glasses looked like I had borrowed them from someone else. The amphitheatre was packed; so many friends had come to support me on the most important day of my life.

Then came the moment when Professor François Dieng asked me to raise my right hand and take the veterinary oath, named after Claude Bourgelat, the founder of our profession. I had waited so many years to do this and become a doctor; strangely, all I felt in that moment was the deepest sadness, knowing that it might be several years before I could present my so-coveted doctor's degree to my parents, who sacrificed so much so that I could be standing there.

“I swear before my elders and my teachers to uphold in all times and in all places the dignity and honour of the veterinary profession; to abide in any circumstances by the principles of correctness and rectitude set by the codes of deontology of my country; to prove by my conduct, my convictions, that wealth lies more in the good we dispense than the good we accumulate; to never overcharge for the knowledge I owe to the generosity of my country and the solicitude of everyone who supported me in the pursuit of my vocation. May I lose all trust if I ever break this oath.”

I had a hard time pronouncing the words “the knowledge I owe to my country's generosity”! What was generous about the country that had reduced all our dreams to ashes on the bonfires of hatred?

CHAPTER 8

Journal entry, August 31, 1994. On Monday, August 29th, I went to see a cardiologist to check on my low blood pressure. Dr Mourad, a very kind doctor, told me not to worry.

Later that day, Aimable received a letter from Burundi. It was from his sister, Immaculée, announcing that she had made it but that all his family was killed.

She was the only one to survive. She was hidden with other survivors by a Hutu pastor. He had hidden them in the washroom and had hidden the keys so that not even his employees knew there was anyone in there.

She stayed there for three months before being evacuated by the French and then the RPF to Kigali. A friend of hers living in Burundi and working for Pharmacists without Borders learnt that she was alive and came to take her.

Aimable has almost gone crazy. To have waited all these months only to find out that his family had perished!

Fidèle still doesn't have any news of his family. I advised him to pray for God to give him the strength to accept whatever happened. He believes his family is in Goma.

It is so hard for everyone. I often feel guilty that my family made it.

Journal entry, Tuesday, September 6, 1994. Last Saturday,

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September 3, I was sleeping deeply when George Ague, a student in my school, knocked at my door and advised me there was a call for me at the concierge.

I went there, but the person had already hung up. I stayed for a moment, waiting for them to call back. I thought it was Beatrice, the only person who had ever called me at that number.

The phone finally rang again. It was Oswald, the brother of my childhood friends Valérie and Alphonse Kimenyi. I was happy to learn that they had made it. He told me that my friend Bony Sibomana was also alive, in a refugee camp in Bukavu, a town in North Kivu province in Congo.

I was so relieved. I had been so worried for them!

Journal entry, November 4, 1994. *On November first, I talked with my Uncle Désiré and my Aunt Agnès for the first time since the Genocide started! It was so emotional! My uncle and aunt were like a second family for me when I was growing up.*

It was surreal to hear Aunt Agnès speak about the way she'd been tracked by the militia for months.

I cried when they handed the phone to Flora, my dear cousin and best friend. We talked for several minutes. She is getting married tomorrow with Louis Niyonsenga, the love of her life.

She told me that the militia stole the gold initial F that I had given her. I will surprise her and send her another one.

Anyway, the biggest treasure of all is that we all survived this, the Rubayiza family and our family. The future will tell us the rest.



The future still held a fair—or should I say, unfair—share of burdens.

Somehow I thought that those who survived the Genocide would never die. I was mistaken.

CHAPTER 9

I was pleasantly surprised when the immigration officer at the border said “Welcome to Canada” after I told her that I wanted to seek asylum here. It reminded me of the article I’d read a few years earlier in which Canada’s minister for citizenship and immigration was pleased to announce that immigration was increasing. Are they for real, I thought then? The right wing was on the rise in many Western countries, and most of the news we received was of immigrants and refugees being treated worse than contagious diseases and of the questionable means used in those countries to get rid of the unwanted visitors.

I fell in love with Toronto the moment I saw it, with its majestic skyscrapers competing with the CN Tower to see which will touch the sky first, and Lake Ontario waving at me like Lake Kivu of my native land used to do. And I immediately felt at home the moment I set foot on the ground and merged into a metropolitan crowd of people of all colours and all the races of the planet. No more wars, no more social clashes, just a harmonious world waiting to embrace me and heal me from all the pain and all the losses.

I spent my first weeks in a family shelter downtown. Though the place was clean and much more comfortable than most shelters, especially the shelters for men, I couldn’t wait to get out of there and have a place of my own. It seemed that everyone in the shelter was escaping something: battered women and their kids escaping abusive husbands, refugees fleeing an abusive country, and many other people simply evading an abusive life in general. Some people seemed to have taken up permanent residence there, staying for

months, just sitting in the lounge watching television. Others told me it was the third or fourth time they'd come to stay there.

I felt that if I stayed there, I would never make it in Canada. Whatever was awaiting me out there, I was ready to face it and fight it. It couldn't be worse than coming from a country decimated by hatred and Genocide.

I found a room on the twelfth floor of an apartment building near Bloor Street and Dovercourt Road. I stayed there for a few months before moving to a smaller room on St. George Street, a couple blocks south of Dupont Street. It was a garret with a low ceiling, a tiny shower and a two-plate stove, but I loved it more than any palace in the world because it was my place, with my name on the lease—my first piece of the Canadian dream.

The first thing I bought even before I got a sofa was a second hand three hundred dollars assembled computer. I spent hours writing memories of Rwanda, trying to cling to them before they all faded away.

My only connection with the rest of the world was a black and white television my brother Imanzi had found on the street and we used a coat hanger as antenna. The only channel that came through more or less clearly was CFMT, which meant a double dose of their seemingly ubiquitous but otherwise charming star host Lucy Zillio.

After months of saving every penny we had, my brother Imanzi and I were finally able to move to a two-bedroom apartment near Flemingdon Park, in the northern part of Toronto. My sister Liliane had chosen Montreal as her post-genocide home.

I started taking English lessons at a public school by Christie subway station. They had an English-as-a-second-language program for beginners. I never quite understood why they called those classes by that name; many of the immigrants I met already spoke two or three languages prior to learning English.

It was slow and frustrating. I wondered when I was ever going to

have a decent conversation with someone if all I was learning was “Hello” and “How are you?” I decided to completely immerse myself in the language. I stopped speaking French and Kinyarwanda or reading anything in those languages. I borrowed novels from the public library and spent hours reading until I started recognizing some words and guessing their meaning. I had abandoned the idea of using an English-French dictionary when I realized that I spent more time reading the lexicon than reading the actual book.

I remember that the very first book I was able to read and understand in its entirety was Alexander Haley’s *Roots*. I had read the book and seen the series in French (*Racines*) when I was in Africa, so I already knew the story. I felt exhilarated by my first milestone on the road to English fluency; I wanted to tell everyone I met on the street!

The television news proved to be a great teaching tool. While I had trouble understanding what people on the street were saying because they spoke too fast, I had no problem understanding news anchors. They spoke more slowly and enunciated every word, plus there was always a short video clip to illustrate what they were talking about. I should mention that watching television was a significantly more pleasurable experience since we’d replaced our black and white television and our coat hanger slash antenna by a brand new colour television and a cable subscription. Once I started mastering the English language, visiting used bookstores and buying books about anything you could imagine became my favourite hobby.

When it came time to look for a job, I realized for the first time that there was an ugly flip side to my Canadian dream. I’ll never forget that day at the social services offices near my house. I had a meeting with an employment counsellor to help me search for a job. As she read my résumé, I could see her shifting uncomfortably in her chair, though I did not understand why. She finally looked at me and asked quizzically, “Do you have any other skills that we can try and highlight?”

I looked at her, puzzled. “I don’t understand,” I said.

“You need to stress your skills rather than your education. Do you have any experience in fields like heavy labour or some sort of clerical position?”

I just looked at her in silence. I made her uneasy, and her eyes went back to my résumé. She continued, with a nervous laugh and an uncomfortable grin on her face, *“You’re a doctor, but who cares, you know what I mean?”*

Did she really expect me to answer that? I should have answered, *“I care,”* but I didn’t utter a word. My sole reaction was to keep staring at her, obstinately mute. My silence seemed to make her even more uncomfortable, so she continued speaking, but with a less confident voice. *“If you have some experience in heavy labour or manufacturing, that can be more helpful if you want to find a job.”*

I stood up, took back my résumé and walked out the door. I could not get myself to stay in that room any longer. As I stepped onto the busy street, I made a silent promise to myself that I would keep looking until I found work as a veterinarian.

One of the social workers at the shelter had given me the contact information for the College of Veterinarians of Ontario. *“Call them, they are the ones in charge of licensing veterinarians.”*

I contacted their office in Guelph. The phone call left me completely discouraged. Apparently getting a license was not as easy as I thought. I would have to go back to school and retake some of my classes and then pass a series of exams before I could get the license. The process seemed like it would take years!

How was I going to pay for that? At the time, refugee claimants did not have access to student loans like permanent residents and Canadian citizens did. I could barely pay my rent and buy food, how was I going to afford school?

My landlord put me in contact with one of his friends, a veterinarian named Dr. Leslie. Dr. Leslie was a very friendly and chatty doctor. He had a veterinary clinic a few blocks from where I was living.

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His wife was as friendly and chatty as her husband, and they immediately put me at ease.

"We can't hire you before you get a license to practice, but you can come and volunteer if you want."

I jumped for joy! At least I would be working in my own field. I would go there early in the morning, clean the clinic, feed the pets and walk the dogs. Dr. Leslie would invite me to assist him when he was treating his patients.

I stayed with Dr. Leslie for several months. It was a paradoxical time for me. It was great working in a veterinary clinic; at the same time, it was frustrating to know that I could do everything, yet I wasn't allowed to treat the animals.

I kept looking for a more permanent job in various clinics around the city, at the humane society and at riding schools, but it was in vain. After a long and unproductive summer and as the weather started getting colder, announcing the hard Canadian winter I had been warned about, I swallowed my pride and did what so many other immigrants did to survive: I removed my university education from my résumé and followed one of my friends to a temp agency.

The interview was very brief. At the end, the interviewer uttered a simple phrase that marked the biggest professional turn in my life: *"Come back tomorrow, and bring steel-toed boots."*

I went to a store to look for those shoes I had never heard of before, only to find out that I couldn't afford them. The same friend who had taken me to the agency gave me an old pair of worn-out black boots. *"I think these can do till you buy new ones."* I remember looking at the old pair of steel-toed boots that had obviously known better days, thinking that at that moment, they were more valuable than my education!

I was ready to join the ranks of the many overqualified men and women working on Canada's assembly lines. I was paid just barely above the minimum wage, and I had to work several jobs to make

ends meet. During my first winter in Canada, I worked three different jobs. I worked for a telemarketing firm from 11 AM to 2 PM, at a shipping company from 4 to 11 PM and at a newspaper from midnight till 5 AM.

I was a superman of some sort. I would wear formal business attire at my telephone job, and then rush home to put on my old clothes and steel-toed boots for the other two jobs.

I couldn't have found three more different jobs. At the telemarketing job, we took calls from viewers of a teleshopping show in Quebec. Since we weren't watching the show, we did not know in advance what we were selling that day. A few minutes before the phones started ringing, a supervisor would come and distribute details of the item we were selling that day. It ranged from sets of pots and pans to digital cameras. It was weird to sell things I'd never seen to people I'd never meet.

My second job was the most physically demanding of the three. I loaded boxes onto trucks that went to every corner of the country. That job was my first and most effective crash course in the geography and postal codes of Canada. I was good at it, so I was "promoted" to uploading and offloading trucks on my own. The working conditions were tough. The warehouses were in the docks, and the windy winter cold coming from the lake nearly froze us to death. I tried wearing gloves, but then it was practically impossible to hold the boxes, so I had to work with my bare hands. When it was too cold, I would go inside to warm them up and then come back to the task.

My job at the newspaper was to put flyers in the papers. The papers came in piles of 50. I didn't have time to read the papers, not even the headlines. I had to work swiftly, lest the next bunch arrived while I was still working on the previous one. The first couple of days, my head spun and my neck ached from spending hours in one position, bending down over and over again.

It was a strange world, the world of midnight coffee at Coffee Time

and long waits at the bus station for the blue line in the middle of the night.

It was also hard for me to pretend that I didn't have an education just so I could get a job. I never took books to work, thinking that if they found out that I was a doctor, I would be dismissed on the spot.

Like my time in the shelter, I was impatient to get out of these sorts of jobs. I didn't mind the physical work; my parents had taught me that no job was too little for you to do. What I minded was having all other options taken away from me. I had spent years studying to become a doctor. Now I spent my days in dread of being fired if my employer found out I was so educated.

I was also afraid that the longer I stayed at a job where no higher education was needed, the more likely it became that I would lose any intellectual capacity to ever do anything else. In my free time, I would go and sit in the library just to be surrounded by knowledge. Or I would walk through the downtown campus of the University of Toronto, almost as though I wanted reassure myself that science hadn't disappeared from the world.

The University of Toronto was said to be one of the most difficult universities to gain admission to. It was in those days, my "factory days," as I call them, that I decided that someday I was going to apply and be admitted to that exclusive school to prove to myself that I was still as smart and educated as I was once upon a time, before the Genocide and becoming a refugee took it all.

It was a difficult time. I felt isolated in a world where no one knew what went on in my native country and no one dared to ask. We talked very little about Rwanda. It took more than two years for my siblings to tell me about what they went through during the Genocide.

My family's refugee claim was progressing well through the system. In those days, Rwanda was a priority country, and cases of Rwandan claimants were processed fairly quickly. Our claim was accepted in

the fall of 1996. It was one the best days of my life! I felt like I had been awarded a medal of some sort.

It was too late to place a call to Africa, but I could hardly wait for the morning to come so that I could share the good news with my best friend Flora. She had supported me through all these months.

When I woke up in the morning, I immediately reached for my phone to call Rwanda. But it started ringing before I could pick it up to dial Flora's number. It was a call from Rwanda informing me that Flora had passed away the previous day.

"Oh, no, not Flora! No!" How could you die, Flora, how could you die when I was so close to coming back and seeing you?

Why was the world such a cruel place? Flora had lost her first baby, then her husband and now she was losing her own life. What is the purpose of life if it is only to watch your loved ones disappear one by one?

I remember going through the day like a zombie, trying not to think about Flora and everyone who had died in Rwanda. As I came back from work in the middle of the night, I stopped by a little park near my tiny unfurnished refugee room, threw down the heavy backpack with my dirty work clothes and my weathered steel-toed boots and sat there crying till the morning, crying for my beloved cousin who had taken me all this way and now was gone forever.

CHAPTER 10

I wasn't sure how the new Rwanda would look. It was going to be a big emotional shock to be back in my native land. The only images of my country were the images of the Genocide that appeared on TV whenever they talked about Rwanda, almost as if there had never been and never would be anything else to show about my native land. Most people I knew growing up had been killed or had fled the country. I dreaded the moment I would go at the Genocide memorial sites, indelible proofs that it did really happen, that 1994 was not just a figment of the world's collective imagination. I also apprehended going at the cemetery and standing on the graves of all my relatives who had died since, Flora and her family, my grand father Sylvestre Bulingufi and my grand mother, who had lived thirty years in exile only to die of old age within months of their return to their native Rwanda.

On that December day as I boarded my plane at Toronto's Pearson International Airport, the only thing I tried to think about was that I was going to be reunited with my family for the first time in four years. Four long years without seeing them, four long years during which so many more people died! I was going to see them face to face for the first time since the horrible Genocide that almost stole them from me and changed our lives forever.

On the flight, I occupied my time with a ridiculous mental exercise: I tried to remember common Kinyarwanda words and expressions so I would not sound like a complete stranger.

All my apprehensions disappeared when the plane entered

Rwanda's airspace and I could see the green hills of my childhood, the houses, some traditional and others defiantly modern, the lakes, the Nyabarongo River (our own red Nile), the tea plantations that looked like giant golf lawns, and the forests, or at least what remained of them.

The airport in Kigali hadn't changed, except that when I was last there, it was controlled by the French military and was surrounded by roadblocks.

I didn't know how much I had missed my country till I walked into the airport terminal and heard people greeting each other and chatting in my native Kinyarwanda. I was so happy, I wouldn't stop smiling at everyone and everything! Even the announcements made in our native tongue sounded like sweet music to my ears.

I went through immigration without a glitch and proceeded to customs. That's when my command of Kinyarwanda failed me. At the time, Rwanda customs didn't have any of the sophisticated equipment you see in other airports around the world, no X-rays, no fancy computers. They went through each piece of luggage one by one.

The customs agent who was going through my luggage pointed at my shower bag and asked me what was in there.

I felt like a complete idiot, I could not remember what a bath bag was called in Kinyarwanda! My little vocabulary exercise in the plane did not extend beyond *Muraho neza* (hello) and *Amakuru ki* (How are you doing?). I vaguely remembered the word *kwiuhagira*, which means to take a bath, but for some reason I said something different. I said "*Ni ho nshyira ibyo kwiyahura*" instead of "*Niho nshyira ibyo kwiuhagira.*"

The customs agent looked at me in shock. I was shocked too, because I had just said that I carried items "to commit suicide." I desperately tried to correct myself, but the right words wouldn't come.

The agent just shook his head and told me that I could go. He was

probably wondering how miserable my life was for me to travel all this way just to end it! Or he was simply thinking that I was somehow mentally challenged.

I was so embarrassed by that incident, it was several months before I could repeat it to anyone!

Seeing my family was wonderful! I am filled with emotion whenever I reminisce about the first sight of my family, touching them, hugging them, embracing them like I never did before, trying to make up for lost times amid laughter and tears of joy.

There was so much to talk about, but we didn't know where to start. We just looked at each other, not believing that we were together once again. The kids, Olivier and Cedric, were all grown, and my sister Agathe was doing great.

Walking on the streets of Kigali after so many years was awkward. I recognized all the streets and landmarks of my old city, but I felt like a complete stranger. Post-genocide Kigali was a fast-paced city, a city that looked like it was desperately trying to run away as fast as it could from its darkest hours. There were colourful billboards everywhere announcing new business opportunities, the streets were filled with new car models, new houses and new schools were built. It was almost as though the new Rwanda was busy erasing the world that existed before the Genocide. But the signs were there, ugly and bare: buildings with bullet holes, broken bridges, houses with no doors and no windows, mass graves in every neighbourhood. Because of the land mines, you had to walk very carefully and avoid freshly turned ground.

Survivors seemed lost in the midst of it all, with practically no one there to help them cope with their losses and integrate them into the new Rwanda. They were so easy to spot in the crowd, with their physical and psychological scars impossible to ignore.

I heard many stories of people whose houses and goods were stolen from them and now they couldn't mount the energy to fight to get their things back. Sometimes someone would look at them and call them *interahamwe*, alleging that the only way they could have

survived was by allying themselves with the killers. It was cruel to call a survivor an *interahamwe*, when that was the militia that had almost killed them.

Kigali was like a ghost town. It was full of people, but it was all strange. You could go for days without seeing anyone you knew. And when you did, you would hug them in an awkward and heavy silence. In moments like that, words become completely meaningless.

You never asked anyone how other family members were doing if you weren't sure they'd survived the tragedy. You only learned of their fate if they volunteered the information or if you learned about it through a third party.

You would stop by a familiar house and knock at the door, hoping to see a friend walking out to greet you, only to find that other people now lived there.

I didn't venture to visit my native Gisenyi. The region was practically a war zone, with the army fighting off *infiltrés*, as they called the infiltrators who came from neighbouring countries. I didn't want to take any chances, as the army was suspicious of anyone they hadn't seen there before.

I went to see Flora's parents. Aunt Agnès, Flora's mom, was my mother's older sister. Our families had always been very close, as most of my mother's family were refugees in Burundi and the Congo since the sixties. Flora's family had been separated during the Genocide, Flora and her father taking refuge in the Hôtel des Mille Collines, the famous hotel featured in *Hotel Rwanda*, and Aunt Agnès and the other kids finding their way to the southern part of Rwanda. They reunited months after the end of the Genocide.

It was so emotional. I was so happy but at the same time very sad because of the absence of Flora. None of us mentioned her name, but we knew nothing was the same without her.

My aunt had practically died when Flora passed away. The death of

Flora hit her so hard, especially for her to have died only two years after having been spared in the Genocide.

Aunt Agnès once told me that she wanted to cry, but she forced herself not to. In her mind, it would have been selfish to mourn the loss of one daughter when she still had all her other children and when so many people in the country had lost all their children.

One of her friends, a Genocide widow who'd lost all her family in 1994, once asked her why she was fighting her tears to the point that it was destroying her.

"I can't cry in front of people, especially people like you who lost all your loved ones."

Her friend told her a few words that liberated her: *"You should not refuse to mourn because others lost more children than you did. Flora was your child. You have the right to mourn for her, to talk about her, to remember her in public. If not for your own sanity, you must do it for her, so she can rest in peace. You owe it to her."*

I always remember that story whenever I lose someone, that mourning them is something we owe to the dead.

My Uncle Désiré Rubayiza looked like the man on Uncle Ben rice boxes, with his hair all turned white. My cousin Inès, Flora's youngest sister, was no longer the little kid she was when I last saw her. She had turned into a beautiful young lady with stylish short hair. Her brother Didier was now a serious and reserved university student.

Pierrot had grown up to be an accomplished young man. The Genocide started when he was staying with my Uncle Rubayiza's family. He fled with my Aunt Agnès, going from one city to another, tracked by the militia till the end of the Genocide. His two brothers, Didier and Michel, were killed in Gisenyi during the very first days of the 1994 tragedy.

"This is Loick," Aunt Agnès said, pointing to the little chubby boy playing on the floor, oblivious to the adults in the room.

Rwanda, Where Souls Turn to Dust

I was incapable of uttering any word. “He looks so much like his mom,” I thought to myself, looking at his little nose and his almond-shaped eyes. When he was born, Flora asked me to be his godfather. *“Please take care of him if something happens to me.”*

I lifted the child, now almost two years old, and held him tightly against my chest. The poor baby was probably wondering who this strange man was who was crying like a baby.



PART II:
SURVIVORS' GUILT

*Why does everyone tell me you've departed
When I know that you are still here?
Your voice and your laughter
Are the first things I hear
Every morning when I wake up,
And your smile
Is the last thing I see
Every night before I go to sleep.
Why does everyone tell me to let you go
When you are the only reason I won't let go?
What else, if not your love,
Makes me stronger
When the world made me a cripple?*

*Excerpt from "Departed,"
The Poetic Journal of Um'Khonde*

CHAPTER 11

Journal entry, Sunday April 11, 1999. I can't believe I haven't written anything in my journal since January. Shame on me!

So many things have happened to me! Let me start by blowing my own horn: I just finished my first year at the University of Toronto with an average of 87 per cent in macroeconomics!

I am so proud. I've come a long way, and I feel ever more confident that I'll finally make it. Now it's time for the finals, and they account for 50 per cent of my grade! I'll be okay. This year has been a happy year.

I am reading Long Walk to Freedom, Nelson Mandela's autobiography. It moves me so much I almost want to highlight every one of his words and make this book my bible.



I had already felt the power of Mandela when I was a veterinary student in Senegal. It was impressive to see how a man who had been imprisoned years before I was born could inspire people around the world to walk, sit in, protest and organize rallies and concerts for him to be freed. He was undeniably the biggest living symbol of all that colonization had taken from Africa.

I can never forget the day Mandela was released from jail. It was one of the most moving moments of my life, witnessing Mandela walking on the street, holding hands with his wife Winnie, a free

man after 27 years in prison. Everyone in the dorm at the university in Dakar was moved to tears. We couldn't believe it was true; his release had been announced and postponed so many times before, it seemed like a cruel joke South Africa's National Party was playing on the people's hero.

Reading Mandela's story in his own words moved me even more and taught me so much about the meaning of freedom and the need to let go of the past so you can open the way for a better future.

"But then I slowly saw that not only was I not free, but my brothers and sisters were not free. I saw that it was not just my freedom that was curtailed, but the freedom of everyone who looked like I did."

Those words in particular taught me that freedom was a collective endeavour and not just an individual dream. And it is a lifelong journey, not just a walk you stop when things get rough.

Long Walk to Freedom literally changed my life and set it on its present course. I had been very active in my community when I was still a student in Senegal, but after the Genocide, I had stopped any involvement in my community. I could still not come to terms with the tragedy that had claimed a million lives five years earlier. I wanted to stay far away from my community, because everything reminded me of the 1994 horrors and the losses we suffered.

Mandela's story helped me find some type of closure. The most important thing I learned from his amazing journey is that Mandela chose to forgive the people who harmed him and his country, so his country could move one. If Mandela could still believe in his country after all the harm that was done to his people, his years as a fugitive, the 27 years in prison that practically destroyed his family, who was I to make excuses for not taking part in reconstructing my broken community?

We had just commemorated the fifth year since the Genocide a few days before, on April 7. The Kosovo tragedy was occurring, with thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands fleeing as refugees. It was a cruel replay of our own tragedy and one more reason for me

to not stay in my corner when I knew that it was indifference that allowed so many to die in senseless wars around the world.

The opportunity to serve my community came soon after reading *Long Walk to Freedom*. There was an article in a local newspaper announcing that the trial of Léon Mugesera was about to resume. Mugesera was well known among Rwandans. He had thousands of people killed during the Rwandan war before moving to Canada. He was lecturing at Université Laval when he was reported to the authorities. The trial was to decide whether he should be deported.

I was upset at how small the article was, so small that it hadn't even made the front page. This was a big story! It's because of people like Mugesera that so many of our loved ones died and so many of us had to take the road to exile.

I decided to talk about it with my fellow Rwandans. Rwandans used to meet at a Christian community centre in downtown Toronto, near Gerrard Street and Parliament Street. It was a great place to be; there was a nice basketball court and meeting rooms for those who preferred playing cards or just chatting.

I took the paper to the community centre. *"It's outrageous that this news didn't receive more coverage. We must do something, we can't let him get away with it."*

One of my comrades asked me, *"Can you prepare something so when we next meet, you can tell us more about the case?"*

So I started researching, reading all the articles, surfing the Internet, looking at previous proceedings, anything related to this case and the four years Rwandan war leading up to the 1994 Genocide.

My passion was contagious. Many youths volunteered to call others and tell them about the trial and urge them to attend: *"We need to go there and give a face to the hundreds of people he had killed!"*

The response was amazing: almost everyone we talked to was interested in attending the trials. We started fundraising so we

could lease buses or cover the travel costs of those who wanted to go to Quebec City, where the trial was taking place. We wrote press releases, talked to the media and called our respective members of Parliament and members of the provincial parliaments. We didn't want to leave any stone unturned. We even conducted a sit-in on Parliament Hill in Ottawa to call upon Canada to uphold its commitment to seeking justice for Genocide victims around the world.

What started as a meeting of a few youths in a community centre downtown Toronto turned into the biggest Rwandan youth movement in the world, with active members in Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal and Quebec. We even had volunteers coming all the way from Alberta and Manitoba.

The public was finally paying attention, and many people outside our community joined in to ask for Mugesera to be deported. It was an amazing time of sharing, of learning about each other. The cause of justice had brought us together, beyond ethnicity, beyond where we came from or where we grew up. We spoke for our dead, and that was the only thing that mattered.

When I decided to go back to Rwanda a couple of years later, my friends from the youth association threw a party for me and offered me a desk clock with the inscription: *"Every time is the right time to do the right thing."* That clock is one of my most precious possessions.

Justice was slow to come, but it finally came. On June 28, 2005, the Supreme Court of Canada finally ordered the deportation of Léon Mugesera, putting an end to ten years of criminal proceedings against this infamous war criminal.

CHAPTER 12

Journal entry, August 15, 1999. I'm almost there, I can see them and I can almost touch them. The Gates of iJabiro, the Gates of my Dreams, the Gates of my Life!

It's Sunday, August 15th, 1 pm. The sun is bright and shiny above my head. Sitting on the terrace at Grabba Jabba, my favourite coffee shop in U of T, sipping my second cup of French Dark, I cannot but think back upon all that I've done over the last few years.

In May 1996, I was a refugee with nothing but a yellow camping bag, a tiny white suitcase (both from the Salvation Army in Detroit) and the black attaché case my father gave me when I left Rwanda to go to University in Senegal—I can't believe that was 10 years ago! With only eight dollars in my pocket, I stepped out of a Greyhound bus from Windsor and my feet touched the ground of Toronto for the first time.

A yellow backpack, two small suitcases, eight dollars in change, but I was not poor. I was the wealthiest man on earth, because two years after the Genocide, I found myself in a land of limitless dreams.

I don't need to close my eyes to relive those events, to see the machines in the factories, to hear the metallic noises they made, the phones in the call-centres, the steel-toed boots tapping the floors of the industrial world. I can easily replay the conversations, the exchanges.

Strange world. Surrounded by doctors, engineers, masters,

experience, knowledge, an ocean of intellectual wealth buried deep down in the anonymity of blind and unrewarding jobs.

I can see my employment counsellor over and over again: “You need to stress your skills rather than your education. You’re a doctor, but who cares, you know what I mean?”

I remember how I didn’t utter a word; I could hear in my head the sound of a rock thrown in the big mirror reflecting my illusions and the noise made by a hundred sharp pieces of glass hitting the floor. Looking at her in that moment, I could only see the empty wall left by the vandalism and the anonymous frame clinging on it. “Who cares?”

I could remember Sophia, the administrative assistant in the department of economics at U of T, looking at me with an air of surprise when I told her I wanted to apply for the master of arts program in economics.

“It’s not that simple. With your background, we’ll need you to take some undergraduate courses before we even consider you. You’ll also have to take a test to assess your fluency in English.”

I came back, months later: 660/683 on the TOEFL and accepted as a special student at U of T’s Woodsworth College. The TOEFL is the Test of English as a Foreign Language, a mandatory English proficiency test for students coming from non-English-speaking countries.

Sophia again: “Yes. I remember you. You have a strange background ...”

“Veterinary medicine.”

She smiles. I smile back.

“You understand it’s going to be hard work, do you? We need you to pass all those courses with at least a B+.”

I nod.

I did it! I finished math with a score of 77 per cent and macroeconomics

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with 90 per cent! In the latter, I was amongst the top 5 per cent of my class.

Hard work is what I am about.

Journal entry, September 4, 1999. *I am in! I've been formally accepted into the MA program! I should receive my acceptance letter in a few days, as Sophia is still doing the paperwork.*

Wow! I can't describe what this means to me. No one knows! No one!

I love the program, but I know that I also want to settle a score. I don't want to be one of those statistics, one of those immigrants who lose their dreams once in Canada.

I've chosen Canada as my second nation. I intend to make it and make it big. Get ready folks, there is a new player in town.

I sure enjoy the game!

CHAPTER 13

Journal entry, June 6, 2000, 11:54 am. Yesterday at 2:30 pm, I crossed the Gates of iJabiro, I entered the Sacred Gates of my dreams!

Yesterday, I was awarded my Masters of Arts in Economics. Under the austere black graduation robe, you could see the colourful Senegalese boubou and white Moroccan slippers I wore as a tribute to my mother Africa!

What I thought was going to be just another ceremony turned out to be one of the most memorable and most important days of my life. As I was standing there with the rest of the class of 2000, it suddenly dawned on me that I was about to receive recognition for what I had worked so hard for over the last two years!

Beyond the two years, there was my dream, that dream that kept me alive, that dream that saw me through adversity, opening the way for me like Moses opened the waters for his people to reach the promised land.

Today, I feel happy, I am happy, but more than that, I am FREE! Free like a bird, free, ready to fly away, ready to start building a new life.

I am ready to be all that I ever wanted to be. Ready, ready!

The president of the University of Toronto asked us to make a difference. I intend to do just that!



My life seemed to finally be on the right track. I had finished school, I was working full time for a consulting firm on University Avenue and King Street, and I was just a few months away from fulfilling my dream of becoming a Canadian citizen!

Oh, my, reading those pages makes me remember how strong and invincible I felt, so sure that nothing bad would ever happen to me.

I was wrong; my life was to change dramatically in ways I never imagined. On November 25, 2000, fate came as a phone call, one of those horrible calls no one ever wants to get in their lifetime: my godson Cedric had passed away in Kigali, two months shy of his twelfth birthday.

I couldn't believe he was gone too. Cedric was the only son of my late sister Antoinette. I was very close to her growing up and when she died of meningitis in 1991, just a few months within the war, I swore I would always be there for Cedric.

I loved that little boy so much! We had a special bond. Whenever he was sick, he would tell everyone that I would take care of him. *"My godfather Patrick is a doctor,"* he would proudly say. One day, many years back, I was home reading a book. Cedric came to my room and put his arms around my neck in a tender embrace: *"I love you, Patrick!"* I almost cried, not knowing the reason of this unexpected hug. *"I love you too, Cedric!"*

I couldn't believe God was taking him away from me, away from our family. Why God, why must the children die?

I rushed back to Rwanda. It was one of the longest trips of my life. My uncles Désiré Rubayiza and Aloys Nkundiyeze were waiting for me when I landed in Kigali. *"Wihangane!"* [Be strong], they told me. How many times was I to hear those simple yet so heavy words in my life?

We immediately went to the morgue at King Faisal Hospital. I didn't want to do anything else before I got to see my little boy for the last time of my life.

Looking at his lifeless body, I made him a promise that changed my life forever: "*Cedric, I am coming back home, I am coming back. I want to stay here with the family!*"

I wanted to beg him to come back, but he was gone. Gone forever.

His tragic death brought to the surface something I had felt deep in my heart without ever expressing it out loud: an overwhelming feeling of guilt! I felt guilty to still be alive when so many had died, guilty to have been able to start a new life when so many were struggling to break free from the horrors of 1994, and guilty to not have been there for Cedric throughout his illness.

I could not get over the fact that I was living in a worry-free society while little boys like Cedric died just because no hospital in Rwanda could carry out interventions that were so simple in other parts of the world. Cedric had died because the hospital wasn't equipped to perform the simple blood transfusion that he needed!

I wanted him back, I wanted all of my dear departed back! I would have given my life if it meant that we could reverse time and go back to how things used to be, before the war, before the blood, before the destruction!

I held on to my promise. Less than a year after Cedric's tragic death, I said farewell to all my friends in Canada and moved back to that country where, after the Genocide, I thought I would never live again.



PART III:
THE END AT THE BEGINNING

*Who am I?
A simple question for most, a troubling quest for me.
Who am I in this world where your ethnic, tribal, racial
origin
Seems to define and seal your fate?
Who am I?
I have been called Half-cast, Out-cast,
Mulatto, Icyimanyi, Imvange, Hutsi—
Castigated and rejected
When I yearned to be just the same as everyone else
And not the unpleasant and persistent reminder of the
Others' existence.
Who am I? I ask myself.
So like every other crossbreed and hybrid of the world,
I find myself endlessly, and often aimlessly,
Wandering the corridors of the Past
Hoping to find in the contradictions of History
The keys to my disconcerting and confusing Present Story,
A match to light the lights that will guide me to my own
Promised Land.*

Excerpt from "Confessions of a World Citizen,"
The Poetic Journal of Um'Khonde

CHAPTER 14

When I decided to go back and live in Rwanda, I applied for a lecturer's position at the National University of Rwanda in Butare, a charming small city two hours away from Kigali. This was my way of giving back to my country. With all the human losses suffered by Rwanda during the war and the massive exodus that marked the immediate post-genocide period, my native country was in dire need of educated professionals. My two graduate degrees from two world-renowned universities made me privileged amongst the privileged, and I wanted to use that wealth of knowledge to help build the minds of the future.

I had a taste of teaching when I was a teaching assistant in my last year at the University of Dakar and during my master of arts training at the University of Toronto. I was soon to realize that none of those previous teaching experiences had entirely prepared me for the reality of teaching in a postwar environment. My time at the National University of Rwanda was in fact going to be a time of great learning as much as it was a time of teaching. Everything in the university captured the challenges faced by our country in reconstruction. You could tell that the university was severely underfunded: the paint was peeling off the walls, some doors and windows didn't have any glass and the dorms were overcrowded.

At the same time, the students offered a sharp contrast to their grim environment. I have never seen students more eager to learn. They would never miss a class; they actively participated by asking smart questions, showing an openness to the world that never ceased to amaze me.

For the first few weeks, I was lecturing in English when I realised that almost half the students were more fluent in French. I decided to teach and prepare their exams in both French and English, sometimes even in Kinyarwanda, which was challenging at times but much appreciated by my young pupils.

I didn't mind the extra effort; I knew they had to overcome so many difficulties just to be there in that class-room, I didn't want the language barrier to be an additional impediment to their success. I was disheartened by the conditions they had to study in. The students had to come early in the morning just to get a chair, as there weren't enough chairs and the university couldn't afford to buy more. One day, one of the students asked me if they could borrow my books to make photocopies. The library had been ransacked during the war, and the university didn't have the means to buy new volumes.

I always look back at those days as the days that shaped my approach to my work in Rwanda. My stay at the university taught me to listen to the needs of people instead of walking in as though I knew all the answers.

In January 2002, just months after I started teaching at the university in Butare, I received a call from Charles Muligande, the secretary-general of Rwanda's ruling party.

"Can you come and see me?"

I was in Butare and went to see him a couple days later when I was back in Kigali. I remember hailing a taxi and asking the driver if he knew where the Rwandan Patriotic Front's headquarters were. The driver looked at me and smiled. *"You must be new in town; everybody knows where the RPF works."*

Charles Muligande was a very courteous and simple man. I immediately felt at ease with him.

"We heard of the great things you did in Canada, with the mobilization of the youth and the trial of Mugesera. We want to appoint you Secretary-General in the Ministry of Agriculture."

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This was big! The secretary-general was the head of the administration, a position where I could do so much for the population, the majority of whom were poor, smallholder farmers.

"I would be honoured to serve the country in that capacity," I answered.

I was so happy. I wrote to all my friends in Canada and the United States to share the news.

"Dear CJ,

Habari ya siko mingi? [Swahili for "Long time no see."] *Comment ça va?*

I have some exciting news: the government has appointed me "Secretary-General" in the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Forestry. Meaning that I will be number two in rank after the ministers! I am so excited!

I am starting tomorrow. I will of course have to readjust my teaching schedule, but thank God the semester is practically over. I just have a few more hours to dispense.

My task will be to contribute to the modernization of Rwandan agriculture. Can you imagine that my appointment was announced on national media and it's the president himself who was presiding over the government council the day they appointed me!

CJ, God has been good to me! Imagine that I just arrived back home and I am immediately entrusted with high responsibilities, a position I did not even ever think of! It's up to me to show God and my country that I am worth this trust bestowed upon me.

Other than that, life is fine. Did you see what happened in Goma? Can you imagine that we could feel the earthquakes all the way to Kigali? It was terrifying! You know what it's like when you are standing above a subway line, the way the ground shakes. Well, magnify that 100 times. And that was just here in Kigali. In Gisenyi, small houses were completely destroyed, schools are closed and there are displaced people everywhere.

Rwanda, Where Souls Turn to Dust

I went there with my parents last Tuesday, and we even crossed the border and went into Goma. It is a sad spectacle, such a horrible human tragedy. All that remains of Goma is maybe a few commercial buildings and the poor neighbourhoods, because they built their houses on the hills. All the houses by the lake were completely reduced to dust. Goma was turned into a ghost town in just a matter of a few days.

How is life treating you? Nicely, I hope. It must be so cold. Hey, you might see me in the near future. I am likely to travel quite a bit now.

Dear CJ, let me stop here, I'll call you in a few days to tell you how it feels like to be SG or Ségéral as people say! I already tasted a little bit of it. I attended an official function yesterday at the stadium in Nyamirambo, and I was seated just three rows behind the President of the Republic!!!

Let me go. You stay well and send me an e-mail from time to time so I can know that you are still alive and kicking.

Take care,

Patrick H

I remembered the words Professor Seydi spoke to me during the Genocide, when I was so discouraged and almost gave up finishing my veterinary doctorate.

“Patrick, it seems like it’s the end of the world, but it isn’t. You cannot give up all the efforts you’ve put in your education, not now, when you are at the end of the road. Trust me, when this is over, your country will need you even more than ever before.”

He was right after all!

CHAPTER 15

Everyone was concerned about my working with Ephraim Kabaija, the minister of agriculture. Kabaija was one of the most powerful and most hated men in the country. He had the reputation of being ruthless, a reputation that was confirmed when he had my predecessor, a woman no less, arrested and jailed for some obscure crime, something I never understood in all the years I worked in the ministry.

I shrugged off all those worries. *“No one can be that evil.”* I was wrong. Kabaija proved to be the boss from hell. Working for him was a never-ending challenge. He did not respect anyone. He fired people on the spot without any formal hearing and hired people with absolutely no consideration for the official procedures. Farmers were not allowed in the ministry’s compound, which was a complete aberration. How could you close the doors to the people we were supposed to serve?

Kabaija didn’t seem bothered by the fact that almost everyone in the country hated his guts. Kabaija loved the power conferred on him by his position, and he was unapologetic about the way he used and abused it.

The deputy minister was a man called Aaron Makuba, an agronomist with oversized plastic-framed glasses and a hard-to-miss inferiority complex. They were the exact opposites of each other: Makuba was short, about five feet seven; Kabaija was about six feet tall. Makuba didn’t speak a word of English; Kabaija had an ostensible disdain for the French language. Makuba was always impeccably dressed

in a suit, well-pressed shirt and tie, while Kabaija looked like he'd bought his clothes in a discount store.

Their differences were not just physical. They also hated each other. It got to the point where President Kagame had to intervene all the time to settle their fights. At some point, the president refused to be bothered by their trivialities and asked that Bernard Makuza, the prime minister, be the one to deal with them. They never talked to each other after that and managed to never cross paths, which in itself was a miracle, given that we all worked on the same floor. When I started working there, they tried to use me to find out what the other was up to or to pass on messages, but I quickly advised them that being a bellboy was not part of my job description.

The ministry could have been easily confused with the officers' mess. I would see high-ranking officers walking in and out of Kabaija's office. I never knew what they were discussing with him, and I wasn't interested in finding out.

It became rapidly clear to me that the ministry was corrupt to the bone. Everything was up for sale: services, certificates, licenses, tenders. It was appalling! I made it my mission to end this system. As secretary-general, I headed a staff of more than five hundred technicians working across the country, oversaw more than fifteen development projects and managed a budget of several million dollars. During my time in that position, I put in place very strict tender guidelines and tried to undo many of the inequities enacted by my boss.

My relationships with Ephraim Kabaija and Aaron Makuba were polite on the surface, but I silently prayed it would end rapidly. It was draining to work with these two highly egotistic men, who were too busy fighting one another to help the poor farmers who clearly suffered from the ministry's lack of leadership. I missed the drama-free academic world and hoped to go back to teaching once my public service assignment was over.

I stayed nine months in the Ministry of Agriculture. In November of the same year, I was promoted to the post of minister of state in

charge of investments, tourism and cooperatives in the Ministry of Commerce. I saw my cabinet appointment as a loud signal that President Kagame had been pleased with how I handled my appointment as secretary-general.

During the 2003 electoral campaign, the president instructed the party that I be given full powers to manage the finances of both the presidential and the legislative campaigns. I managed the budget with a rigor the party had rarely seen before, setting strict rules, reviewing every spending request, and rejecting the hundreds ineligible requests that landed on my desk every day, even if they emanated from the party's barons. At the end of the campaign, I audited all the campaigns' accounts and produced a detailed report for the president's eyes only.

Many people say that it is my "Mr. Clean" reputation that made Kagame promote me to the agriculture portfolio in October 2003, just two days after my thirty-fifth birthday.

I was overwhelmed: I was the youngest member of government and I was going to be in charge of the biggest economic ministry in the country!

I was also shocked by another appointment—or should I say, demotion—: Kabaja, my former boss, the powerful man who'd led the Ministry of Agriculture for almost a decade, was to stay in the ministry as my deputy minister.

My friend and colleague, Romain Murenzi, was the first person to call and congratulate me. I also congratulated him: he had been reappointed as minister of education.

I asked for his advice on working with a demoted minister. He had lived through a similar situation a few years back. When he was first appointed as minister of education, he had to work with the former minister for education, Emmanuel Mudidi, who had been demoted to the position of deputy minister.

His advice was very simple: *"You have to be the better man. Call him and congratulate him as though this is the most normal situation."*

After all, you will be working with him every day for God knows how many years.”

I took a deep breath and dialled Kabaija’s number.

“I wanted to be the first to congratulate you,” I said when he answered the call.

“Thank you, Patrick.”

It was a very mundane but awkward call. We exchanged a few banalities before hanging up. Man, this wasn’t going to be easy!

Friends and family members came to my house to celebrate with me. The same question was on everyone’s lips: *“How are you going to be able to work with Kabaija as your deputy?”*

I dismissed their concerns.

“Let’s just party tonight. I will have enough time to deal with that situation from tomorrow on. And anyway, I am sure President Kagame knows what he is doing by putting the two of us in that ministry!”

I gave an emotional toast to the people gathered at my house. I was still overwhelmed by the news.

“I want to start by thanking my parents for raising me the way they did and pushing me to try and always be the best I could be. It’s their education more than anything else that has allowed me to come this far and become minister.”

My parents were as emotional as I was, beaming with joy and pride.

“I know it is a blessing for parents to see one of their children called to serve the country, but at the same time it is a sacrifice. When your child starts serving his country, he stops being yours and you have to share him with the rest of the country.”

I was overwhelmed. I know how big the appointment was, and I felt so grateful to President Kagame for trusting me that way.

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When the party was over, I wrote a simple letter to the president, thanking him for this amazing opportunity and promising to work hard to live up to his expectations. I took it myself to the State House, the official residence of the president of Rwanda, in the cosy Kiyovu neighbourhood.

My rapid rise to one of the highest offices in the country put me at centre stage in Rwanda's public life. My simplicity and conversational ease made me one of the most popular ministers, a popularity which strangely earned me many enemies in the party's old guard. Amongst them was Kabaija, my deputy minister slash former boss from hell. It rapidly became clear that Kabaija had a hard time working under the authority of his former staff member. He and the other members of the party's old guard were going to show me that Kagame might govern the country, but it was they who really ruled it.

Ironically, my biggest challenges during my tenure as minister of agriculture were not the chronic diseases plaguing and debilitating our livestock or the harsh elements that made it barely possible for an average Rwandan farmer to feed his family.

No. My biggest fights were fought in another arena: politics. From the first moment I set foot in that ministry, the ruling party, my own party, showed me that Rwanda was still clutched in the claws of the Evil that had destroyed Rwanda less than 10 years earlier.

CHAPTER 16

I can say without hesitation that my career started sinking in March 2004, just a few days before Rwanda commemorated the 10th anniversary of the Genocide.

I was coming back from a trip to South Africa, where I had attended a regional conference of the UN Food and Agricultural Organization in Johannesburg, and to London, where I conducted a promotional tour of Rwanda's specialty coffee industry with a group of small coffee growers. It was memorable trip. In Johannesburg, I met with President Thabo Mbeki and fellow ministers of agriculture from practically all the African countries and greeted the great Miriam Makeba. In the U.K., I met with various business leaders and British parliamentarians and gave interviews to major news media groups, including the BBC and *The Economist*.

I had been dealing with an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease since January. The outbreak, which affected the eastern provinces of the country, had erupted in Umutara Province just as I was entering my third month as minister of agriculture. FMD is probably one of the worst enemies for anyone in charge of a country's livestock, for it comes unannounced and disseminates very quickly.

I had to react very quickly to contain this highly communicable and debilitating illness before it spread to other parts of the country. January's dry weather was conducive to a rapid propagation of the illness; water was scarce, and livestock consequently converged in high numbers upon the few watering points in the province.

I've been to Umutara several times, sometimes just to get away from the capital and enjoy its amazing landscape. Picture a big savanna with thousands of long-horned cattle freely roaming around. This time, however, I didn't even look at the vista. All I could think about was that deadly virus and what needed to be done to contain it. I went to Gabiro, the district where the outbreak originated, to see the reported cases with my own eyes and talk with the herdsmen.

I organized a meeting with the local mayors, the governors of Umutara and its two neighbours, Byumba and Kibungo, and the commanders of the army and police forces stationed in the region.

"We need to immediately quarantine the zone where the illness appeared first and isolate all the animals presenting symptoms. Make sure no cows or animal product of any kind gets out of that locality."

I informed them that I wanted to remove all the animals exposed to the disease. *"There is no other choice. If we don't do it, we will lose many more animals. The ministry will compensate the farmers."*

It was the first time in Rwanda's history that farmers were going to be compensated for their losses. No other minister had ever done that before.

My enemies rallied to sabotage my actions. I can never understand how hatred blinds people to the consequences of their actions. They wanted me to fail so badly, they didn't care that the farmers were the ones who were going to bear the burden of any mishandling of the crisis. As soon as I instituted the quarantine, parliamentarians of my own party, the ruling RPF, pressured Parliament to hold public hearings where I would have to explain what I was doing.

I appeared before the Parliament for three weeks in a row. It was one of the most well-attended sessions since President Pasteur Bizimungu resigned from office four years earlier. Practically all the parliamentarians were present, a very rare occurrence: most days, Parliament can barely meet its quorum. The public gallery in

the back was more or less full. They even had the national television and radio giving live coverage of my hearings.

They hoped to find a fault in my plan so they could call for my resignation. Well, it didn't happen. I calmly explained what we were doing. I talked about the risks posed by FMD and the consequences if we did not intervene. People told me later that I sounded more like a lecturer than a politician.

I did indeed use that platform to give out as much information as possible about the outbreak, policies pertaining to disease control and the authority given to me by law to make all the decisions I made. I wanted to reassure the general public listening to the hearings on their radios that the ministry was in good hands.

While my hearings were going on, a local newspaper called the *New Times* ran fallacious stories alleging that I had violated the quarantine, which was completely ludicrous, since I was the one who instituted the quarantine in the first place. According to the paper, "cows were confiscated by allegedly armed people." The same article went on to say that I had struck a deal for an unidentified amount and imprisoned a staff member who tried to get in my way. They should win an award for best fiction!

I went to see the secretary-general of the party, François Ngarambe, to ask him what was going on. *"I find it shocking that members of my own party initiated this Spanish inquisition. This is outrageous! If they had questions, why didn't they simply come and ask me? Why did they have to convene a plenary session and create all this confusion in the mind of the public? Then the New Times is running all these silly stories. What is going on?"*

Ngarambe tried to dismiss my concerns with a smile. He always smiled and tried to bullshit his way out of any situation. *"There is nothing going on."* I could tell he did not like my directness. Well, I wasn't going to pretend I didn't see what was happening!

"It's not as bad as you say, they just need to understand the plan you put in place. As for The New Times, don't worry, it's our paper. Just talk to them. I am sure you can sort out whatever the problem is."

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I was dumbfounded by his comment: “The New Times *is our paper.*” I had no idea at the time that *The New Times* was owned by the party. For me, that made it even worse. How could people conspire to sabotage a minister of their own camp?

Why don't they take it up with Kagame, I thought? I didn't appoint myself to this position!

The situation was tense, not on the ground but in Kigali's political circles, so Kagame finally went on record to back me in my handling of the outbreak. It was during a press conference at the airport as he was coming back from a trip to Libya. One of the reporters asked him about me and my handling of the FMD outbreak. “*We have been able to control this disease as a result of these actions. It was the perfect way to control FMD, and our officials have been able to handle this perfectly well.*”

The outbreak was indeed over in just a few weeks, and within less than two months I was able to lift the quarantine. I was proud of that achievement. It was the first time in Rwanda that an FMD outbreak had been contained so quickly. All the farmers were compensated for their losses at market price, and we helped them acquire better-performing cattle.

That incident revealed an ugly side of the Rwandan Patriotic Front. For the first time, I realized that all the talk about unity and reconciliation amounted to just empty political statements. In reality, the true power lay in the hands of a few ruthless individuals who didn't want any outsiders like me in their inner circle.

I never went to see *The New Times* to sort out “our differences”, as François Ngarambe suggested. I didn't want to sit down with those hoodlums, and in the end, I didn't need to. Everyone stopped writing about me after Kagame went on record defending my actions.

The president's comments also put an end to the ridiculous inquisition. When I look back at that episode, I am grateful to Kagame for stepping in. At the same time, I now know that his defending me put my life at greater risk. I have no doubt that the

interview made my enemies understand that to get rid of me, they had to convince Kagame to stop trusting me the way he did.

It wasn't going to be long before I was to see how far people could go to destroy me. A few days after my return from abroad, I received a call in the middle of the night. It was one of the president's assistants.

"He wants to see you tomorrow morning."

"Did he say what he wanted to discuss," I asked her.

I wanted to make sure I brought along any relevant files.

"No, he didn't tell me. Just make sure you come on time; he has a busy day."

As I was sitting in the waiting room waiting to be escorted to the president's office, I had no idea that the meeting to follow would be different from any meeting I'd ever had with him before, and that this meeting was going to change my life forever. I thought the president wanted me to update him on the FMD situation, but the meeting had nothing to do with the outbreak.

CHAPTER 17

Urugwiro Village, the office of the president of Rwanda, is a compound with two dozen pavilions. Ironically, Urugwiro Village was built with the support of the French government—President Kagame’s favourite enemy— in the late seventies to serve as accommodations for dignitaries attending the 1979 Summit of France and Africa attended by heads of state. In those days, the country would come to a standstill whenever a foreign dignitary was visiting; imagine having more than 10 heads of state visiting at once. It was a real frenzy! All businesses would close, schools would be out, and we would all go and stand by the side of the road, waving flags and singing so the visitor would know how happy we were to have them in our land!

After the 1979 conference, the residences were turned into a hotel called Village Urugwiro, which means the “village of abundance.” In the early nineties, a couple of years into the war, the hotel was closed to the public and turned into the office of then-president Juvénal Habyarimana.

Ministers and state protocol’s cars were amongst the few vehicles authorized inside the compound. Everyone else, including staff members, would have to leave their car in a parking lot at the entrance and walk, even when it was raining.

President Kagame’s office was next to the meeting room where we held our weekly government council meetings. From the bay windows in his office, you could see the courtyard we crossed to get to the conference room, with its beautiful Zen-inspired water fountain. The office matched the image of the president: sober and austere. There

was a big desk in one corner with a glass bookshelf behind it, and a few artifacts and crafts, nothing too ostentatious. His desk was very neat, no clutter like my office. I actually never saw him sitting at his desk. He favoured the little sitting area by the bay window, which had a few modern chairs around a glass table.

The president's personal assistant, Brigadier General Jean-Bosco Kazura, ushered me to the president's office and directed me to the sitting area. Kazura had a notepad in his hands. He was about to sit next to me when President Kagame stopped him: "*Can you leave us alone? I want to discuss a private matter with the minister.*"

This request for his personal assistant to leave the room puzzled me. Kagame rarely received anyone alone. He often said himself that he always had a staff member with him during his audiences, to prevent people from distorting what he discussed with them.

I could read the surprise on Kazura's face as he left the room. Kagame sat on the chair across from me on the other side of the coffee table. He liked to sit in that corner.

Kagame was a very tall man, with a bony structure and a very small frame. He often made fun of his own weight, saying that everyone else who was in the struggle to liberate Rwanda had put on weight but him, because he had yet to arrive at his final destination.

He was so unpredictable. On his good days, he was jovial and loved to crack jokes, and on his bad days, his wrath would make you want to run and move to another country or even another planet.

Three years in his service had taught me to try and decipher which mood he was in before opening my mouth. That day, he was very calm, but cold and distant. A bad day.

Kagame didn't waste time on small talk: "*Minister, I received information concerning you, and if it is true, it would have grave consequences.*"

His light brown eyes seemed to send electric waves through his glasses as he talked to me. His opening statement sent a cold chill down my spine. He went on to tell me that he had received a report from

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intelligence advising him that there were people in the country, Hutus, who felt that I was the only high-ranking official who could speak on their behalf.

I froze in my chair, not sure I wanted to know where this was going. He pointed to the folder on the table in front of us.

“The report mentions someone who said that you talked with him and gave him assurances that you will indeed help them.”

He mentioned the name of one of the ministry's former staff, one Claudien Habimana.

“Do you know him?”

“Yes, I've known him for a few years. He used to work in the Ministry of Agriculture till his department, forests, was moved to the Ministry of Environment. We've stayed in touch.” I didn't want to pretend I didn't know him.

Kagame continued: *“His views are very well known. Apparently, he thinks Prime-Minister Makuza and Minister Bazivamo are useless Hutus. What surprises me is that you offered your support to such ideas!”*

I had seen Kagame angry like this before, but it was the first time his anger was directed at me.

“Sir, I never had any such discussions with him or with anyone else!”

This situation was paradoxical! Someone talked about me to someone else, therefore I am a divisionist! The room was spinning around me, the oxygen seemed suddenly rare. I wanted to run away, yet I was paralyzed before Kagame, motionless!

Being accused of “supporting Hutus”—even in such a grotesque manner— was the worst accusation in the country's post-genocide era. I didn't know what to say, I didn't know where to start. What arguments does one use when those horrible allegations are conveyed to you by none other than the head of state?

“Your Excellency, never in my whole life have I ever treated people differently because of their ethnic or racial origin. It is against my beliefs,

and contrary to the way I was raised. I even fight anyone who thinks like that! I fight hard against anyone who thinks that way."

I couldn't tell exactly what he expected me to say. He continued.

"Why do you think that some people still think like that despite the fact that things have changed in Rwanda?"

I was wondering how much things had really changed: the president has summoned me to his office to explain to him how Hutus think and to answer an accusation about my imaginary divisionism! Déjà vu!

I wanted to answer, *"How would I know? Why don't you ask them?"* But I didn't think being insolent toward the head of state would have helped my case in any way.

He looked at me with a cold expression on his face, scrutinizing me as though he was trying to read my mind.

I tried to remain calm as I answered, *"I believe it's mental slavery, sir!"*

He looked at me, puzzled. I rapidly continued.

"Take the example of the abolition of slavery in the U.S. Despite the promulgation of the emancipation act, some slaves stayed on the plantation with the same masters who had abused them for generations, at least for a while. Why did they stay, why didn't they go, why didn't they fly away to freedom?"

My mouth was dry as I proceeded. I was in a daze, not quite sure where I was getting my inspiration from.

"They stayed for two main reasons: some stayed because they simply didn't learn right away that slavery had been abolished; while others, knowing that slavery had been abolished, stayed because they were afraid of that unknown world out there."

I looked at him, not knowing what he was thinking of me as he listened. It was one of Kagame's traits not to look at you when he was listening intently. He would look at a distant point somewhere in the room or at his hands.

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"Freedom is frightening when you've never experienced it. It takes less time to remove physical ties than to break mental shackles."

He looked at me silently, probably pondering what I just told him. Or maybe not, for he abruptly changed subjects.

"I also received reports that you go around telling people that you never wanted to be in government. That it was something that we forced upon you!"

This second blow hit me even harder than the first! I didn't know where that came from!

How many more lies did that so-called "intelligence report" include? I felt trapped in a big hole, a hole I had not seen myself falling into.

"Mr. President, I would never say anything like that. That would make an ingrate of me, that would be disrespecting you, sir!"

His expression was ice cold. At times, he would pull back in his chair, his legs still crossed and his eyes slightly closed.

"Mr. President, I've never told you this, but I appreciate more than I can say to have been chosen to work in the cabinet. The title of minister itself is not so important for me; what's important is to be able to be in a position to inspire other youths to work for their country. If I can inspire even one single youth to be better at what they do, just by seeing me working hard, that would be my biggest possible reward."

He remained silent for what seemed an eternity, looking at some invisible point in the courtyard outside the bay window. Then he turned and looked at me with an even colder expression than before.

"I was hoping that it would be different with younger people like you. It's with people like you that I had hoped to build the country, people who grew up in a different environment, people whom I hoped thought differently than the older generation."

He stood up, marking the end of the meeting. I tried to meet with Kagame on several occasions, but he never again granted me an audience, not once in the fourteen months between that day and the day I resigned from office.

CHAPTER 18

The meeting with Paul Kagame troubled me for a long time. I tried my best not to think about it anymore, but it haunted my days and invaded my nights.

It was sadly not the first time in my life that I had faced a situation like that. This discussion with Kagame brought back memories of my classmates assaulting me in Senegal in 1993 because they had decided I wasn't Hutu enough. I hadn't thought about it for years, and now, I had nightmares where Kagame and my former classmates were taking turn spitting in my face and calling me the most horrible names. When will I ever be on the right side of this senseless tribal quarrel?

Growing up a mixed Hutu-Tutsi was challenging in a country where ethnic groups had been at political odds for so many generations. The 1990 war exacerbated the situation; I can't count the number of times since that I and others of mixed descent have been asked which side we were on. Usually the real object for those narrow minds was for us to choose a side and betray the other, something I was never willing to do.

My parents had met, fallen in love and married in the sixties. Our household was a safe haven, a cocoon of ethnic acceptance. Our parents loved us and taught us to love and protect the weakest among us and always embrace people who came from different backgrounds. It came to them naturally. They both came from lineages of men and women who had shaped the history of Rwanda for generations.

It was when I got older and started to venture outside my family bubble that I realized society was less “colour-accepting”—or should I say, “ethnic-accepting”—than my parents. Outside our cocoon was an unsettled world, a society that didn’t quite know what to do with us. We were neither Hutu nor Tutsi. Paradoxically, we were racially unmixed yet we were treated as the mulattoes of our troubled nation. We were alternatively called Hutu or Tutsi, depending on which ethnic group was unwanted by the political powers of the day. And that was only when we were not being called one of many demeaning epithets that I will not repeat here.

It’s probably because of my mixed origins that I am so intolerant of any type of discrimination or prejudice. It’s also the main reason I chose to move to Canada, a country I always pictured as a place where I could aspire to be appreciated for what I brought to society and not ostracized because of my genetic makeup.

For the longest time, I thought I would never be able to live again in Rwanda. I was scared to go back to that place where people hated each other so much that we ended up killing each other, to the tune of one million innocents.

Ironically, it was Kagame’s speeches on reconciliation and breaking with the past that convinced me that Rwanda was finally ready to embrace all of its children.

After that meeting, I could no longer see Kagame the way I always had. He was no longer that hero who had prevented more people from dying in 1994. He was just another Rwandan president who could not rise above his own ethnic origins and who was taking Rwanda further down the road to hell.

About two weeks after my meeting with Kagame, Rwanda commemorated the 10th anniversary of the 1994 Genocide. I was sitting a couple rows behind Roméo Dallaire, our Canadian hero, the man who tried to alert the world about what was taking place in Rwanda. I could see him crying as he listened to survivors share their stories. Who, I wondered, was going to alert the world now

that everyone seems to think we had finally broken free of our ethnically divided past?

As always, Kagame's speech contained all the right words: *"We cannot turn the clock back, nor can we undo the harm caused, but we have the power to determine the future and to ensure that what happened never happens again."*

What was he doing with the power invested in him, then? Chasing imaginary enemies like Miguel Cervantes' Don Quixote?

The following year was going to show me more of the horror that I only glimpsed in that March meeting. Evil was still very much alive in Rwanda, the ugly demons from the years and days that led Rwanda to the Genocide, horrible images I thought were behind us forever.

Accusations of divisionism were to resurface throughout 2004, with countless meetings at the party's headquarter where I attempted to justify myself against vague accusations of favouring one ethnic group over the other.

"Who told you that?" I asked the secretary-general of the party, François Ngarambe, in one of those meetings. I was fed up with their baseless accusations and never-ending innuendos! RPF boasted of having suppressed the mention of our ethnicity on our identity cards, yet the party forgot to erase it from their own minds!

"It doesn't matter who said it," he answered. *"We heard that you work more with one group than the other."*

"Which group did they tell you I favour? You know I am mixed; did they tell you I favour Hutus or Tutsis?"

Those accusations were so despicable and hurtful. My own grandfather and many of my relatives were refugees for more than thirty years just because they were Tutsi. How could these people accuse me of discriminating against my own blood?

In September 2004, Kagame reshuffled the government. I remained

at the ministry of agriculture, while Ephraim Kabaija was moved to the president's office as his powerful chief of staff. Kabaija's days in the dog house were apparently over. Dr Daphrose Gahakwa, a Uganda and U.K. trained plant genetic engineer specialising in bananas, was appointed as my deputy minister. I have to admit that I never knew there was any such peculiar specialisation till I met the matronly scientist.

Dr. Daphrose Gahakwa was an expansive lady with a compulsive need to share details of her personal life with everyone.

More negative reports about me continued to land on Kagame's desk. With Ephraim Kabaija in the powerful chief of staff office, I knew it could only go from bad to worse and it did. I started dreading the weekly cabinet meetings. Kagame would come in and immediately ask me about the latest thing he'd heard about me. I never knew what to expect; one day it was about fertilizers, the next day it would be about cows, or cars, or both.

It was just too much to bear! I made a decision that probably precipitated my already well-advanced fall from the stars. Shortly after I was appointed secretary-general of the Ministry of Agriculture in February 2002, the RPF instructed me to remit to the party 10 per cent of my salary, *icyacumi*, as it was called in Kinyarwanda. The party collected millions of Rwandan francs not only from government appointees but from practically every public official and business owner. After the party secured victory in the 2003 presidential and legislative elections, the funds were automatically debited from our bank accounts.

I found it outrageous that I should be funding a party that was destroying me and reminding me every day that I was not "one of them," that I was from the "wrong" ethnic background. In October 2004, I decided to stop making those payments, which in any case were illegal, as no party was allowed to collect fees from its members.

I was seriously considering leaving the RPF and becoming an independent. I found it utterly ironic that someone who'd spent all

his adult life breaking the mental shackles of growing up in the pre-genocide one-party dictatorship would find himself shackled to a troublingly similar hegemony. I was to quickly realize that rebelling against a former rebellion would have dire consequences.

In November 2004, just a few weeks after I stopped making payments to the ruling party, Martin Ngoga, the country's deputy prosecutor, called and asked if we could meet. He insisted that we meet somewhere other than his office or mine. *"It's a casual meeting; nothing official. I need you to clarify a few things for me."*

I had spent enough years in the system now to know that no one ever held a "casual meeting" with the number two in the office of the prosecutor-general of the republic.

We met near my office at the Novotel Hotel. I chose that hotel because it was close to my office. It was actually one of my favourite places. I often went there for lunch, and on Sundays, I would have breakfast there and swim.

As I took a seat on the hotel's terrace a few yards from the pool, I immediately saw that we had company: I spotted two intelligence officers sitting a few tables from us. After three years in government, I had no trouble spotting the regime's spies, grim individuals always so awkwardly silent and tense. Whatever Ngoga wanted to tell me, he wanted to make sure it was reported to his superiors that he had delivered their message to me.

I had known Martin Ngoga for a few years. I met him in Tanzania when I was secretary-general in the Ministry of Agriculture. He was attached to the Rwandan embassy in Dar es Salaam as the lawyer representing the government of Rwanda at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha. The ICTR was established in 1995 to prosecute the people responsible for the Genocide. We were about the same age. He was a little shorter than average, five feet six or five feet seven. He was a laid-back and pleasant dark-skinned fellow. At least he used to be. Since his appointment as the number two in the prosecutor-general's office, he had turned into

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a vicious and virulent political attack dog, going after the enemies of the country with absolutely no remorse.

Martin Ngoga, like so many people who grew up abroad, spoke in a Kinyarwanda mixed with English words. He started with small talk, but I had no patience for that. *“You don't need to beat around the bush. Just tell me why you wanted to meet me.”*

His fake smile disappeared. A man in his position didn't appreciate being cut off, but I couldn't have cared less.

“The president has asked me to look into allegations of corruption he heard about you.”

CHAPTER 19

A few days after that meeting with Martin Ngoga, I received a call from Evelyn Kamagaju Rutagwenda.

“Minister, can I come and see you? There is a small matter I need to discuss with you.”

Evelyn was the auditor-general of Rwanda. She had been appointed to that position just a few months earlier, but she was already making waves. She was a very soft-spoken lady, but you could feel an iron-clad fist under the velvet glove.

It must be important for her to come and see me in person. Most files were handled by our respective staffs.

She came to see me early the next morning.

“Minister, it’s a very small matter, but I felt I should alert you about this.”

She opened her briefcase and handed me a sheet of paper. It was a copy of a letter addressed to the president and copied to practically all the authorities of the country, from the president of the senate to the auditor-general.

The person who wrote the letter was accusing me of abusing my office and diverting funds to my personal benefit and the benefit of my friends. He gave the example of GECAD, a private consulting firm that was helping the Ministry of Agriculture develop its strategic plan.

I couldn't believe such filth!

There was a name and phone number in the sender's information corner, a man called "Juste," a name completely unfamiliar to me.

Evelyn waited silently as I read the letter.

"Minister, we checked the phone number provided. It's a false number. We also think the name is an alias."

"These people won't stop at anything! They are shameless!"

I was angry and sad at the same time. *"Thanks for showing me this, Evelyn. I appreciate it. What do you need from me?"*

"Nothing really. We receive a lot of letters like this," she said, adding jokingly, *"You seem to be a very popular person!"*

She managed to get me to smile. *"I guess so!"*

"Minister, we cannot allocate our already meagre resources to investigate these types of unsubstantiated accusations. The author of this letter mentioned the consulting firm GECAD, which we know was hired by the International Fund for Agricultural Development. Our mandate doesn't give us the power to audit a contract between a private firm and a donor agency. It's not the role of the auditor-general. I just wanted to talk with you about this in case they call me about it. The letter has been copied to many offices, as you can see."

"Thanks again. I knew people were making various allegations about me, but I didn't know they were going so far as to write letters about me. The president has asked me about all these allegations, and I prepared a memo for him about that. I can forward you a copy of that memo. Just keep it confidential."

I trusted her.

"Of course," she answered, nodding her head.

Evelyn was the only person who treated my case with such deference and decency. It increased the high opinion I already had of her.

My life had long ceased to be a wonderful dream and became a never-ending nightmare marked by professional disillusion and further family losses. Every month of 2004 seemed to bring more pain into my life. December was no exception. The last month of 2004 started with the death of my sister Agathe. She had been ill for a long time. I was angry at myself for not spending more time with my family when they were the reason I had come back to Rwanda.

I was tired of this life of intrigues and betrayals. I loved working with the poor farmers but I sure hated being in the heartless world of politics. The day my sister Agathe died, I was due to appear before the Senate to talk about some “urgent matters” in the agricultural sector and they refused to postpone the meeting, citing that they had a busy calendar. What could be so urgent in agriculture, one wasn’t even allowed to be with their loved ones?

I was still in mourning when Jean-Bosco Sanyo accosted me at an event and insisted that he wanted to see me. Jean-Bosco Sanyo, *The New Times* editor-in-chief and general manager, had been trying to get an appointment with me for a long time, but I hadn’t felt like meeting with anyone who worked at that paper. He didn’t give up. He apologized for the articles his paper wrote about me earlier that year.

“Some people who wanted to harm you tried to use the paper. I was new in the country, and I didn’t know what was going on.”

I finally agreed to see him. It was a few days before Christmas. Everything about him was phony, including his suit and brightly coloured shirts. Sanyo was a very unctuous and mild-mannered man. He seemed to play a character, trying to appear intellectual and well read. He always insisted on speaking in English, probably to add to that cultured character he was affecting.

He apologized again for the inflammatory articles his paper had printed about me during the FMD outbreak.

“I was still new in Rwanda,” he told me again, as though this was an acceptable justification for trashing someone. *“People had given us*

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false information about you. After we printed those articles, many people called me and told me that I should not have printed those stories without verifying their authenticity, that there was obviously a group of ill-intentioned individuals trying to destroy the career of a young hard-working minister. I apologize for it, sir. I really thought those sources were reliable.”

I doubted his sincerity but I decided to be gracious and accept his belated apologies. “As long as you recognize your mistake and don’t do it again,” I said, before asking him why he was so insistent upon meeting me.

“As you know, our paper is still a young paper,” he said. “It was started by the RPF, who wanted at that time to put on the market a serious English newspaper, as the only English newspapers we had in Rwanda came from Uganda. In the beginning, we were entirely subsidized by the party, but now we think it’s time that we break away. Dr. Emmanuel Ndahiro has been one of our biggest supporters and patrons. He is the one who encouraged me to come and see you.”

The managing director didn’t need to tell me who Ndahiro was. Dr. Emmanuel Ndahiro, or should I say, Colonel Emmanuel Ndahiro, was Rwanda’s head of intelligence services. He was one of the most powerful men in Rwanda. A medical doctor by training, he started his career as Kagame’s personal physician. He was later promoted to the position of national security adviser before becoming the director of intelligence services.

Ndahiro had a reputation for being both ambitious and ruthless and was said to be responsible for the downfall of many powerful men in the party.

Jean-Bosco Sanyo paused a moment, as though he expected me to say something. But I remained silent, waiting to see where this was going. He continued. “Dr. Ndahiro was instrumental in creating The New Times. He helped us, along with other cadres in the party, to get settled. He is now encouraging us to try to develop other sources of revenue.”

He took a letter from a folder he was holding and handed it to me. It was a letter addressed to the ministry asking for a 20 million francs sponsorship! I couldn't believe my eyes! Twenty million! Sponsorship? So that's what they call it nowadays, I thought.

My visitor went on to explain that the 20 million francs would buy us space in *The New Times*, space that would be used "to portray a more positive image of the ministry."

"And how do you propose to do that?" I asked him.

"The ministry could use the space as it pleased. You could insert articles about what you do, and you as a minister could share your views, your plans for the country."

"But wouldn't that compromise your journalistic integrity?"

He seemed surprised by my question. Did he even know what journalistic integrity meant?

"How, Honourable Minister?" he asked, with a falsely innocent expression on his face.

"Well, if we are the ones writing praises about ourselves in your paper, how is the public ever going to see all the sides of the story?"

"The paper will of course research the stories you send us," he quickly answered, probably hoping that this would be enough to address my concerns.

I could see him losing his cool as I continued my line of questioning. "But how will you probe our stories when we will have paid you 20 million a year to 'portray a positive image of us'? Plus, I have seen the type of articles your reporters write. No offense meant, but they lack the basic knowledge to understand what is correct or incorrect in a technical field like agriculture. So, in the end, you would find yourself printing anything we send you, and it would cease to be an independent paper, becoming a government paper instead."

The discussion was obviously not going as he had planned.

He tried another approach. "Honourable Minister, maybe the

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ministry can just extend us the funds as a benefactor of the paper, since you obviously have at heart that we succeed.”

I interrupted him, not wanting to continue this ridiculous conversation. Handing over a blank cheque to a paper to write nice things about you is not called patronage, it's called corruption. That's how the party operated. The party had numerous dummy corporations, and they tried to get officials to fund them, either by giving them money or awarding them public tenders.

I knew that many of my colleagues preferred to pay whatever amounts were asked of them, but I was not about to abuse this office. The public funds I was entrusted with through the ministry were not even enough to help the millions of Rwandan farmers get out of poverty; I was not about to squander those funds to help some shameless barons rob the country.

“I am afraid we cannot consider this at this time. Our entire budget is tied up in projects on the ground.”

I stood up to signal the end of the meeting. Bosco Sanyo could not hide his disappointment. He was probably wondering how he was going to go back to Dr. Ndahiro and the RPF to explain that he had been unsuccessful in securing a sponsorship from me.

It was not long before I was made to see how a paper owned by the ruling party deals with a minister who refuses to do as he is told.

CHAPTER 20

I almost decided not to attend the president and First Lady's end-of-year cocktail party at Urugwiro Village but I knew my noticeable absence would only make things worst between President Kagame and me. Over the course of the year, my relationship with the president had deteriorated to a point I would have never imagined possible just the year before, when I was so close to him.

As the clock hit midnight on December 31, 2004, I prayed for 2005 to be a better year. It wasn't going to be long before I realized that my earlier troubles were nothing compared to what the Devil had in store for me in the coming year.

I was woken up on January 1 by the ringing of my phone. I looked at the call display: "Rujugiro." What could Rujugiro want to talk to me about that couldn't wait? The Christmas break was almost over, and I would be back at the office the following Monday.

Tribert Rujugiro was a self-made millionaire, one of the richest men in Rwanda. He derived his wealth from known (and many more unknown) investments in real estate, tobacco and banking. He conducted business in South Africa, Nigeria, Dubai and other places around the world. His investments in Rwanda touched every sector you can imagine, from service to manufacturing and retail. I knew he had his eyes on the country's profitable tea industry, but I wasn't aware of any emergency or new development in that sector that warranted a business phone call in the morning on the very first day of the year!

I decided to ignore the call and switched my cell phone to silent mode. I'd been fighting a cold since the beginning of the Christmas holidays. My head was aching, my sinuses were obstructed, I was coughing; the last thing I needed on the first day of the new year was yet another business meeting. I needed to rest before going back to my hectic schedule.

He tried to call me again the next day. My phone was still in silent mode, but I could see it flicking non-stop. I was puzzled. This was unusual. I finally picked up the phone.

"Patrick, I need to see you urgently!"

Something in his voice persuaded me to see him right away. He lived only a few blocks from me, so I was there in a few minutes.

When he told me why he had called me, my hopes for a better year abruptly dried up. Rujugiro started by telling me that he was recently at the president's residence and had heard something that he couldn't believe, something he wanted to verify with me.

I knew Rujugiro to be very close to Kagame; he was a member of the party's national executive committee, and he was even rumoured to be one of the party's main financiers.

What now? I was thinking as I listened to him silently.

"You must swear to never repeat what I am about to tell you to anyone!"

I nodded, still silent. *"People went to tell Afandi [that was one of Kagame's titles] that you received a 200 million francs bribe from Mrs. Edith Gasana and that you used that money to buy a luxurious mansion in the Nyarutarama neighbourhood."*

I was shocked beyond what I can describe. Mrs. Edith Gasana was one of the owners of GECAD, the firm that was mentioned in the anonymous letter the auditor-general had shown me back in November.

He continued: *"Kagame believed it! I can tell you that he is very*

upset. He told me that he is very disappointed in you. He kept saying, how could Patrick do something like that?"

It was like the sky had just fallen on my head! How could Kagame possibly believe those lies? How could he for just one second consider that I could take a bribe?

Rujugiro told me that he was shocked when he heard those stories, and he wanted to get the truth from me. He was very direct.

"So, tell me, did you receive a bribe from Edith Gasana? Did you buy a mansion?"

"No!" I almost shouted.

I didn't need to explain who Edith Gasana was. Mrs. Gasana had occupied various official positions in the public sector after the 1994 war, including heading Rwanda's Development Bank for several years.

I explained how her firm had been retained by the International Fund for Agriculture Development to work with the ministry.

"It was done in a very transparent manner. I didn't take any bribe. I wasn't even part of the tender process. They have their own procedures at IFAD, and they hired Edith's firm because hers was qualified for the job!"

I also explained the circumstances under which I bought my house. *"I bought a house because government policy now requires ministers to live in their own houses. It's nothing fancy."*

He explained me that he had also contacted Edith Gasana and had asked her to give him all information on her consulting firm and her banking statements.

"If we can show that there were no money transfers between her accounts and yours, it will show the president that they lied to him."

"Okay. I can bring you copies of letters I exchanged with the bank and all my bank statements."

Rujugiro told me that unfortunately there was a disease spreading in the party: *ishyari* (jealousy).

“Whenever people see that you are appreciated by the president, they will invent all sorts of things to alienate him from you. Even me, they do it to me all the time, to the point where I just let the storm pass, and when Kagame realizes that he has been lied to, he starts talking to me again.”

I was completely down. This was probably my lowest point in all my time with Kagame. My life spiralled into a never-ending succession of lows that eventually led me to resign abruptly from the cabinet a few months after this meeting with Rujugiro.

On my way back home, one question kept turning in my mind: what made Kagame stop trusting me to the point he could believe that I, of all people, was corrupt?

I brought my bank information to Rujugiro the next day. I even brought him pictures of my house. He was surprised as he looked at my little one storey house with mismatching tiles, a metallic roof and no view.

“This is your house?”

“Yes.”

“This is a very simple house!”

“Yes, it’s one of the first houses built in the neighbourhood. I liked the property because of its location, not the house itself.”

I told him the name of the house’s previous owner and Rujugiro exclaimed that he knew him. *“He used to work for me in Burundi,”* he said. He promised that he would show them to James Musoni, the president’s eyes and ears in the party.

“James will talk to the president. I am sure this will clear up things.”

I never heard from Rujugiro again, but I knew our meeting didn’t

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yield any positive results. Before the end of that first week of 2005, my enemies moved the fight to another playing field: the press.

In its first edition of the year, *The New Times* dedicated their whole front page to an article alleging that I was corrupt to the bone. This was the same *New Times* I had flatly refused to “sponsor” just a few weeks earlier. So, this was retaliation time, I thought.

Like my old Latin teacher would have said, “*Ludi incipient!*” Let the games begin!

CHAPTER 21

For some reason, my mind kept going back to the infamous one hundred days of 1994 that changed our lives forever. I thought again about the words that Professor Malang Seydi spoke to me when I couldn't muster the courage to get ready for my graduation.

"Patrick, it seems like it's the end of the world, but it isn't," Professor Seydi said to me. *"When this is over, your country will need you even more than ever before."*

It all seemed such a lifetime ago, such a long time since my beautiful days lecturing at the National University of Rwanda before the Rwandan Patriotic Front offered me the position of secretary-general in the Ministry of Agriculture.

Long gone were the days when I was the young rising star of Kigali's cabinet, a minister of state always teaching Rwandans to love their country more. It was almost like a dream that never was.

In his beautiful masterpiece, *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison stated that the end is at the beginning, though it lies far ahead. I do believe that my story did end at its very beginning, when I set foot in Rwanda, in the new Rwanda, a place I didn't know.

I was guilty of seeing Rwanda as I dreamed it should be or as I hoped it might become. Though dreaming of a better future is a great thing, my recent circumstances and the many events that were to occur in the months following that front-page article made me finally see the country of my birth not as it should or could be, but simply how it was, in all its naked crudeness.



PART IV:
THE BACK-ALLEYS OF HISTORY

*How will we answer when the children ask us "Why?"
Will we be able to look them in their tearful eyes
When we tell them that sometimes,
Sometimes, Freedom must die before Freedom even begins?
Will we be able to keep that hope in their smile
When we tell them that too many times,
Too many times, Dreamers do die young for their Dreams
to live on forever?
Or maybe, will we perhaps find it much easier to simply
shush them,
Shush them through our scarred lips with a broken finger,
Shush them till they stop asking us all those questions,
Shush them till they find the answers on their own?*

Excerpt from "The Children's Why,"
The Poetic Journal of Um'Khonde

CHAPTER 22

January 2005. My troubles were far from over. One of my staff came to see me one day. I had an open door policy for the ministry's staff; they could come and see me anytime without an appointment. I had worked with most of them before I was appointed to the government, back when I was heading the ministry's administration.

"Minister, the police has started issuing summons to everyone, and they have people here going through the files."

They didn't even have the courtesy to inform me. Talk about protocol.

"What are they looking for?" I asked.

"They don't want to tell us. Many staff members don't want to talk with them. I don't."

"No, that would be wrong. Tell everyone that they should cooperate with them. After all, we have nothing to hide; everything is done in the most transparent way."

From that time on, I saw police coming in and out of the ministry as though they owned the building.

Andrew Rwigamba, the head of the national police, was to advise me, months later when I was no longer in government, that it was just *"a routine"* investigation requested by the president. *"Nothing to be alarmed by."*

I am certain it was just a ploy to destabilize me, as their conclusions

were never shared with me, the public, or with anyone that I know of.

I was not about to let them scare me. I continued working as though nothing had happened. I was certain my apparent indifference was making them even angrier.

The prosecutor-general of the republic, Jean-de-Dieu Mucyo, called me one day early in February to invite me to his office.

“Nkeneye kukubaza utuntu ducye kuri ya dossier. [I need to ask you a few things about that file.] Can you come and see me?” Why do Rwandans always feel the need to speak in such abysmally vague terms? Why not just spell it out?

The prosecutor-general’s office was in the neighbourhood of Kimihurura, less than fifteen minutes from my office and within walking distance of my house. I had passed this three-story orange building many times without really paying attention to it, not knowing that I would one day be on the visitors list. They were in the same compound as the Ministry of Justice and the Supreme Court, just across the street from the Parliament.

I could tell how uneasy Mucyo was in my presence. I had known him for many years; we were colleagues in the cabinet; he was minister of justice before becoming prosecutor-general.

“So, how do we do this?” I asked him after we finished exchanging the customary banalities about the ever-changing weather and asking about each other’s family as though he wasn’t about to rip mine further apart.

“The interviews will be supervised by my deputy, Martin Ngoga.”

He looked at me a long moment. I could tell that he wanted to tell me something but wasn’t sure if he should.

“Just make sure that you remain consistent in your answers. If you ever talked about this with any other authority before today, make sure you tell exactly the same story.”

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He lowered his voice as he continued. *“Most of these reports end up on the president’s desk. Rest assured, they will compare everything, so be careful.”*

I appreciated the warning and gratefully smiled in silence. It was an awkward moment.

“What will be next?” I asked him.

“We’ll just wait. Once we finish this investigation, we will report back to the party, and they will decide what to do with it.”

The party. Of course! Why did I even ask? Mucyo picked up his phone and called Martin Ngoga. *“The minister is here.”*

CHAPTER 23

The interviews were conducted by two individuals whom I had never met, one Sudi and one Azarias. We were sitting in Martin Ngoga's meeting room next door to his office. He would come in from time to time to see how things were going. He never talked to me; it was as if he had never met me before. The masks were finally off.

What a parody of justice to see them taking notes on notepads with the pompous letterhead "Pro-Justitia." Oh, their arrogance and disrespect! They kept calling me by my first name, as though I was no longer in the government. At some point, I called them back to order: *"I haven't authorized you to call me Patrick. You will address me as minister or, if that's too hard for you, call me Dr. Habamenshi."*

If it wasn't that they were busy dismantling my career, I would have found it amusing, the way they clenched their teeth and started addressing me as Dr. Habamenshi.

The interview went on for hours. I could tell that they were fishing for something; I am not even sure they knew what they were supposed to find. They kept repeating the same questions, probably hoping that I would contradict myself.

I refused to answer the same question twice. *"Go and read the answer I gave two hours ago. My answer hasn't changed."*

They didn't appreciate my haughtiness, so I gave them a full load of it. For people I've never met before, I could tell that they took

this affair very personally. They reminded me of those militia *interahamwe* who killed people during the war. Although they did not prepare the Genocide, they executed it with a passion that probably exceeded the expectations of those who sent them on that horrific killing spree!

During one of the interview sessions, in mid-February, I received a call from François Ngarambe, the secretary-general of the party. I excused myself and answered the phone.

“Patrick, we need to see you. Can you come right away?”

“Can I come and meet you after six? I am at the prosecutor’s office, and our session might take a little longer.”

“I know.” Of course you know, I cynically thought.

He continued. *“We need you right away.”* He hung up. A few minutes later, Martin Ngoga walked into the conference room where the interview was taking place. *“The minister is urgently needed somewhere. You will continue the interview another day.”*

I went to the party’s headquarters. It had been a long day. I’d had a field visit early that morning. I was receiving an important delegation from the World Bank, one of our biggest donors, and it was traditional for me to accompany the mission on the ground to show them the various projects we were able to do because of their funding.

I’d come back to Kigali around midday and immediately rushed to the prosecutor’s office without having time to stop home for lunch. My stomach ulcers were killing me, and knowing the RPF, this meeting was probably going to last till late in the night.

“You can go home,” I told my driver when he let me out at the party headquarters. I didn’t like keeping my driver waiting for me in the car for hours. If a meeting was to run late, I would take the keys and drive myself home. Ministers were normally not allowed to drive themselves, but I always ignored that injunction. I didn’t want to

be driven by around by an exhausted, overworked and underpaid driver.

There were police trucks in the parking lot and a few of the four-by-four Land Cruisers that were used by various government officials. Were they there for me, I wondered? I was about to enter the three-story villa in Kimihurura that housed the RPF's offices, when I saw a friendly face, that of Senator Immaculée Kayumba, a long-time family friend. She was the wife of the president of Ibuka, a foundation fighting for the rights of the Genocide survivors and the memory of the Genocide victims. Immaculée was of my mother's generation, a woman who was raised in the days when values and dignity still meant something. I often found her to be an odd character in this new political Rwanda of sharks and thieves.

I walked over to her and greeted her, happy to buy a few more minutes of peace before the storm that awaited me upstairs in the lion's den. It felt good to see a friend in the middle of the sea of hateful people who had overtaken my life of late. She hugged me in a motherly fashion and looked at me with a very worried look on her face. "*Patrick, how are you doing? Are you okay?*"

I tried to muster a reassuring smile. "*I am okay, thanks.*" I am sure my demeanour told her a whole different story. She squeezed my hand and simply said, "*Be courageous, Patrick. This will all pass.*"

God, I needed to hear and believe that so badly! Will this really pass, I wondered?

Ngarambe received me in his office, smiling as though he was receiving his best buddy. In reality, he knew very well that I didn't think much of him and that I limited my visits to his office to only the times I was summoned to see him. In addition to my contempt for that man and the way he managed the party, I found it difficult to breathe in the office of this unrepentant chain-smoker without fear of endangering my otherwise healthy lungs. He smoked so much that the car he used when he was in government still smelled of tobacco years after he stopped riding in it.

Ngarambe had a short and forgettable tenure in government as

minister for youth, a peculiar appointment for this greying former lecturer. No one ever understood why he was picked to be the party's secretary-general after his disastrous period in the cabinet. Of course, it would have been unfair to expect him to demonstrate the charisma, quiet efficiency and political savvy of Charles Muligande, the previous secretary-general, but François Ngarambe seemed adamantly determined to be the exact opposite of the last occupant of that office: he was loud, indiscreet and uninspiring. Any crisis that he was called upon to handle inevitably degenerated into an irreparable disaster.

There were three other people waiting for me in his office: Mary Gahonzire, second in command of the national police, James Musoni, the president's personal assistant in the party, and Tito Rutaremara, the ombudsman and one of the party elders.

This doesn't look good, I thought as I sat down, wondering what this firing squad had in store for me. Having these four people present certainly did not signal happier days in my foreseeable future.

James Musoni was maybe four or five years older than me. He was six feet tall, with the heavy physique of someone who enjoyed too many meals in his life. He never looked straight at people, even when he was leading a meeting; he would slightly shift his head sideways and look up as though he was reading the words of his speech from an invisible teleprompter inconveniently placed above his head. He wore round tinted glasses that didn't entirely hide his small shifty eyes. James Musoni was one of the most feared people in Rwanda. Musoni was part of a very exclusive and powerful group: he was one of the three men known to be the eyes and the ears of Kagame on the streets. President Kagame, a former head of intelligence in the neighbouring Uganda, where he grew up, had established a regime where everyone betrayed everyone else. Whether true or false, all news and information about everyone, from their private lives to their associates and their opinions, were channelled to him via three individuals: Dr. Emmanuel Nhahiro, the ambitious director of Rwanda's intelligence services, Jack Nziza, the cruel head of military intelligence, and James Musoni, the head

of Rwanda's revenue agency. James was the only civilian of that trio, a trio that did and undid the lives of everyone in the country, but he was as feared as the others, if not more so. His victims of choice were members of the party and business people who refused to join the party's ranks. Whenever Musoni was sitting in on one of the party's never-ending meetings, you knew that everything you said would be reported back to Kagame.

Mary Gahonzire was one of the country's highest-ranking female officers. I first met her in 2002 when she was heading the economic crimes division. She was the officer in charge of investigating the DRB fraud cases I had unveiled when I was secretary-general of the Ministry of Agriculture. She had since been promoted to become the number two person in the national police. She was in charge of field operations, which simply meant that she had unlimited powers. She was a soft-spoken lady with candid eyes, but you would have been a fool to cross her path. Anyone who crossed her path, civilians, police officers and military alike, ended up finding out the hard way how far her powers extended. She practically never took off her blue uniform. I even wonder if she didn't sleep in it. That is, if she ever slept: whenever I saw her, at any time of the day or night, she seemed on the lookout for someone to investigate, interrogate or incarcerate.

Tito Rutaremara was the most puzzling of the people sitting there that night. I never really figured out his motivations for being part of this charade. I didn't think it was greed. A self-professed Marxist, Tito Rutaremara lived a very sober lifestyle, a trait you couldn't mistake by looking at his overall demeanour. He dressed in those two-piece Mao-style suits favoured by Chinese leaders, and he wore them to the limit of common decency. I didn't think of him as a power-hungry animal like James Musoni or Mary Gahonzire. He was well into his seventies, an age where he couldn't expect any further professional advancement. He was one of the party's most recognizable figures; he was a very vocal spokesperson and mediator during the war. After 1994, he occupied various positions, the most notorious one was coordinating the commission that developed Rwanda's current constitution. He was appointed the

country's first ombudsman, and for a long time, I thought he was the perfect person for that long-overdue office.

That night in the office of Ngarambe was going to make me realize how poorly I had judged Tito Rutaremara. He was the first one to speak. *"Thank you for coming so quickly,"* the old man said. Like I had a choice! He proceeded. *"Patrick, I am not here in my capacity as ombudsman. You might not know, but I head the disciplinary committee of the 'family' and we wanted to ask you a few questions."*

I had come to hate how they called the RPF "the family" and referred to its members as "family members." The only "family" they reminded me of was the Sicilian mob.

"The way we see it," he continued, *"you haven't done anything wrong."* I didn't believe his words for a second. If I hadn't done anything wrong, why did they bring the big guns to this meeting? And why did I just spend the whole afternoon being questioned in the prosecutor-general's office?

"The way we see it, we think you were duped by Edith Gasana. We think Edith colluded with IFAD to get that contract and used you to make it look legit."

What? I was so surprised, I almost fell off my chair! Less than two months earlier, Rujugiro had told me that Kagame was convinced that Edith Gasana had given me a 200 million francs bribe to get that contract, and now they were saying that she had colluded with an international organization to get the deal. Were they crazy?

Mary Gahonzire added, *"She probably learnt about this opportunity when she was secretary-general in the Ministry of Finance."*

This was the most ridiculous assertion. Edith Gasana had left the Ministry of Finance more than five years earlier, whereas the funds for the project her consulting firm was hired to do were allocated just the previous year, in 2004!

Mary continued. *"Just tell us that this is how it went, we will*

understand. All inquiries about you will immediately cease. After all, why would we keep asking you about something you had nothing to do with?"

The others were nervously glancing at each other, waiting to see what I was going to say.

So, that was the deal the Devil was proposing to me: hand them Edith's head on a platter to save myself.

Well that's a deal I wasn't going to make. If they wanted to destroy Edith, let them do it on their own. Plus, I knew enough about the RPF by now to know that this was not going to make my troubles go away. They had gone too far. They had shown me so much hatred and contempt, and I found it hard to believe it would just go away overnight.

If I was to go along with their version of what happened, I was implicitly admitting that there was something wrong with that contract and that I had been part of it. I could see them holding their breath when I started speaking: *"What you say, Mary, is simply not plausible. Edith has done nothing wrong! There is no way she could have known about this program back when she was still in the Ministry of Finance, because the idea of a strategic plan is entirely mine. It was initiated by me, not by the donors. All I wanted was to offer my country, my party, a plan to realize the promises we made to Rwandans to modernize agriculture to get them out of poverty. Nothing else!"*

It was late in the night, and I could feel the chilling breeze coming from the nearby valley. I felt exhausted, dead, powerless, frustrated and hungry. I could feel the tension in the room. There was no longer any trace of the fake, condescending conviviality they displayed at the beginning of the meeting.

Tito spoke again. *"Okay, if that's how it is, then we will continue the investigation. You must understand, Patrick, that family members are wondering what is going on with you, and we need to provide them with credible answers."*

I wanted to vomit! What duplicitous individuals! And to have Tito Rutaremara, the patriarch with a white beard, the country's ombudsman, one who should have known better than to be part of this, telling me that all this was to help the "family" look for "credible answers"!

Tito continued. *"Of course, the police will continue to help us in our investigation."*

In your harassment, you mean!

"We ask you to cooperate with them, the prosecutor and all the authorities in charge of investigating crimes, so we can get a complete report."

"Yes, sir."

There wasn't much else I could say. There is a proverb in Kinyarwanda: "Ntawe uburana n'umuhamba." *A dead person can't argue with the people in charge of burying him.*

Ngarambe and Musoni were silent practically through the entire meeting. Musoni was scribbling notes, which I suspected were to land on Kagame's desk before the end of the night.

"One more thing," Tito added. *"We will convene a disciplinary hearing about your case. The secretariat will notify you so you can prepare to come and explain yourself."*

It was well past 11 when I left the party's headquarters that night. My head ached, and my heartburn was acting up. I could see the lights from the secretary-general's office, the lone light in the sleepy capital.

I was too tired to wonder what was going to happen next. Right then I just wanted to go home, the only place of solace I had in this country that I used to love so much.

CHAPTER 24

Some days later, the prosecutor's office called me to set a date to resume the interviews. We agreed to meet at three that afternoon. When I got there, their office was closed. I knocked at Martin Ngoga's office, but there was no answer. I went to ask Mucyo what was going on.

"I don't know." He tried calling them on their cell phones. *"Where are you? The minister is waiting for you."* I couldn't hear their answer, but I could tell he was displeased with whatever they said. *"You should have rescheduled if you knew you had other engagements. Hurry up!"*

He hung up the phone and turned to me, looking embarrassed. I could tell he didn't control those men.

"They will be here soon."

We kept waiting, talking about everything and nothing but my case. They arrived about an hour later, and we went to the usual meeting room. I had just taken a seat when they told me that we had to reschedule the interview.

"Why?"

"The new law forbids starting interviews after business hours." Business hours ended at 3:30 PM.

I was outraged! *"I got here before 3:00 pm, you are the ones who are late!"*

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“Well, that’s the law, and we can’t break it!”

I tried arguing in vain. I finally rose from that chair and looked at them with the last shred of my quickly eroding ministerial authority. *“Well, let me tell you this. I will not be coming back to this office. I have better things to do. If you want to see me again, you will call my assistant and book an appointment like anyone else. The law doesn’t forbid you to conduct interviews in another government building, does it?”*

I walked out without waiting for them to check their law books. I didn’t hear from them for three months.

CHAPTER 25

The *New Times* stories continued throughout February. I couldn't take it silently anymore. On March 1, I wrote a "Right to Respond" to the party's paper in which I exposed their attempt to extort 20 million francs from me and dared them to prove their allegations.

I sent a copy of the letter to the president, the prime minister, all my fellow ministers, the secretary-general of the party and the entire ministry's staff.

The *New Times* refused to print my letter, so I sent it to all the other print and radio media to force their hand. I knew I was playing with fire. By writing this letter, I was attacking the party publicly. I didn't care anymore. I was not going to let them use me like a punching ball.

The *New Times* reluctantly published my letter and retaliated by publishing my cell phone number. I started receiving all sorts of crazy and heinous phone calls, and I had to change and restrict my number.

During those troubled days, I kept asking myself what was the motivation of those people trying so hard to remove me from the ministry. Their earlier attacks had made it clear that my mixed ethnicity was not welcomed by some of the ruling party's old guard, especially the Hutu part of my parental heritage.

But that couldn't be the only reason. I was sure that there was something else, but I couldn't fathom what. What was in this

Ministry of Agriculture that made it so crucial to keep it in the hands of one of the party's old guard?

A hint of an answer came to me from the most unlikely of places: the secretariat of the party. Sometime in March 2005, I received a call from one of the party's staff. The secretariat of the party at that time had about fifteen permanent full-time staff. They usually worked as anchor persons for the different party's commissions, and in between the commissions' meetings, they would follow up on the various files that landed on the secretary-general's desk.

"Minister, there is a man here, his name is Ntaganda. He told us that the ministry owes him some money for fertilizer he delivered to you. Do you know anything about this?"

I knew very well who Jean-Baptiste Ntaganda was. Though I hadn't seen him since my days as the ministry's secretary-general, I could never forget his particular case.

As secretary-general, I signed all the checks for goods and services delivered to the ministry. On any given day, I would have more than 50 cheques waiting for my signature. I was very meticulous about this task. I would review all the contracts and supporting documents to see if and when the goods or services to be paid for were delivered. Ntaganda's file stood out. He had delivered tons of fertilizers for an agricultural project in the northern province of Byumba, a disastrous white elephant called DRB, Développement Rural de Byumba.

DRB was funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development and supervised by the African Development Bank. It was one of those integrated development projects fancied by donors in the eighties and nineties. DRB covered everything from infrastructure development to agriculture, livestock and water. The project was marked by a succession of corruption scandals that spanned several different project coordinators. The project was one of the rare projects to be reactivated after 1994.

I was surprised to see that the project had so much fertilizer in store.

When I last visited that province, the population was complaining that they hadn't received any fertilizer.

I decided to take a road trip to Byumba. It wasn't far, less than two hours from the capital. The project staff was taken by surprise by my visit. No one had informed them I was coming. I asked that they take me to the warehouses where fertilizers were stored.

"Why are the fertilizers still in here?" I asked. *"Shouldn't you have distributed them to the farmers?"*

"The fertilizers came too late," they told me. *"The season was already over."*

I wasn't satisfied with the answer. The staff looked like they were hiding something from me, but I couldn't fathom what.

I went back to my office and looked at that file again. I made a very strange discovery. According to the file, the fertilizers had arrived several months ago. So why did the project staff tell me that the fertilizers had just arrived?

I asked to see all the tender documents, the contracts, the customs documentation and the previous payments. That's when I found out what was going on.

Ntaganda had won the tender to deliver fertilizers that he didn't have at the time. The project staff signed a letter stating that the fertilizers had been delivered just so he could be paid. The first request for payment had been sent to the donor directly.

Ntaganda received 78 million Rwandan francs from the African Development Bank. Ntaganda then used the funds to order the fertilizers, which explains why they were delivered many months after the original order was issued!

When the DRB came to an end, all the remaining requests for payment were sent to my office.

I was shocked by my discovery. I sent a team of auditors to Byumba, and they came back with a frightening report. DRB had for years

been paying for goods and services that were never delivered. Ntaganda was part of a broader scheme that cost the country millions of dollars.

Ntaganda had the audacity to ask that the ministry pay him another 230 million francs!

"I will not pay you a cent," I told him when he came to see me to find out why his cheque was delayed. *"Since you've already received 78 million, we will keep the corresponding quantity. Take back the rest of the fertilizers."*

Ntaganda was distressed by my decision. *"What will I do with those fertilizers?"*

I had no inclination to listen to his whining. *"That's the least of my concerns. You defrauded the ministry. Consider yourself lucky that I am not having you arrested!"*

I put a hold on all the project's other pending payments and alerted the police. Mary Gahonzire, the head of the economic crimes division, conducted the investigation herself.

So, yes, I knew very well who Jean-Baptiste Ntaganda was. I explained the situation to Aimable, the party's staffer at the other end of the line. *"We don't owe him anything. He defrauded the country and he's lucky we didn't put him in jail!"*

"I can meet Ngarambe and explain to him why you shouldn't waste any time entertaining the confabulations of corrupt people like Ntaganda," I added.

Aimable replied, *"I don't think that will be necessary."*

After I hung up the phone, I called in my assistant. *"Can you look for the DRB files? You remember, I had requested the project to be audited. Look for that audit report for me. It was done by Deloitte, if I recall."*

She searched for the file, but she came back to tell me it was nowhere to be found.

I couldn't believe it! *"The whole file has disappeared? How can such a big file disappear? It was hundreds of pages!"*

I immediately called the accounts receivables department. They told me all the payments were made, despite my recommendations. *"Where did they find the money to make those payments?"*

I remember closing DRB accounts and transferring the balance to the Ministry of Finance back in 2002!

"They used the money from the old projects accounts."

The old projects accounts! Of course! The old projects, as we called them in the ministry, were the pre-1994 projects. When the Genocide happened in 1994, all projects came to a complete stop. Very few went back into operation after the war, mostly because the staff had died or gone missing, and a lot of the archives had been lost or destroyed.

What was odd is that no one ever claimed the balance on the projects' bank accounts. Millions of Rwandan francs were lying in dormant accounts all over the country.

The central bank had asked all the ministries to close these accounts and transfer the funds to treasury. Kabaija had preferred to turn a deaf ear to that request. Instead, he authorized the use of those funds for different activities that were otherwise ineligible on the budget allocated to the ministry.

I thought we'd finally transferred the funds to treasury. *"I don't understand how that is possible. I don't see those funds on our balance sheet anymore."*

The accountant paused for a moment before answering.

"We never transferred the funds to treasury. Minister Kabaija ordered that the money be transferred to the institutions attached to the ministry. All the payments to the DRB clients have been made from there."

I was shocked! How could Kabaija do that?

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I made a few phone calls and found out that no one was ever indicted for defrauding the ministry in the DRB case. And all payments were made except for Ntaganda's!

I decided to get to the bottom of this. I called my assistant.

"Can you prepare a letter for the governor of the central bank for me? I want a printout of the activities on each and every one of the ministry's bank accounts, including the outreach services and the development projects for the last two years!"

CHAPTER 26

The National Bank of Rwanda (NBR), Rwanda's central bank, sent me the printouts within a few days. I have to say that NBR was probably one of the most efficient services in the country. Other services took months to reply to the simplest query, and usually only after you reminded them numerous times.

I started going through the files. It was too sensitive to let anyone else handle, so I decided to do it myself. I took the files home and started going through them. It was a very tedious job. There were hundreds of pages from more than twenty different accounts.

I stayed up late night after night, looking at columns of numbers and names, not sure what I was looking for. I often asked the office to look for contracts.

I will never be sure whether my actions triggered what was going to happen next, but I believe I was getting close to the truth when I came home one evening and found one of my bodyguards by my door with his suitcase.

"Minister, we were instructed to go back to the barracks."

"All of you?"

"Yes. The others are already gone. I was waiting for the one who was with you today so we can leave together."

I was shocked by the unexpected turn of events! This situation was getting out of hand.

My security detail had been reinforced at my request early in 2004. At the time, two staff members whom I suspended for corruption had publicly threatened to get back at me. My bodyguards looked into the matter and told me that both of the former staff members carried guns.

I called the man in charge of the ministers' security, an officer called Johnson Sesonga. He looked into it and told me that both individuals were authorized to carry guns, but he didn't want to tell me who authorized them to carry the weapons.

My security detail was doubled to four permanent bodyguards, two who would follow me everywhere and two who protected my residence. It was ironic that I, the minister of agriculture, was one of the most protected cabinet members, alongside the ministers of defence, finance and interior!

I knew I was fighting powerful men, but I never expected this. I have to admit that for the first time since that meeting in Kagame's office a year before, they managed to scare me. This latest move signalled that they had the power to take my life with impunity.

I didn't sleep the whole night. If something happened to me, there wouldn't be anyone to defend me.

I did something we did back during the war when we feared that someone would throw a grenade through the window: I put a mattress in my windowless corridor and spent the night on the floor.

Here I was, a minister, sleeping on the floor of my own house, in my own country, in fear of being attacked by men sent by my own party, all with the blessing of a paranoid president!

By morning, I had regained control of my nerves. I was not going to give them the satisfaction of knowing that their scare tactics were working.

I called officer Johnson Sesonga and asked him why he had removed

my security detail. He gave me a weird answer: *“Someone from your office called and said you didn’t want them anymore.”*

I was furious. *“Who called you?”* I was trying my best not to yell at him.

“I don’t know; he didn’t give his name.”

“Let me see if I understand what you are telling me: someone who didn’t tell you his name called to ask you to remove my security detail, and you obliged him without bothering to check with me?”

He didn’t find anything to say in reply.

“You know better than anyone else that I never let anyone else handle my security matters, so don’t give me that bullshit! I want them back within an hour, or I’ll report you.”

My security detail was reinstated before the 60-minute deadline. Sesonga wasn’t stupid; he knew that if I was to report this, the people who had ordered him to remove my bodyguards would sacrifice him to protect their own asses.

CHAPTER 27

This crisis was slowly destroying me. I felt as though I'd been buried alive in my executive sarcophagus. I didn't know how much air I had before I suffocated under the weight of all the hatefulness around me.

It was overwhelming at times, and I didn't know who to share it with. Kigali was such a deceitful scene. Kagame had put in place a system where everyone spied on everyone else. Anyone who had something to report could access the president himself or any of his key spies, James Musoni, Jack Nziza and Emmanuel Ndahiro, day or night.

Given my status as a fallen angel, they would have all delighted in hearing that I had dared to complain of the way Kagame and the party were treating me.

It was no secret that the phones of government officials and "enemies of Rwanda" alike were routinely tapped, and I had no reason to think mine was an exception. So I reduced the time I spent on the phone to only what was strictly necessary. There was no doubt at this stage that any misplaced word could have cost me my life or my freedom.

The whole situation had a detrimental effect on me. I was irascible all the time. My relatives could feel that something was wrong, so I started avoiding them to dodge their questions.

I avoided everyone. The work of visiting farmers and reforming the ministry was my refuge. The countryside, the fields and the

pastures were my places of solace. I found the genuineness of rural Rwandans farmers so refreshing after days spent with the party bashing me in Kigali. During the smear campaign in *The New Times*, you could see me conferring with livestock farmers in Umutara on Monday, rice growers in Rwamagana the next day and coffee growers in Rushashi two days later. In that month alone, I went to Cyangugu in the southwest, Gishwati in the northwest, Butare in the south and lastly Kibungo in the east.

Despite the ugly stories about me in the party's media, I was still extremely popular. Farmers in particular were happy to finally have a minister who spent more time talking to them than any other minister ever did in their lifetime. They viewed me as one of them, and they knew I had their well-being at heart.

I wanted to leave behind a strong legacy, and I did. During my tenure as minister of agriculture, I managed to redefine the mandate of the ministry and modernize it into a small, yet more efficient organization, closer to its stakeholders.

I had the government pass the first comprehensive agricultural policy in our history. I also articulated a detailed strategic plan and priority actions to operationalize the new policy and put in place the road map for a broader reform and new extension and research structures to develop and disseminate new technologies adapted to the needs of our farmers.

All that in just 20 months! In my 11 months as minister of state in the Ministry of Commerce, I organized the country's first annual international investment conference, promoted Rwanda as a major eco-tourist destination and introduced the country's first cooperatives policy. I was fast and resourceful, and I had the confidence of the public and all of the country's major donors.

I seemed tireless, but by March 2005, after a year of constant harassment by members of my own party, Rwanda's ruling RPF, my youthful energy was more of a front than anything else. The constant harassment and unrest was taking a severe toll on my

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physical health, and my psyche wasn't doing any better. I was suffering from sleep deprivation and loss of appetite.

I was torn between my will to go on and serve my country and the recognition that they were much stronger and better connected than I was. Sooner or later, I'd be crushed like a bug.

CHAPTER 28

One of my first decisions when I became minister of agriculture was to establish monthly field trips with my senior staff. These field trips allowed us to better understand what was happening on the ground in each province and allowed us to meet farmers, most of them who were too poor to afford a trip to the capital.

We were in Kibungo, in eastern Rwanda, for the last weekend of March 2005. I remember not feeling well, but I thought it was just exhaustion. Upon my return, I attended a meeting at the party's headquarters. I don't remember a word of what was said by the presenters, my cabinet colleagues Solina Nyirahabimana, a minister in the president's office and former legal counsel to the president, and Edda Mukabagwiza, the Minister of Justice. My head was aching, almost to the point of exploding.

The meeting went on and on, not ending until nearly midnight. As I painfully drove back home, I regretted having let my driver leave early.

The weekend was horrible. My head hurt. I felt so cold that I stayed in bed with three blankets. I went to visit my parents that Sunday morning. I always visited them whenever I got a chance. My mother looked at me, worried.

"You don't look good."

"That's a nice way to greet your son," I joked, but I could tell that she was genuinely worried. *"I'm okay. I just need to rest. I took some paracetamol and stayed in bed all day yesterday."*

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"You're sure it's not malaria?"

I tried to dismiss her concern. *"You know I haven't had malaria since I was a kid."*

Mama would not be Mama if she didn't insist. *"You should still go to the hospital and get tested. You shouldn't neglect your health like that. That job is killing you."*

That was the understatement of the year, I thought. I hadn't told them what was going on with the party, and we never discussed what they read about me in the press.

I stopped at the hospital on my way to work Monday morning. They took my temperature.

"That's not alarming, 38°. Let me take a blood sample so we can run some tests."

"I need to go back at the office. I will send someone to get the results."

The nurse didn't want to hear anything about me leaving.

"Did you have anything to eat this morning?"

"No."

"Have some breakfast first, then I'll let you go."

She came back to find that I hadn't touched the plate they put before me. *"I can't eat anything. I feel nauseous."*

She took my temperature again. It had risen from 38° to 40°!

"Oh, my God! We have to immediately hospitalize you! You can't go anywhere with this!"

Everything went very quickly from there. My state worsened in the next few hours. I remember them taking me to a room, and I remember people moving around me and doctors and nurses examining me and conferring. Then I passed out.

My temperature continued to rise, and they kept giving me injections to lower it. That night, I was hallucinating and talking out loud. I couldn't even make out who was in the room. I just remember many people going around and nurses taking my pulse or changing the serum. I finally fell asleep or collapsed, I don't know which. It was like being in big black hole.

I was in that state for two days. When I woke up on the third morning, I was feeling very weak but so much better than when I'd arrived.

The doctor came in and smiled when he saw me awake.

"Hi, I am Dr. Joseph Ntarindwa. You gave us a fright, Minister! It's malaria. You must have been carrying this bug for several weeks. If you hadn't come to the hospital that day, the fever would have killed you before we could do anything!"

He tried to adopt a reassuring tone to mitigate the gravity of his words.

"The nurse told me she had to fight with you to keep you here! Well, I think the affairs of the state can wait for a few days. You just rest and let others get the headache for once, okay?"

I nodded and went back to sleep.

CHAPTER 29

It was the first time in my life that I had been hospitalized. God, what was this job doing to me?

Looking back at that event, I can say that malaria saved me from having a nervous breakdown, which is where I was heading with all that was going on.

Staying in King Faisal Hospital was a much-needed detox for the workaholic that I was. For the first few days, I could only think about the work that I left behind and the files that were probably piling up on my desk. My sister had to hide my cell phone so I wouldn't call the office.

Pope John Paul II had just died the previous Saturday, and the television was showing special programs about his life. At the time, I was no longer going to church, but I couldn't but be taken by the pontiff's legacy of love and abnegation.

The prime minister rang me in the evening of the third day. I thought he wanted to check on my health, but no, he asked me about a file to be discussed in cabinet during my absence. Some things never change!

He kept me on the phone for 10 minutes, very casually conducting business with a man who was lying in a hospital bed with an intravenous drip in one arm.

The call left me with a strange feeling. Was I just a brain for the government to pump till I dropped dead of fatigue? The next

day, I asked my secretary to direct all my calls to Mrs Daphrose Gahakwa, my deputy, and I turned off my mobile phone so no one could reach me.

The time I spent at the hospital helped me regain my health, but most importantly, it brought my life to a forced halt, to a place where I had no choice but to reflect on my situation, with nothing else to distract me.

For more than a year, I had been working tirelessly to avoid the rumbling around me. The result was one week in the hospital with people calling me to ask me about work.

I was a complete wreck, both physically and psychologically. Every time I went to the bathroom, the hospital mirror forced me to look at the cold and unflattering reflection of an exhausted man with emaciated cheeks and hollow eyes.

I tried to smile, but it didn't do the trick anymore. Smiling comes to me naturally, but in those days, I had a forced smile that barely hid my internal turmoil.

For the first time in my life, I felt hopeless, and it scared me. I was not who I used to be, and I was failing to become who I should be. Who or what had I become? What brought so much hatred upon me? My life used to be filled with laughter and bliss, and I was so full of energy, so full of passion, but now I could barely see through the clouds above my head.

The 11th remembrance of the Genocide found me on my hospital bed. I could see all my colleagues at the commemoration ceremony, a crowd I felt increasingly estranged from. When Kagame stepped to the microphone, I turned off the television.

On that April 7, I was in no mood to hear his usual virulent speech reminding us that it was owing to him and him alone that we survived the horrific mass murders of 1994. I preferred to take time and remember all my loved ones who died in vain, having paved the way for this despot and his acolytes.

CHAPTER 30

When I came out of the hospital, I was more than ever determined to find out if there had been any other misuse of public funds in the Ministry of Agriculture over the last few years.

I wasn't sure if I was going to find anything, but I suspected they weren't smart enough to cover all their tracks.

My assiduity finally paid off. After several nights spent going over the bank printouts, I finally found something. I found several payments that were made in duplicate. At first, I thought my eyes were playing a trick on me: I saw cheques of similar amounts paid from different accounts.

I requested the contracts to verify how much we owed those service providers. I wasn't mistaken: they were paid twice for the same goods and services, which meant that someone was pocketing the difference!

I asked the accountant to bring me copies of all those cheques. The procedures required that all cheques be signed by two people. All the cheques from the double payments had one common signature: the signature of Fulgence Nsengiyumva, the ministry's former secretary-general.

The man had been embezzling millions of francs for years! And so as not to attract suspicion, he drew the payments from different accounts, the same accounts where the balance from the pre-genocide projects accounts was transferred and used to pay the people who defrauded the DRB project in 2002!

I was shocked by this discovery. I was certain of one thing: Fulgence did not act on his own. The accountants who were in charge of preparing the cheques had to have helped him. It was also likely that one of the other signers on the cheques was involved. Why else would they have authorized payments for goods or services that their institution hadn't ordered?

I made a copy of all the cheques and contracts and went to see James Musoni. For people unaware of how the Rwandan Patriotic Front works, Musoni was just the head of the Rwandan Revenue Agency. But he was more than that: James Musoni was President Kagame's personal assistant in the party's structure.

I could have gone directly to Kagame, but I wanted to test the party. I had a hunch that the party knew what was going on in the ministry, which is why they all connived to get rid of me, James Musoni included.

It was risky bet, but I needed to know the truth. One of two things was going to happen: either this information was new to them and they would investigate this scandal, or they'd known all along that this sort of thing was going on and were going to accelerate their plan to get rid of me before I found more evidence of their wrongdoings.

I presented James with the report and watched to see how he would react. He didn't flinch. All he said was that he was going to ask CID, the infamous Criminal Investigations Directorate, to look into it.

This was the beginning of May 2005. On May 26, 2005, I received information from two different sources that I was about to be indicted and arrested for corruption and embezzlement on the testimony of Fulgence Nsengiyumva.

The party had spoken, and I had my answer!

Like they say, those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it. I once read a story that happened about a hundred years ago, one that resembled my tragic situation.

Father Alexis Kagame, who bears no family ties to Rwanda's President Paul Kagame, despite sharing the same last name, reported the story of a man called Seruteganya, whose life was so similar to mine, it was amazing. Seruteganya lived in 19th-century Rwanda. In those days, the country was still a kingdom and was ruled by the powerful King Kigeli IV Rwabugiri.

King Rwabugiri, or Mwami Rwabugiri as we call our kings, is believed to have ruled Rwanda from 1853 to 1895. He is one of the most famous and infamous men to have ever ruled the country. He was a valorous warrior, one remembered for his epic expeditions and his unprecedented expansion of Rwanda.

Mwami Rwabugiri acceded to the throne upon the death of his father, Mwami Mutara II Rwogera. According to Rwandan royal customs, the country was ruled by the Queen Mother, Nyirayuhi IV, till Rwabugiri was old enough to take over.

The earliest years of his four decades as ruler were not very glorious. They were marked by never-ending intrigues and political eliminations, not unlike those of modern Rwanda. Rwabugiri was a man known for his choleric temper and his rush to punish anyone he thought was against him. His entourage knew this and took advantage of this character flaw to eliminate anyone they didn't like.

Seruteganya was the *personne à abattre* of the day. Seruteganya had served the royal family for years. He started serving the family under Rwabugiri's father, Mwami Mutara II Rwogera, and stayed on in the service of the new king. His loyalty earned him the trust of Mwami Rwabugiri and of Nyirakigeli IV, the Queen Mother, making him one of the most powerful men in the kingdom, a situation that in turn earned him countless enemies.

Courtesans came up with a dubious plot to eliminate him. They went to see the king and told him that Seruteganya had a love affair with the Queen Mother. You can imagine how scandalous such allegations were in the Rwanda of 150 years ago. As they had rightly anticipated, Mwami Rwabugiri was enraged by the news and sent

them to get Seruteganya and the Queen Mother and bring them back to him.

The courtesans went to Seruteganya's house, but instead of taking him and the Queen Mother back to the court, they killed them both, intending to tell the king that Seruteganya had killed the Queen Mother, leaving them no other choice but to eliminate him on the spot.

One of the Queen Mother's servants, a man called Ruhotorambuga, witnessed the whole situation and heard them planning to deceive the king. He threatened to report them to Mwami Rwabugiri.

The courtesans took Ruhotorambuga to the River Nyabarongo, a river infested with crocodiles, and pushed him into the water.

"Jya kubibwira busunzu," they yelled. *"Go and report us to the crocodile!"* They watched as he was eaten alive by the merciless reptiles.

How was I going to get out of this trap if I didn't want to suffer the fate of Seruteganya or Ruhotorambuga?

Since Kagame didn't want to put an end to this cruel game, I had to be the one to sever all ties with his regime.



PART V:
SANCTUARY

And me, I ask myself, how will I die? Will my death be swift and painless or my agony cruelly long and the pain unbearable? Will I show the courage of the Greats or will I shamefully beg for mercy? Will my death be glorious and save many more, or will I die like a vagabond in the back-alleys of history?

How will I be remembered? Or will I even be remembered?

No music is playing anymore, no kids are laughing anymore! Brutality and hatred have invaded everything; violence has replaced violins, trees are leafless, flowers are dry and purple! There are no lakes and no parks! Life and My Dream have fused into a tenebrous, pervasive and invasive Nightmare!

Excerpt from “Solitude: My Untold Story (The End),”

The Poetic Journal of Um’Khonde

CHAPTER 31

Saturday, May 28, 2005. Everything about my last hours in government was surreal. Here I was, in Urugwiro Village, the office of the president of Rwanda, sitting to the right of the man who had been my boss for the last three years, the man who had mercilessly thrown me to the party's wolves the previous year. Across the table sat King Mswati III of Swaziland and his entourage.

The 37-year-old Swazi monarch was known across the world not for his brightness but for his love of expensive cars, expensive clothes, and the virgins who danced half naked for him when he picked a new spouse every year. He had arrived a few hours earlier with one his 19 wives (or was it 21 wives?) and his royal entourage to pay a state visit to Rwanda.

Like so many times before during my time in government, I felt so out of place in that meeting. As I looked at Kagame and King Mswati, I couldn't but feel sad to see how these two men, like so many African rulers, misused their absolute powers to further their own interests and keep their people in the dark ages.

Like many Rwandans, I desperately needed to believe that there was someone out there who was going to come and mend our broken nation after the Genocide happened in 1994. We convinced ourselves that Kagame was that saviour, the man who rescued the liberation movement after Fred Rwigema's abrupt death in October 1990 and gave us so much hope for a better Rwanda.

Working with Kagame up close was a rude and painful eye-opener

for me. Kagame was an abusive and self-centred man with no loyalty to anyone, a dictator who created a Stalin-inspired regime based on terror, betrayal, mistrust and manipulation of the media, a man who unapologetically freed the men who committed the Genocide and capriciously imprisoned anyone who didn't want to do things his way.

The Rwandan Patriotic Front had become a nepotistic system not unlike the other regimes that led Rwanda to ethnic division and genocide. It was appalling to see how the party forced everyone in the country, from cabinet appointees and public servant to business owners and self-employed individuals, to enlist in the party and remit 10 per cent of their income to the party.

Mansions and luxury cars were practically popping out of the ground. Congo and its wealth was the private backyard of the powers of Kigali. And all the while, survivors were being tortured and killed by the recently released criminals so they would not testify against them in the Genocide trials! A complete mess!

On that particular evening, I was considering what was about to be done to me, and I still could not believe that my life had come to this. I was angry at myself. How could I have trusted this man for so many years to the point where I just let him take my life apart? Why had I stayed when I knew he was the one who had authorized this malicious prosecution that had been under way since last October? How could I have stayed by his side while he falsely accused me of being ethnically divisive and when he accused me of secretly travelling abroad to seal some corrupt deals when he knew full well that I could not leave Rwanda without him knowing about it? How could I not have seen this horrible outcome when he himself had authorized the police to turn the Ministry of Agriculture upside down to find something they could pin on me?

What made him hate me so much he would send me to my death instead of just letting me go back to the life I had before he appointed me to government? Kagame knew better than anyone else how hard I had worked throughout my tenure in the cabinet to improve the livelihoods of poor farmers in Rwanda. I had restored confidence

in the ministry after the office had been closed to both the farmers and most of the development partners for almost 10 years under my predecessor. I dismantled the corrupt system I found in the Ministry. I restructured the largest ministry in the country to make it more efficient and client oriented, and I toured the country for months, visiting every corner of the country to get the input of small farmers and other stakeholders for the first comprehensive agricultural policy the country had ever had! I had even sacrificed my own personal life to give my all to this demanding appointment! Where had I gone wrong?

Many people have asked me why I didn't go to him that night and explain that everything he had been told about my alleged corruption was pure fabrication, produced by his own entourage. What would have been the point?

Even if he stopped them from putting their hands on me, my nightmare wouldn't have ended. Ever since I had become minister of agriculture, they had tried everything in their power to get me out of office. They had tried to impeach me in Parliament during my first four months in office; they summoned me to the party's headquarters to explain myself after I was accused of being an "ethnic divisionist," a term manufactured by the party to stigmatize Hutus and anyone related to them; they had written articles in the party's own newspaper depicting me as a corrupt minister; and if that was not enough, they started writing about my family. In November 2004, Martin Ngoga, who was then deputy prosecutor-general and who coincidentally was sitting in that meeting with Mswati, had been tasked by Kagame to investigate me. They even tried to scare me off by removing my security detail and leaving me vulnerable to physical harm.

Now they were about to arrest me because some sick people had reported to Kagame that I had received a bribe of 200 million Rwandan francs (almost half a million U.S. dollars) and bought myself a luxury mansion! How could anybody believe such ridiculous allegations? Yet, Kagame did believe it in his paranoid, distrusting mind! I had to present details of my bank accounts, produce pictures of my house and explain myself numerous

times before the party and probably before the same people who concocted this tale. Nothing seemed to stop this hateful machine, the same machine that crushed so many before me!

It was time for me to move this despicable game to another playing field, one where they could no longer hide in the dark while stabbing me in the back. Over my time in the Rwandan Patriotic Front, I had seen so many lives destroyed and innocent people prosecuted on manufactured charges. It was time for me to break free from Kagame and his system, even if it meant that I might lose my life in the process.

The gala organized for the Swazi delegation that evening was the last official function I ever attended. As I had done so many other times since my life turned into this living nightmare, I smiled, shook hands and conversed with the foreign dignitaries.

I put on my professional front one last time to hide that I was living the worst time of my life.

CHAPTER 32

May 29, 2005. It was a very long and sleepless night, listening to every noise. I dreaded they would make a move before I did what I had in mind. Fortunately, no one came to my house.

My Sunday morning was paradoxical in many ways. Since I knew I was being watched, I did not want to change my routine lest I alarm them. I started the day with a breakfast meeting at Intercontinental Hotel with Mohamed Toure, director of the World Bank in Kigali and a delegation from Washington; I had scheduled the meeting many days earlier to discuss the bank's portfolio.

After that meeting, I went to the office and left detailed notes about the meeting with my assistant so she could follow up on what we had discussed. I removed any personal items such as family photos, knowing that I would probably never set foot in that office again.

In the afternoon, I went to Mount Kigali cemetery. In the past few years, the cemetery had become my place of solace. I would walk all the way to the end of the cemetery where my maternal grandfather and grandmother, my sisters Antoinette and Agathe and my best friend Flora were buried. I would always end my visit at the grave of Cedric, my beautiful godson who never lived to see his 12th birthday, and whose sudden and tragic death had made me come back to live in Rwanda.

It was a beautiful and peaceful place. I could see the whole capital; on a clear day, I could even see the eastern lakes in the distance.

This time, I couldn't gather myself to walk through the cemetery or

look at the view. I found no comfort in this place of rest, no peace among these tombs. For the first time of my life, as I looked down on this city rebuilt on lies and excesses, I doubted that things would ever get better. I had a sad feeling that more innocents were going to perish to pave the way to a succession of cliques that, one after the other, would continue robbing our country of any chance for a better future.

“My dear Cedric, I tried, but I failed. I can’t do this anymore. I came back to be with the family, not to get incarcerated for something I haven’t done. These people are too evil.”

I stayed there feeling so powerless, so beaten. Then I just turned away and went back to the car. As the car slowly wended its way down the hill, I was overtaken by a deep, insurmountable sorrow. I wasn’t sure if I would ever get a chance to come back to this place where all my loved ones rested in peace.

On my way home, I saw my great-uncle Rusanganwa and his wife on the road and gave them a ride. His resemblance to my late grandfather Sylvestre Bulingufi was so striking; it was almost like seeing him in person. Then I went home and got ready for my big day, hoping they would not try to arrest me in the middle of the night.

CHAPTER 33

May 30, 2005. I didn't tell my driver or my bodyguard where we were going. The less they knew, the safer they were. I just told them that I was going to a meeting and gave the directions to the driver. As we were going through the city, I couldn't help but think back about my awkward and now winding journey as minister of agriculture.

Kagame had shocked the country on October 19, 2003, when he appointed me to replace the unpopular Ephraim Kabaija. I remembered how I was so overwhelmed; never in my life had I ever imagined heading that crucial ministry, especially not two days into my 35th year!

It was a wonderful day, a day I will never forget my whole life! I knew what the sector meant for Kagame, and I knew he had to trust me so much to give me this amazing opportunity.

To think there was a time when I respected him so much. I shook the thought of him as we arrived in front of the Canadian Embassy, my final destination.

The ambassador, Mr. Jacques Laberge, was walking to the parking lot as I reached the entry of the embassy.

"Good morning, Ambassador. I need to speak with you."

"Can't this wait? I was leaving for the opening of the COMESA heads of state conference, and you know Mr. Kagame will not be happy if I am late."

Rwanda, Where Souls Turn to Dust

Kigali was hosting a heads of state summit for the regional organization COMESA, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa. Dignitaries from the organization's nineteen member countries had arrived in Kigali over the weekend.

"Either way, he will not be happy, not with what I am about to tell you."

He looked at me in silence, waiting to hear what I had to say that could not wait.

"I am a Canadian citizen, and I need the embassy's protection."

I could hear him sigh as he looked at me in disbelief.

"Let's go to my office."

I called my driver. *"I won't need your services or the bodyguard's anymore. You can return the car to the ministry."*

My journey in government had unceremoniously come to its end.



PART VI:
MY HEAD HELD HIGH

*I will never forget Ntebe,
The Palace of Deceit;
A Man on a Red Velvet Throne
In a soft voice: Destroy him.
Mantra of hatred and a smiling Judas
And a blindfolded crow,
That's all it took.
Silent claps on a dusty place,
Illusions of peace, broken
And tortured and killed
For a borrowed chair
And a field of nothingness—
Worthless pawn
In the land of death.*

Excerpt from "Did I Tell You of the Day I Died?"
The Poetic Journal of Um'Khonde

CHAPTER 34

It took less than two hours for the Rwandan authorities to locate me. Within minutes, the embassy was surrounded by armed men in a scene reminiscent of the 1990s war: men in bushes and trees, and roads blocked to prevent anyone from coming in or out of the diplomatic compound.

The commissioner-general of the national police, a former head of the military court by the name of Andrew Rwigamba, called the ambassador himself and asked the embassy to confirm my presence. Rwigamba advised the embassy that they suspected that I was trying to flee Rwanda with the help of the embassy and that the government was going to do all it could to keep me from leaving the territory.

I felt trapped and powerless. Whatever made me want to work with these animals? How could I have been so stupid as to trust people who just a few years before were killing their way to Kigali? It was clear, just from looking at the arsenal they had deployed around the embassy, that the power was on their side and not mine.

After hours of deliberating what I should do, I finally decided to surrender. So far they hadn't dared to enter the embassy yet, but the fact that they searched a diplomatic vehicle illustrated how little they cared about the 1961 Vienna Convention on diplomatic relations, especially its article 22 that stated that the premises of the diplomatic missions and their means of transport shall be inviolable.

Ambassador Laberge insisted that I didn't need to go right away. *"You can rest some more and leave in the evening."*

"Ambassador, look at them," I said, *"they have surrounded the embassy with so many men, and I am sure they will stay here for as long as it will take till they get their hands on me. If they intend to harm me, I want it to be in broad daylight and before witnesses."*

While I was gathering my thoughts and getting ready to come out of the embassy, they arrested my sister Umutoni and took her to the infamous prison of Gikondo to make sure I would make "the right choice." I was to later learn that both the bodyguard and driver who had brought me to the embassy had also been arrested and were held in that same facility.

"Ambassador, these people are ruthless! Now they've arrested my sister. What does she have to do with this?"

Ambassador Laberge called Andrew Rwigamba, the commissioner-general, who of course denied any such arrest. The ambassador advised him that I was going to surrender, and my sister was immediately released.

Deputy Commissioner General Mary Gahonzire, the highest-ranking female officer in the country and number two in the national police came in person to arrest me. What an honour, I cynically thought!

I had no idea where they were going to take me, and I was ready for the worst. I just requested that they take me to my parents first. *"I want them to hear what happened directly from me and not from some newscast."*

With the ambassador standing there, Mary Gahonzire had no other choice than to accept and grant me that unexpected request.

"I hope they treat you with respect and dignity" were the ambassador's parting words. I didn't find any comfort in those words. Neither did I find any comfort in the little publication from the Canadian government that the embassy had given me earlier: *Guide pour*

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les Canadiens Incarcérés à l'Etranger [A Guide for Canadians Incarcerated Abroad].

Now, years later, I smile when I remember Julie Fournier, the Canadian consul handing me that brochure. I could tell she was shaken by my situation, probably feeling helpless in a crisis no one at the embassy could understand. "*The embassy cannot unfortunately help you secure legal counsel,*" she said, almost apologizing for having to proceed with this formality. She handed me a list of lawyers registered with the Rwandan bar association and the little publication with the familiar Canadian flag. "*This brochure might help you deal with your situation.*" I remember thinking how it was so typically Canadian to have a brochure for everything! I never read it, but I keep it close to my heart as an unusual yet precious memorabilia of that horrible day.

Here I was, on May 30, 2005, the day I resigned from the government of Rwanda, being escorted through Kigali in a heavy convoy full of armed men to my parents' house.

When we got to my parents' house, I found it already surrounded by armed guards.

Mary Gahonzire waved to an armed guard and showed him my briefcase. He obviously knew what to do. He immediately opened it and started examining its contents. Did I mention that there is no such thing as a search warrant in Rwanda?

They were in for a big disappointment: the only items I had on me when they arrested me was my Kinyarwanda Bible and a rosary my mother gave me years back, when I left Rwanda to go and study in Senegal, my toothbrush and a few personal items. No compromising documents, no highly classified files, nothing!

I tried not to smile, though I was internally jubilant, imagining a fictive headline "*Minister Caught with a Bible and Rosary. Accused of Trusting God More than the President!*"

Mary angrily proceeded to interrogate me. Her first question

showed me how crazy these people were. *“Minister, were you trying to escape to Uganda?”*

Rwanda’s paranoiac ruling party was convinced that Uganda, our neighbour to the north, was involved whenever anything bad happened in Rwanda.

“Why would you think that I was going to Uganda? Does the road to Uganda go through the Canadian Embassy?” I asked sarcastically.

She asked me a few other questions, to which I gave one-word answers. When she realized that I wasn’t going to speak, she stood up and left.

My official cell phone was still on; it was closed a couple days later. The first person to call me was François Ngarambe, the secretary-general of the party. I hung up on him. How dare he think that I would want to talk to him? He tried a couple times before finally giving up.

My phone was ringing of the hook, probably reporters trying to get the scoop of the day. The only calls I answered were from Christophe Bazivamo, a colleague minister and party vice-chairman, and Bernard Makuza, the prime minister. Both calls were short and seemed to have been scripted using the same key words. *“When something happens to you, even if you don’t trust anyone else, you should always trust the president.”* I am sure they wanted to make sure that whoever was listening in on my calls had them on record claiming their allegiance to the mad president, even though anyone would have been out of their mind to think that could save them from his raging dogs.

Another familiar actor in the cast of my personal demise was to come and see me that afternoon: the infamous James Musoni.

“Patrick, no one understands what happened.”

“I didn’t know what else to do, James. No one seemed to trust me anymore. The lies were growing every day, and the president himself didn’t trust me anymore. I couldn’t function anymore with these

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never-ending investigations, with the police practically living in the ministry, trying to get my staff to tell them that I am as corrupt as the New Times said."

"Why didn't you say something? You could have gone to the president and told him that these investigations were interfering with your job."

I didn't even know where to start answering that one. *"How could I have gone to tell him that I was disturbed by investigations that he himself authorized?"*

James Musoni avoided commenting on my answer. He repeated his earlier statement, *"No one understands this! Especially not from you. You are a hard-working person; you aren't known for having a double language like so many other people."*

That was one of the party's familiar lines. The people with a double language he was referring to were the politicians who pretended in public to love the regime while collaborating behind closed doors with the so-called "enemies of the country," a broad group that included the French, the Ugandans, the oppositions based abroad, the human rights groups and virtually anyone who had ever criticized the RPF.

"Tell me then, if I am so well appreciated by everyone, why did people invest so much energy in destroying me? Why don't you go after those you know have a double language?"

All the frustration of the past months was coming to the surface, raw and sour. *"I never asked for this! When I came back to Rwanda, all I wanted to do was to teach at the university. And when I was appointed in the government, I worked hard. I never spared any effort to help people and to advance the RPF's platform. I don't understand how I became a public enemy!"*

I didn't really care what he thought of what I was saying. I think I was talking to myself more than I was talking to him, asking aloud the questions that had haunted me during these 18 months of living hell.

James tried to get me to tell him what I discussed with the ambassador, but I simply told him, *“I went to see him as a Canadian citizen to discuss a private matter.”*

I didn’t add anything else.

James could clearly see that I was no longer a dupe. He tried another tack: *“You have to know that whatever happens to you, you always have to trust the head of state.”*

Oh, did you receive the same memo as Prime Minister Bernard Makuza and Minister Christophe Bazivamo with regards to what to say “in-the-unlikely-event-a-minister-abruptly-resigns-and-seeks-refuge-in-a-foreign-embassy”?

He continued. *“Patrick, there are many things that happen in a country without the head of state’s knowledge.”*

He went on to cite an example from 1987, when he was a student in the University of Makerere in Uganda. *“The soldiers came on campus and shot the students, but we later learnt that President Museveni didn’t have anything to do with it.”*

I found it laughable how, in one of the worst crises in Kagame’s presidency, the only example his most trusted aid could cite to illustrate his point was an anecdote about the president of Uganda, the same Uganda where Mary Gahonzire suggested earlier I was attempting to find refuge.

The new Rwanda was such a world of contradictions!

Mary Gahonzire came back to find Musoni sitting with me on the terrace where she had left me a couple of hours earlier. She looked at him, waiting for instructions on how to proceed.

“The president has instructed that Patrick is not to be seen in public again until he decides otherwise.”

Mary nodded knowingly. It was obviously not the first time that the president had instructed that someone “is not to be seen in public again till he decides otherwise.” Mary waved at a young man

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who was waiting by her car. He was dressed in civilian clothes, but I could immediately tell his army background from the way he walked. *"This is Robert Nshuti. He will be in charge of your security."*

I watched Mary and James get into their cars. It was early evening, on May 30, the longest day of my life. So far, at least.

I was curious to see how these people, who were so much used to plotting and working in the dark, were going to deal with me. I had outplayed them by going to the Canadian Embassy. Whatever they were to do to me, they would have to do it in broad daylight, with everyone watching.

CHAPTER 35

My first days under house arrest were extremely difficult. I couldn't sleep. I had a recurring nightmare with confusing images of the party's henchmen and the militia *interahamwe* running after me through a desolate country. I would wake up, agitated, at two in the morning, sweating and trembling!

The house was surrounded by military guards, courtesy of my former mentors turned tormentors. They watched my every move. When I would take a walk in the garden, all of them would come and build a human barrier around me. Two guards were posted at the gate, checking the papers of anyone who attempted to come and see me. Needless to say, not many people took the chance to voluntarily expose themselves to such scrutiny.

I don't know what briefing the guards had received, if any, as to the reasons for my house confinement. All I could tell was that they were extremely tense and nervous, a combination you would never want to find in the armed people charged with ensuring that you don't create any further public embarrassment for the president.

There were 10 guards during the day, replaced by 20 for the night. They would be brought in by a truck around six in the morning. The same truck brought them food at midday and returned around six in the afternoon with their 20 replacements for the night. The night guards seemed even more nervous than their daytime counterparts. Most of them spent the night by the windows, obviously not trusting the anti-theft bars that made any escape from those exits a nearly impossible task. I could see others in the

trees in my backyard and in the bushes in the front lawn. Their superior stayed for a week while the guards were rotated every two to three days.

I had no idea how long my incarceration was going to last. I knew I was going to be there for a while when, after three or four days, I saw them erecting a military tent on the front lawn.

Robert Nshuti came from time to time to check on his men. Another officer whose name I can't recall, a dark-skinned man with yellow smoker's teeth, came early in the mornings and asked to see me. His task was obviously to check if I hadn't escaped during the night. He dressed in Mandela-style African print shirts and always held a pack of cigarettes in his hands, which explained the yellow teeth. He didn't speak much, and I didn't invite him to. I would come to the living room where he waited for me, say hello and silently wait for him to leave.

What they didn't know is that I wouldn't run. I didn't want to run. I wasn't scared anymore, at least not by all those soldiers in charge of "my security." The sight of men with guns was nothing new for me: ever since I was a kid, Rwanda had been under military rule.

Nor was being surrounded by armed guards 24 hours a day a novelty. Two bodyguards were immediately attached to me the day I was sworn in as a minister of state in November 2002. It was awkward at first, having two complete strangers following you everywhere you go. When I visited family and friends, they would go in first and search the house (I am not sure what they were looking for) before letting me in. It was absolutely embarrassing, and at some point I asked them to stop doing it. "*I only visit my family and close friends. I don't think any of them is out to get me,*" I told them.

After a few months in government, I got used to them and stopped seeing them as men with guns but simply as men. They were all so young. Most of them were in their early twenties. Behind their severe outlooks were young people with dreams and aspirations like anyone else. I made sure they were always treated properly,

unlike some of my colleagues who treated them as servants. When I went to a restaurant, I would ask to make sure they were seated inside and not in the hallway or by the door. When I spent the night on the road, I would make sure they got a room in the same hotel, so they could take turns, one guarding me while the other rested in his room.

I didn't look at these guards around my house any differently, despite the fact that they were my wardens and not my bodyguards. If I was to fear anyone, it would have been their superiors, but even they didn't impress me much.

When I resigned and walked into the embassy on May 30, I made a choice and I was ready to bear all the consequences. I didn't think I was any longer in physical danger. Now that the Canadian Embassy was involved, the Rwandan authorities couldn't just make me disappear without a trace, even if they were dying to do so. They had made people disappear for days without anyone knowing where they were held. A few weeks prior to my resignation, Patrick Karegeya, one of the country's officers, had disappeared, and it was weeks before anyone knew why or where he was held. I remember thinking that if they could make Patrick Karegeya, a close aid and friend of President Kagame since their days in Uganda's army, vanish like that, then I, the ultimate outsider, stood no chance.

What affected me more than being in their vigilant custody was that I was imprisoned in my own country, one worthless victim in a country that was mourning the one million lives we lost during the 1994 Genocide. What scared me was that I had carried the illusion that Rwanda's troubled past had ended with the pre-war regime, and in the end, one clique was going to do to me what the *interahamwe* had done to so many before: destroy me!

These were solitary days. As in 1994, the world seemed to have gone on as though I had never existed. The only people I saw were my family and a few loyal friends. Everyone else had vanished, my former colleagues, all the people who just weeks before proclaimed to be close to me, even some of my relatives. They didn't disappear one by one. No, they vanished together, all at once! The words of

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Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. kept playing repeatedly in my mind: *“In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”*

Months later, when it was all over, some of those acquaintances tried to get back in contact with me, but I had closed that door and would never reopen it.

It was a time of deep reflection, a time to confront myself and understand my role in what happened. For someone who believed so much in freedom, I was angry to have worked even one day for and with people who put such little value on that ideal. I was angry to have kept working with Kagame even after I realized his system was so corrupt. I was angry to have stayed amid allegations, angry to have stayed through the insults and humiliations, angry to have stayed when my mixed ethnicity was questioned all the time, angry to have stayed while my reputation and integrity were shredded to pieces.

On June 3, just four days into my seclusion, I sent a letter to Kagame via James Musoni asking to meet him to talk about what happened. I explained that taking refuge in the Canadian Embassy was an act of despair.

“The attacks I have been victim of since late last year, and the means that were used to destroy me, left me with no doubt that the people behind them would not hesitate to harm me.”

“I never thought it would go this far. Ever since it started, I kept comforting myself with the belief that the truth would triumph and that this whole issue would go away. But the situation just kept worsening.”

“Anonymous letters were written, stories about me buying a luxurious house with the bribe I was alleged to have received were concocted, I was rumoured to have travelled to Rome when I did not. The New Times added to this ordeal by portraying me as a questionable person who did not respect any established procedures.”

“When I learnt of my imminent arrest, incarceration and subsequent

public humiliation, I lost all hope that the truth would ever come out. My discouragement was aggravated by the fact that I was being kept in the dark about this coming prosecution. I was about to be brought before a court, but no one felt it relevant to inform me and to advise me of it.”

“These past months have been nothing but a nightmare for me. I devoted my whole life to setting a good example for others in terms of integrity, patriotism and selflessness. Ever since I joined public service, I worked hard to prevent such misdeeds and denounce the culprits.”

“I felt abandoned by everyone. I thought of approaching you many times, and I should have. But I remembered how upset you were about me and thought you probably saw me through this portrait of a thief that had been painted about me. I did not know where to start.”

He never answered and I never tried to meet him again. The last time I saw Kagame in person was at the gala for King Mswati of Swaziland. Our roads had officially parted, and I have never regretted it.

For such a long time I couldn't forgive myself for allowing this to go so far. Why hadn't I left before? Why had I to defiantly stand up to these criminals? Why didn't I just give them back that damned office?

But I know I would not have left; I am not that type of person. I asked myself the question: why did I stay? The answer came to me so naturally: I stayed because I owed to the Rwandan people, my people, to keep on trying, at least till I reached my limits. From the first moment I started working in public service in Rwanda, I realized how badly Rwandans were waiting for someone who would genuinely care for their needs. I was overwhelmed by the number of people who couldn't feed their families with the fruits of their little piece of land, and I felt compelled to do all I could to build a ministry that would be there for them. I spent countless

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hours touring the country, talking with small farmers, engaging them in the policy changes I was spearheading in Kigali.

I stayed because I believed and still believe in a united Rwanda, at peace with its troubled past, a Rwanda where the strong protect and care for the weak. It's because of what Rwanda could be that I defied the most powerful men in Kigali.

Knowing now where this road led, would I still have walked it? The answer came to me so simple, so clear. Yes, I would. Even if I didn't know how this was going to end, at least I would have held on to my principles and stood on the right side of history to the end.

CHAPTER 36

I developed a routine so as not to lose my mind. I woke up early in the morning, had some breakfast and then went and sat outside in the garden. I wouldn't venture too far. I would sit on a small stone wall near the house, by the stairs that led to the lower part of the garden. I would spend hours looking silently at the horizon.

It was so peaceful. After the months I spent fighting off these demons, my world had come to a strange standstill before the next storm.

I could see the airport from my house. Looking at the planes landing and taking off, I doubted I would ever leave Rwanda again.

After a while, the guards relaxed. Some would even shyly say hello to me. Those who came to talk to me always addressed me as minister, though I was no longer in government. When I looked at all these young men in uniform, charged with guarding a man without knowing what crime he had committed, I thought about the history of my country, so full of young people whom one regime after another had used to fight against their own countrymen and women.

I was the one in custody, yet I couldn't but feel sorry for them. Their prison was worse than mine: they were trapped in the timeless prison of African dictatorship. They were likely to fall when the current regime fell, and they would be tried for all these crimes while the people who ordered them lived happily ever after in secluded palaces somewhere far from here.

I spent my afternoons writing in my journal, gathering my thoughts. Writing had always been a powerful calming tool. I would write whatever crossed my mind, in no particular order and with no concerns about style and grammar. My journal is an interesting mélange of French, English and Kinyarwanda, the truest picture of my mindset in those long days of solitude.

Music played a great role in keeping me sane, and even hopeful at times. In the evenings, I would put on my headset and listen to inspirational songs to try and find in them the light I didn't have in my own reality. Bebe Winans' "How Do We?" and "Stand" and Corneille's "Notre jour viendra" and "Les marchands de rêves" were the four songs that I listened to the most.

At the beginning of my second week in captivity, Kagame appointed Anasthase Murekezi to head the controversial ministry that I had so unceremoniously vacated ten days earlier. James Musoni made his debut in government by replacing Anasthase Murekezi at the Ministry of Commerce as the deputy minister in charge of investments, tourism and cooperatives.

The local papers had gone wild since I abruptly left government, speculating as to my whereabouts. Many made up stories alleging that I was jailed in the infamous maximum security 1930 prison or that I fled the country, all of them quoting reliable and of course anonymous sources. They probably hoped that at some point someone would come out and refute their stories and give them the scoop on this strange affair.

I learned that reporters from ORINFOR, the government news agency, and the *New Times* had approached the Canadian Embassy to find out what I was doing there. All they could get from the embassy's staff was the two-line response I had asked be given to anyone who came there to ask about me: "*Dr. Patrick Habamenshi is a Canadian citizen. It's in that capacity that he came to the embassy to discuss a private matter that we are not at liberty to share with the public.*"

I was under a strict gag order not to speak to the press. The truth

is that, gag order or not, I had no inclination in those days to talk with reporters, not after the way the party's barons used the *New Times* to ruin my life.

No, if anyone is to ever tell my story, it will be at my own time and on my own terms.

On June 15, 2005, I was escorted to the Ministry of Agriculture for the handover to my successor. In a gesture of good will, Robert Nshuti allowed me to drive myself instead of being taken there in a police car. Nshuti was a very decent person, and for the duration of my time under house arrest, he made sure that I was always treated with dignity and respect.

It was awkward to be back in that building. I went into my former office and reviewed the handover document which the directors had prepared; then we walked together to the conference room where all the ministry's cadres were waiting for us.

We kept the ceremony as short as possible. At the end, I shook the new minister's hand and just wished him good luck. I knew he would need it.

As I was driving through the city I grew up in and used to love so much, I decided that it was time to reclaim my life: I was going to go to trial. I had received several calls from "well-intentioned" people who all coincidentally advised me to go and beg Kagame for mercy. I didn't want to do anything like that. My parents had faced their challenges in their own lives and they had never begged anyone for anything. I wasn't about to tarnish our good name.

The next morning, June 16, my sister Umutoni volunteered to go and get my file at the tribunal. The sooner the better, I thought, for I didn't want them to tamper with it before I saw what I was accused of. I later learned that the Canadian Embassy had made a similar request to the police but never received anything.

The tribunal at first refused to give her the file, saying that the president of the tribunal kept the file in his office and didn't allow anyone near it.

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I took the phone and dialled his direct number: *“This is Dr. Habamenshi. I requested my file, and it is my constitutional right to see what I am accused of. Is there a reason why you didn’t authorize your staff to give it to me?”*

I could hear him breathing heavily on the other end of the line. I could imagine his surprise: no one knew where I was. Many thought I was in prison, as had been speculated by the local papers, and there I was, talking to him from home!

He finally answered in a very unconvincing tone: *“It was a misunderstanding. They can come and get your file at any time.”*

My sister returned to the tribunal and triumphantly came back with my file.

It was a very thick file. It was several days before I could find the courage to open it. Instead, I put it somewhere in my desk. When I finally opened the file and started going through it, page by page, I had to convince myself that I was reading the file of someone else, just so I wouldn’t throw up every time I opened the file that substantiated the hatefulness I’d endured for the past two years. That mental detachment didn’t work all the time, but it helped me a lot.

At the same time, having that file in my hands, being able to touch it, to see it, gave me a sense of closure, something I’d been yearning for since my life was turned upside down by the most powerful men in town. My last 18 months were full of innuendos, of hearsay, of vile lies, and whenever I would defend myself from one accusation, another would surface to drag me deeper into this living hell: one day I was accused of dividing Hutus and Tutsis, then I was accused of furthering my own interests, favouring my friends and buying a mansion on a bribe from the friends I allegedly favoured.

These files, of course, were filled with innuendos and aspersions masked in the guise of factual accusations, but now they would have to prove their case in a court of law. It was easy for them to smear me behind the closed doors of the party and convince the paranoiac president of all their lies. I had been defenceless in the

arena of politics, but I intended not to be defenceless in the arena of justice.

In a court of law, they could not bring any of the wild accusations they had brought against me on the countless days and nights when I had been summoned to the president's office or the party's secretariat, at least not on paper.

The file before me stated that I, Dr. Patrick Habamenshi, born in Nyamyumba, Gisenyi, was charged with the embezzlement of 65,000 U.S. dollars. No Hutu-Tutsi divisionism, no bribery, no lavish mansions on the hills of Kigali. Mrs. Edith Gasana was listed as my accomplice.

I could tell that the file had been put together in haste, most likely after my stay at the Canadian Embassy. After I was taken into custody by the Rwandan authorities, the embassy had requested to see the charges against me. Their request was never granted, and the diplomats even started to doubt whether the file ever existed.

The prosecution hadn't attached the customary memorandum or statement summarizing why a lawsuit was filed against me. Under normal circumstances, the tribunal would examine the prosecutor's argumentation before allowing a case to proceed to trial. That wasn't done in my case.

Attached to the one paragraph stating my name, Edith's name and this singular charge, was merely a bric-a-brac of interviews the prosecution conducted starting in November 2004 and various unrelated documents and correspondence from the Ministry of Agriculture.

Without that memorandum to guide me, I started reading every single page of that almost 200-page file.

I was very methodical, highlighting different parts and writing down details I had to research in my own personal files.

In the middle of hundreds of irrelevant documents was a letter where I authorized the disbursement of \$65,000 to pay consultants

and field agents who were collecting information for the agricultural sector's strategic plan.

One of my biggest undertakings during my tenure at the head of the Ministry of Agriculture was the elaboration of a comprehensive strategic plan for the transformation of Rwanda's agriculture. It was an ambitious but necessary project. Agriculture was the most vital sector of Rwanda's economy. It occupied more than 90 per cent of the population and contributed to 40 per cent of the GDP. It was also the least-developed sector and the one that accounted for most if not all of the 70 per cent of Rwandans who were living on less than one dollar a day.

When I became minister for agriculture in October 2003, I started rallying the various stakeholders around the idea of working together to create the common strategic framework that we all needed. I toured the country, met with farmers, cooperatives, farmers' organizations, local authorities, manufacturers and other government institutions involved in rural development. Within my first six months in office, I proudly produced the first agricultural policy document the country ever had.

I immediately proceeded to develop a strategic plan and a three-year action plan to operationalize that policy. In order to involve farmers from the most remote locations in the country, I decided to hire consultants and field agents that we would deploy across the country to gather all the data we needed.

Three donors generously agreed to fund the whole exercise on a grant: the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Kigali and DFID, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development.

IFAD hired the local firm GECAD, co-founded by Mrs. Edith Gasana, a former head of Rwanda Development Bank, and Professor Firmin Ndimira, a former prime minister of his native Burundi. Gasana, a trained economist, and Ndimira, an agronomist and agricultural economist, were mandated to recruit and coordinate the consultants and field agents to be deployed in the country.

The donors made arrangements to fund different aspects of the budgets based on their institution's individual interests and areas of predilection. IFAD's funding was the first to arrive, and by the summer of 2004, we were able to start an exciting exercise that was going to provide the basis for the sector's long-term growth.

In September 2004, I was informed that funding from the Netherlands embassy was slightly delayed. I immediately authorized the disbursement of \$65,000 from one of the ministry's accounts to pay for the field operations, lest there be delays while we waited for the Netherlands funding.

The Netherlands funding came in a few weeks later, and the \$65,000 advance was immediately deducted and reimbursed to our account.

How did that constitute embezzlement? It sounded so grotesque, yet it was written here in black and white that I had embezzled \$65,000 with the complicity of Mrs. Edith Gasana!

It was clear that the prosecution based their charges on one interview, the interview of my former secretary-general, Fulgence Nsengiyumva. When asked about the letter and the \$65,000, Fulgence had told the prosecutors that he had absolutely no knowledge of what those funds were used for and that I was the only one who would know.

I had to read his statement several times to make sure I was reading it right. How could he say that? He was the head of the ministry's administration, the person supervising all the operations on the ground. He had even prepared and signed the \$65,000 cheque to pay for those field operations!

Why would he lie to the prosecution about this?

To my surprise, the file did not include the interview of one of the ministry's directors, Alfred Mutebwa. Mutebwa was the second signer on the account from which the \$65,000 were withdrawn. I knew Mutebwa had been interviewed by both the police and the prosecution and that he had provided them proof that the \$65,000

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were returned to their account once the Netherlands funding became available!

Didn't they think I would not notice the absence of the one interview that exonerated me from these odious charges?

I was more eager than ever to go to trial and confront all these liars!

CHAPTER 37

The guards were removed at the end of June 2005, leaving no sign they were ever there other than a rectangular patch of sun-deprived yellow grass where their tent had been planted during my captivity. The commissioner-general of the police, Andrew Rwigamba, asked me in a meeting in his office just hours before the guards were removed, *“If we remove the guards, you won’t try and escape, will you?”*

Yeah, like I would tell you if I had such plans!

“No, I will not escape. I am waiting for my trial to clear my name.”

Rwigamba continued. *“We will need you to surrender both your passports. We know you also have a Canadian passport.”*

I had anticipated that the moment would come when they asked me for my precious Canadian travel document.

“Commissioner, I don’t have my Canadian passport. When you called the embassy telling them that I was facing criminal prosecution, they decided to keep my passport till everything was cleared up,” I told him.

I was taking some liberties with the truth. What really happened at the embassy is that I was the one who asked them to keep it for me. When I realized I had no other choice than to surrender to the authorities, I asked the embassy what would happen if they seized my passport. *“There have been cases in the past where they*

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confiscated a Canadian passport and never returned it," the consul informed me.

I was worried. I knew this mob waiting for me at the embassy's gate was capable of destroying it like they destroyed everything my life had ever been about. *"Can I leave it here then?"* I asked. They agreed. *"We can keep it in our safe till you request it from us. We won't give it to anyone else."*

Rwigamba sent someone to the embassy to ask for my passport, but the embassy refused to give in.

"The passport is the property of the Canadian government, and it must remain in the sole custody of our government."

In the end, I am happy that the embassy didn't surrender my passport. I doubt it would have ever been returned to me, as my Rwandan passport was never returned to me.

A new officer was assigned to my security to replace Robert Nshuti, one cheerful Joseph. He would call me everyday at different times to find out where I was or what I was doing. I quickly realised that he mostly called me whenever a plane left Rwanda, probably worried that I had found a way to escape their vigilance.

In July, I was advised by one of the president's top aides that Kagame had realized that the allegations against me were bogus and had instructed that all charges against me be dropped.

To everyone's surprise, I refused! I was more than ever resolved to have my case brought to trial without any further delay. I didn't want to live the rest of my life knowing that I owed my freedom to the very man who had unleashed his dogs on me.

No! They had destroyed my life, bashed me, and dragged my family in the mud. I was going to clear my name publicly! I was ready to confront their system, confront their lies, even if it meant that I might lose the very freedom I cherished so much.

I called the tribunal and requested a trial date, and this time the president of the tribunal did not dare to intervene. The prosecution

was surprised. A friend told me that one of the prosecutors said that other people who were accused of corruption did everything they could to prevent their cases from ever going to trial. Well, it was about time they realized I wasn't like "the other people." I was innocent, and I intended to fight my case in a public hearing and not in the deceptive backrooms of the Kagame regime.

Choosing a lawyer was not easy. I wanted to make sure I had someone who wouldn't be intimidated by the people who wanted to see me behind bars. Integrity was a very rare commodity in Rwanda, and even more rare in the legal sphere.

My other criterion in choosing legal counsel was to find someone who would not divulge any of the information I was to share with him. Attorney-client privilege seems to be a foreign notion for most lawyers in Rwanda, and I didn't want to end up having details of my case freely shared in the bars of Kigali.

I decided to retain the services of Me Protais Mutembe, a lawyer trained in Belgium and a long-time friend of the family. He had attended Kabgayi seminary in southern Rwanda with my father in the forties, and they had remained very good friends, even when they were living in different countries.

Though I considered him an uncle, he always insisted on addressing me in a very formal way as "Monsieur le Ministre." One day, I asked him to just call me Patrick, but he vehemently refused: "*Once a minister, always a minister,*" he said. "*Once you have that title, no one can ever take it away from you. Always remember that.*"

You couldn't tell the man was in his late sixties or early seventies. He was very alert, both physically and mentally. He knew the law inside and out and always made things very simple.

He was in high demand and was always running from one courthouse to another all across the country. He was one of the few attorneys in Rwanda who did not shy away from political and sensitive cases.

He went straight to the point with almost surgical precision:

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“We will focus on three simple things. A crime requires that you have opportunity to commit the crime, a motive, and that you benefit from the crime. The prosecution has to prove all three. I don't see how they can do it: you didn't have any reason to steal that money, you didn't have access to it, and you didn't benefit from it in any fashion.”

He gave me a few law books and photocopied pages where he'd highlighted the articles he wanted me to read. He wanted to give me a copy of the constitution, but I told him I already had one.

I spent hours reading the books he gave me. I had always had a keen interest in the law, and legal dramas were one of my favourite genre, both in books and on screen, but I never expected to find myself in a real plot, with me as the main character.

CHAPTER 38

As I was getting ready for the first day of the trial, my nephew Loick came to my room and silently sat by my side. He had grown so much since that day I saw him for the first time almost 7 years earlier. It's in moments like this that I missed my late cousin Flora, his mom, the most. I wished she could have been there with my family as I was going through these difficult times.

I could tell that he had something on his mind. I stopped reading my files and forced myself to smile:

"What's going on?"

"Uncle Patrick, will Kagame be at your trial?"

I looked at him startled. What would make a little 9-year-old boy ask that?

"Why do you ask me that?"

"The kids at school, they say it's Kagame who is accusing you. Will he come to the tribunal too?"

I couldn't find an appropriate way to answer to his question: *"No, he won't be there; Presidents don't go to tribunals".* I almost added *"unless they are the ones facing justice"*, but decided it was wiser to keep such thoughts to myself. *"I am sure he will be very well represented there."*

The courtroom was in an unfenced crumbling building in Nyamirambo, one of Kigali's oldest neighbourhoods. Like many

other administrative buildings, the courthouse was painted orange on the outside, or used to be, I should say, as practically all the paint had peeled off the walls. The courtroom was painted in a surprising turquoise. Almost all the windows were broken, and you could tell the mismatched furniture and squeaking doors had seen better days.

I made it a point to dress sharply for the occasion, wearing a suit and tie throughout the proceedings. I did not want a picture of a dishevelled me making the front pages of the morning news. I tried to look as though I was unaffected by my situation, my head high, my stride strong and confident.

The reality is that I died every time I entered that compound, stepping onto the dusty gravel, walking up the uneven stairs, entering the courthouse and taking a seat just a few steps from the prosecution. My family and I seemed lost in this justice house, full of strangers hungry to witness the literal hanging of Patrick Habamenshi.

It was a high profile trial, the trial of a man who was once the poster boy of a new Rwanda where ethnic origins didn't matter and was now disowned by the very man who put him in Kigali's spotlight. Ironically, my trial was held at the same time as the controversial trial of Pasteur Bizimungu, a former member of RPF and first post-Genocide President of Rwanda.

The Rwandan judicial system was probably one of the sectors the hardest hit by the war. Many people had been killed or fled, infrastructures were lost. The post-genocide government had worked hard with the support of the international community to rebuild the system, but they were still very weak. One of the biggest weaknesses of the system was that many positions had been filled with people who had limited experience or even knowledge of the law.

Another notorious problem was corruption. Many people "paid" their way out of their legal troubles; or, alternatively, people would

corrupt judges in order to render a negative verdict against someone they had a grievance with.

Corruption had motivated one of the major changes in the way trials were conducted. Trials used to be presided over by three judges, but that made cases of corruption difficult to track down, so the authorities decided to have only one judge. I don't know if it was necessarily a good thing: Rwandan trials didn't have a jury, so your fate was basically in the hands of one person.

My lawsuit was filed with the tribunal of the city of Kigali, a provincial court with jurisdiction limited to the capital. In the country's judicial system, the Supreme Court is at the top, followed by the High Court of the Republic, the provincial courts and the district courts.

The judge was a young lady fresh out of school named Judith Mbabazi. Ironically, *mbabazi* means "pardon" in Kinyarwanda. The judge, the prosecutor and my lawyer were dressed in black robes with a white collar, the Anglo-Saxon style.

According to Rwandan law, corruption is considered a penal case, which meant that I had to represent myself; my lawyer was there only to clarify articles of the law.

The court had granted me my request to be tried separately from Mrs. Edith Gasana as she was abroad at the time the trial was due to start. Edith too had been harassed for several months and ultimately placed in house arrest. She immediately left the country when she was released after several weeks of confinement. I was happy that at least one of us had made it out of this living hell our country had turned into.

From the very first day of these infamous proceedings, it was clear they had never anticipated having to present their fallacious accusations publicly.

The prosecution was represented by a young man with small tinted glasses and an anxious look on his face. Everything about him seemed borrowed for the day, from his dark suit, which was two

or three sizes too big and worn under an even bigger black robe, to his shiny black shoes.

I've often wondered if he was really a prosecutor or just an unsuspecting passerby who was brought in to stand there that day. You will understand what I mean when I tell you what happened next.

The young man looked so weary you'd have thought he was the one on trial. He kept looking at the double entrance doors in the back as though he was waiting for someone else, but no one else had shown up by the time Judge Mbabazi came in to start the proceedings.

"I can see that everyone is here. Let's start," Judge Mbabazi said.

The young prosecutor immediately raised his hand, the way young kids do in schools.

"The prosecution would like to ask for a continuance. I just received this file, and I didn't have time to review it."

"What?" I immediately objected. *"Honourable Judge, this is preposterous! How could the prosecution say that they are not ready when they are the ones bringing suit against me? What were they doing for all these months? I ask that we proceed and hold the trial."*

Judge Mbabazi concurred. *"Dr. Habamenshi is right. You were all notified of this trial several weeks ago. That gave you ample time to prepare for it. Don't waste the court's time anymore,"* she added at the end, obviously upset by the prosecutor's attitude.

What followed happened very quickly and took us all by surprise. The prosecutor scooped up all of his documents and dashed to the door. He ran so quickly that no one had time to stop him or even understand what he was doing. The last we saw of him, he was just a comical character in an oversized suit, whose black robe floated in the air behind him like the cape of a reverse superhero!

The whole room burst into unstoppable laughter at this unexpected

turn of events! Even I was laughing, feeling suddenly empowered by this shameful desertion of the prosecution.

Minutes later, another man in a black robe stormed into the courtroom through the double doors in the back. It was Sudi Hirwa, one of the two men who had conducted my infamous interviews in Martin Ngoga's offices. He was carrying the heavy yellow folder that his colleague had run out with, and he hurriedly walked to the desk occupied shortly before by his unforgettable runaway colleague.

"Are we ready to proceed?" Judge Mbabazi asked him once he settled in. She was grinning.

"Yes, Honourable Judge." He looked so pitiful! You could read defeat all over his face.

"Please proceed with your opening remarks, then."

Sudi Hirwa's opening remarks set the tone for the drama that was about to unfold. The prosecutor of the city of Kigali was sitting in the back watching the proceedings together with the president of the tribunal. An odd pair, I thought, when my lawyer pointed them out to me.

"Dr. Habamenshi abused his office by awarding a tender to his friend, Mrs. Edith Gasana, and then giving her a personal loan of 65,000 dollars. The prosecutor asks that Dr. Habamenshi be sentenced to 20 years in jail!"

The maximum sentence! His boss stood up and left, probably reassured that his sloppy staffer's little jog to the courthouse hadn't made him forget his mission.

Rwanda is a place of contradictions. The government I faithfully and loyally served for four years regularly released Genocide perpetrators on their own recognizance but was ready to send me to jail for two decades for a crime that never happened!

The court protocol required that we address only the judge and ask our questions through her. I made sure to respect that protocol, but

it was difficult not to walk over to this malicious man and confront him face to face.

I tried to stay calm and composed as I made my rebuttal. *“Honourable Judge, I did in fact authorize the release of the 65,000 dollars. The money was needed to pay consultants and field officers who were working on the elaboration of the country’s Agricultural Strategic Plan. Can the prosecution explain to the court how that constitutes embezzlement? His opening statements were a bit confusing, and I could find no logic in what he was saying.”*

I can be a redoubtable opponent when it comes to oppositional debates. I’ve loved engaging in them ever since high school. It was a skill that I honed in the harsh world of Rwandan post-genocide politics. One of the most important things I learned over the years is that a debate is as much a mind game as it is an argumentation game. Find your opponent’s weak spot and use it to destabilize him.

I was intent on making him look like a fool by exposing his contradictions. That was going to be the easiest part of the trial: I was a seasoned speaker with years of experience standing in front of large groups to give lectures and make speeches, sometimes to angry crowds. He was a poor orator and was clearly not at ease defending a case he knew was empty and weak. It had been easy for him to be aggressive and vindictive when we were sitting in the office of the powerful deputy prosecutor-general. In this courthouse, however, he was on his own, and if he failed, he knew his career and any future prospects in this regime were over.

I was sure it was the first time he had tried a minister, and whether he liked it or not, that reality did not empower him; on the contrary, it crippled his ability to see me as someone on his level. His contempt towards me was his way of trying to bring me down so he could look down on me. I was haughty during the interviews, I was haughtier during the trial. Fighting fire with fire.

Another tool I used throughout the trial was to refer the court to various paragraphs in documents included in the heavy file he had

assembled. Since there were no page numbers or reference numbers assigned to individual documents, I knew it would be practically impossible for him to locate them in his sloppy file, especially not under the pressure of the courtroom.

I made photocopies of each document I referred to and handed them in a folder to the judge so she would have them handy as I mentioned them.

“Honourable Judge, I still don’t understand why the prosecutor insists on calling this embezzlement. I had no motive for doing it. The funds were used to pay consultants and field agents working to provide the country with a strategic plan. May I add that the strategic plan was long ago approved by the government and is now the sole official framework for the agricultural sector?”

I paused a moment to let that information sink in. The Strategic Plan for the Transformation of Rwanda’s Agriculture, as it is called, was approved by the government in January 2005!

I continued to argue that this could not in any way constitute embezzlement. *“I had no opportunity to commit the crime I am accused of, since I, as minister, do not sign on any of the ministry’s accounts, not even my own expense account. And, third, I did not benefit from this in any way, as I never touched a cent of the 65,000 dollars. It all went to pay the consultants and fields agents.”*

Sudi Hirwa replied, *“Fulgence Nsengiyumva told us that he did not know what the money was used for. You just instructed him to give the money to Mrs. Gasana, and he obeyed.”*

“Honourable Judge, this is ridiculous,” I said. *“Nsengiyumva was the secretary-general of the ministry. He was the one supervising the elaboration of the strategic plan and all the related operations. What type of secretary-general was he if just gave out 65,000 dollars without, as he claims, being aware of the intended use?”*

The prosecutor was insistent. *“Nsengiyumva testified that the minister forced him to pay the money to Mrs. Edith Gasana.”*

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I interjected, *“How did I force him? Did I hold a gun to his head? Did I beat him up? How did I get him to write that cheque? And the cheque was not issued to Mrs. Edith Gasana, it was a cheque to the firm GECAD!”*

“Dr. Habamenshi used the powers of his office to force him to give the money to Mrs. Gasana, whom he had arranged to be hired for the job,” Sudi said.

Given how the party treated me lately, I thought to myself, I doubt that my office ever held any power of any sort!

“The powers of my office? And did I use those powers to force the ministry’s accountant to write the cheque? Did I use those powers to force Alfred Mutebwa to co-sign the cheque?”

This was outrageous!

“Honourable Judge,” I said, *“I request that that Nsengiyumva, Alfred Mutebwa and the accountant who wrote that cheque be called to testify so they can tell the court what really happened. I’d also like the court to invite representatives of the donors who funded this initiative so they can help the court understand the funding mechanisms for this project. They will testify that there was no wrongdoing in this project and that all procedures were respected.”*

I took a letter from my trial folder. It was a letter from IFAD’s headquarters in Rome. I’d just received it a few weeks before the trial, and I held on to it like the most precious treasure.

“Honourable Judge, I would like to present to the court a letter I received from the International Fund for Agricultural Development. It’s a statement they issued saying that it was the Fund that directly recruited the consulting firm GECAD and that all procedures had been adhered to.”

I read the statement to the court. I was grateful to IFAD for their letter; the fact that it was signed by IFAD’s vice president gave it even more weight.

“I am sure IFAD would be more than happy to come and provide

you with further information. IFAD has audited this project and found no wrongdoing,” I said.

I asked permission to approach the bench and gave a copy to the judge. I was very pleased to *gracefully* hand a copy to the prosecutor. Sudi Hirwa was fuming. He wasn't expecting this surprise statement. I had kept that information to myself, waiting for the moment when I would present it at my trial. Never show all your cards in advance!

The prosecutor objected to it. *“The prosecution cannot accept that letter because Dr. Habamenshi was the one to request it. Dr. Habamenshi probably told them what to write in it!”*

I calmly retorted, *“No, Honourable Judge, this letter was not requested by me, and I am not even mentioned in it. This statement was issued at the request of the government of Rwanda via my deputy minister, Dr Daphrose Gahakwa in February 2005. If the court wishes, Dr. Gahakwa can be contacted to confirm that information. I simply requested a copy of the letter from IFAD. Contrary to what the prosecution thinks, my so-called powers do not reach the office of the vice president of IFAD!”*

The judge looked at the letter but didn't make any comments. Neither did she ask why IFAD had provided the statement to Dr. Gahakwa, my deputy, in February, and not to me, the minister of agriculture. The reality is that Kagame had sent Dr. Gahakwa to IFAD's headquarters in Rome without my knowledge to inquire about my involvement in the recruitment of GECAD. IFAD provided her with the same statement I presented to court that day, but she never showed it to me. I received the information about her visit from Rome and a copy of the statement as a courtesy gesture as I was one of IFAD's governors at the time.

Judge Mbabazi seemed puzzled by this trial. She kept asking the prosecution if they had any proof that I had embezzled that money. *“Did the money trail lead back to Dr. Habamenshi? Did the 65,000 dollars end up in his personal account?”*

“Honourable Judge, that is not the point. Dr. Habamenshi abused

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his office by authorizing payment of the funds to Mrs. Gasana, whom he had arranged to get that contract to do the job.”

I was sick every time the prosecutor opened his mouth and repeated that silly allegation almost word for word.

I wanted a speedy trial, I got an expedited one. We had only two sessions, and then the judge set the verdict date for one month later, on the afternoon of September 12, 2005.

I went back home feeling good, certain I had won the case.

I don't know how the thirty days went by, but before I knew it, we were back at the courthouse. As I had expected, the room was completely packed. I entered and walked to the front row with my lawyer. My family sat in the row behind me.

Everything went in slow motion. Judge Mbabazi came in about one hour late. She didn't look at me as she entered. She sat at her desk and began scribbling something on her large notepad with a blue ballpoint pen. I realized she was writing the verdict when she started reading it from those notes. September wasn't normally hot, but the judge was sweating, and she avoided looking at me again as she read the verdict.

Judge Mbabazi started by summarizing the trial proceedings. It took about thirty or forty minutes. I stopped breathing when she reached the words “*Urukiko rwemeje*” (“The Court finds”).

“The Court finds Dr. Patrick Habamenshi guilty of the crime he is accused of: loaning funds to GECAD, a consulting firm owned by Mrs. Edith Gasana. The Court sentences him to five years in prison.”

I didn't flinch throughout, paralyzed by the shock. How could I be sent to jail for five years for a crime that never took place and on the basis of witnesses who were never invited to take the stand?

I went back home. Ironically, Rwanda was celebrating the anniversary of Kagame's 2003 inauguration. Happy Anniversary, Mr. President!

For many days, I stayed silent, still not understanding what took place. Judge Mbabazi's questions throughout the trial clearly demonstrated her scepticism of the prosecution's case. "*Did the money trail lead back to Dr. Habamenshi,*" she asked Sudi. "*Did the 65,000 dollars end up in his personal account?*"

What happened between that last court day and the verdict to make her declare me guilty of this absurd crime?

I finally went to my desk and placed my signature on the letter of appeal my lawyer had prepared for me. I took it to the High Court of the Republic in the neighbourhood of Nyamirambo, entering for the first time the building where my fate would be at stake in the months to come.

When I came back home, I opened that horrible file I had foolishly believed I would never have to touch again and started preparing for my final legal recourse.

CHAPTER 39

The High Court was next to St. Andrew College, a school that my sister and two of my brothers attended. I used to go to St. Andrew a lot as a teenager. My school, the Lyceum of Rugunga, another high school of the capital, would often have activities with St. Andrew, either a play or a match of soccer, basketball or volleyball. I had not known then, when I passed those buildings, that my fate would one day be determined there.

The High Court is the second highest court in the country after the Supreme Court. Contrary to the first tribunal where I was tried, the High Court has a national jurisdiction. My lawyer explained to me that this was the last stop. *“There is no appeal after this. Verdicts with sentences of five years or less don’t go to the Supreme Court.”*

The appeal trial started November 7, 2005. The High Court obviously had a bigger budget than the tribunal of Kigali. The tribunal was a group of one-storey buildings surrounded by a well-tended garden. The courtroom where my trial was to take place was in the main building, with an entrance facing the visitor’s parking lot.

The High-Court setting was different from the provincial tribunals: my case was going to be heard by a panel of three judges. *“I just learned that Karugarama himself will be presiding over your case,”* Me Mutembe told me as we got settled in the room.

I was relieved to have my case handled by a judge with such experience and unquestionable probity. Justice Tharcisse Karugarama was one

of the sharpest legal minds in the country. He was previously at the Supreme Court, where he headed the commission in charge of reforming the country's judiciary system so it could address the many legal challenges of a post-genocide country.

I admired his insightfulness and his independence of character—or stubbornness, as the narrow-minded called it. He had a reputation of being someone who never let anyone else influence his positions. Everyone had expected him to become chief justice at the end of the transition in 2003, but President Kagame appointed him to the second highest tribunal, reserving the Supreme Court for the much less experienced but more politically manageable Aloysia Cyanzayire. It was clear that the ruling party didn't want the Supreme Court to be presided over by someone they couldn't control.

I have to admit that it did feel awkward to be tried by someone I knew. I had never met Judge Mbabazi, the judge in the Kigali tribunal, but I had met Justice Karugarama several times in various official functions. We had once chatted like friends, and now I was standing before him, accused of horrible crimes.

The two other judges on the panel were two female judges, Justice Isabelle Kalihangabo and Justice Angéline Rutazana.

I had thoroughly prepared for the appeal. This time I didn't try to read my file as though it was the file of someone else. I had to face the fact that this was me, my life, and if I wasn't able to defend it, I was going to be sent to jail for many years.

A joke was circulating in Kigali: apparently, the inmates in 1930, Rwanda's maximum security prison, had prepared a room for me. They had no doubt I was going to join them, as there was no way anyone could defeat a case put together by the powerful RPF.

The government was represented by two prosecutors, a man named Jean-Bosco Mutangana and a young lady named Espérance Nyirasafari. They both worked in the prosecutor-general's office in Kimihurura, the infamous place where my interviews were conducted earlier that year. I had never met them before, but they

clearly had the same marching orders as Sudi Hirwa, the prosecutor in the first trial, at least Jean-Bosco Mutangana had. Mutangana was very virulent; from the get-go, he showed the same rage and contempt for me as Sudi Hirwa and all my detractors in the party. What did I do to you people?

He no doubt saw my trial as an opportunity to advance his career. He seemed to talk more to the reporters present in the room than to the judges. The young lady was more guarded. I think she didn't want to be there. I don't know what excuse she made, but she managed to avoid coming back for the following court dates, leaving Jean-Bosco Mutangana to deal with this mess alone.

Apparently, the prosecution had also appealed the verdict, arguing that Judge Mbabazi had been too lenient.

"The minister abused his office, and he didn't even apologize for the harm he has done. We feel he should be sentenced to 10 years instead of just five," Jean-Bosco Mutangana said in an impassioned opening statement.

Apologize? To whom? My blood was boiling inside my head, but I tried to remain calm as I answered. And why settle for 10? Whatever happened to the 20 years they asked for at the beginning of the first trial?

"Honourable President, not only should I not be jailed for 10 years, but I should not even be jailed for the five years I was sentenced to in the first place. The prosecution has failed to meet their burden of proof, so they are hiding behind the fact that I was a minister. If being a minister was a crime, the whole government would be on trial."

I almost bit my tongue after making that comment about the government. *I have to resist being sarcastic!* The last thing I wanted was to alienate the judges with anything that could be misconstrued as disdain or arrogance.

I asked the court if I could proceed and read my own opening statement. I had prepared it and reviewed it several times with my

lawyer, as this was the most important item in the trial. According to Rwandan law, the appeals court didn't review the whole trial but only the points you brought to their attention in your opening statement.

I started reading the statement I had prepared. I had written it in Kinyarwanda and had reviewed it with my lawyer to make sure I had used the right terminology and referred to the correct articles of the law.

"Honourable President of the High Court of the Republic, Honourable Judges, my first reason for objecting to the verdict rendered on September 12th in the Tribunal of the City of Kigali is that the charges against me kept changing throughout the investigation and even the trial."

Justice Karugarama interjected immediately before I could elaborate any further. *"Dr. Habamenshi, do not waste your time on anything that doesn't help your case."*

My lawyer whispered to me that I should not insist, and so I moved to the next point. I took a deep breath and proceeded with my statement.

"The investigation lasted seven months, during which time I was never formally informed of what I was accused of, which is contrary to the 2004 law on criminal prosecutions."

The judges didn't react. I moved to the next point.

"The allegations against me relied on accusations made by Fulgence Nsengiyumva, an unreliable witness who is under investigation for fraud..."

Justice Karugarama interrupted me curtly. *"Minister, I will not let you accuse anyone else in my court. Focus on your own case, please!"*

I had expected the court to react that way. I knew that even if that argument was stricken from the record, it would not be stricken

from the judges' minds, and that was all I wanted. I quickly moved on to the next point.

Justice Karugarama didn't interrupt me anymore. I read my remarks in a clear and deliberately slow fashion. I was nervous at first. I couldn't tell from the expressions on the judges' faces if any of my arguments were registering. When I reached the fourth or fifth point, I saw the whole demeanour of the three judges start to change. They all reached for their pens and started taking notes. I knew I had secured their attention. I started to relax.

I highlighted, amongst others things, the fact that I was refused the opportunity to cross-examine the witnesses interrogated by the prosecution during the investigation, and also that the court refused to call representatives of the donors who could have testified that no funds had been embezzled. I also argued that as a minister, I didn't sign cheques and therefore did not have access to the funds I was alleged to have embezzled. Another key point I made was that the prosecution never audited the project in question and only relied on innuendos they heard on the street or read in papers.

When I finished reading my statement, Justice Karugarama asked me if I could forward it to the court. I smiled. *"I made a copy for the court, Honourable President. May I approach the bench?"*

I walked to the bench and handed President Karugarama the copy I had printed for the judges. He handed it to the trial recorder. I was happy; at least my words were going to be properly recorded in the trial minutes.

I purposely had not prepared a copy for the prosecution, and I could see them looking at me angrily as I walked past them. They had tried to get my opening statement in advance so they could prepare their rebuttal, but I refused. I was certainly not going to make their life easier.

Justice Karugarama turned to the prosecutors and asked them if they had any rebuttal. Jean-Bosco Mutangana stood up and started to speak. He looked like someone trapped in quicksand, hoping that someone would rescue him. He didn't have my statement, and

was too proud to take notes while I was speaking, so he couldn't respond specifically to any of the points I made.

He tried to speak from memory, but his partner waved her head to advise him not to venture any remark that could be used against them later.

He finally decided to stick to the key points he raised at the beginning of the proceedings: *"Dr. Habamenshi was the minister, he abused his office. He didn't even apologize to the public for what he did."*

I could see the other prosecutor tucking herself deeper into the seat to distance herself from the debacle.

Justice Karugarama turned to me: *"Do you have anything else to say, Doctor?"*

"As a matter of fact, yes, Honourable President."

I had kept the best for last. I reached into my briefcase and extracted a thick file from it. The prosecution was increasingly nervous, wondering what was coming next. They hadn't yet recovered from my 12-point opening statement.

They had underestimated me. They came to the trial unprepared, arrogantly thinking like everyone else that I was finished simply because Kagame stopped trusting me. I was to show them that I would fight to the end.

I opened the file on the table and looked up to the bench.

"Honourable President, what I have here are copies of the cheques that were issued by the consulting firm to pay for the consultants and field agents. They total exactly 65,000 dollars, the amount I am alleged to have embezzled. The question I ask is this: Does the prosecution have any proof that these consultants and field agents cashed their cheques and came back to give me that money?"

I had turned towards the prosecution's desk as I was speaking. They were seated on my left, across the centre aisle. The room fell

silent, waiting to hear their rebuttal. Justice Karugarama was the first to speak.

“Doctor, this is an appeals trial. You cannot present new evidence.”

I thought I would die on the spot. Was he rejecting the proof of my innocence? Me Mutembe quickly rose to his feet: *“Honourable President, with all due respect, what the law forbids is for the prosecution to present any evidence they didn't present in the original trial. The defendant has the right to produce any document that can exonerate him at any level.”*

Justice Karugarama smiled. *“You are right, Me Mutembe.”* He motioned to me to show him the documents. I took another folder from my briefcase and handed it to the president of the High Court. He flipped through it, looking completely puzzled.

I was emboldened by Justice Karugarama's last remark, and I continued. *“Honourable President, if the prosecution had bothered to do their job properly, they would have accessed these cheques during the investigation, and we wouldn't be here. The law requires the prosecution to look for evidence that exonerates the defendant. They failed to do that. This information was available all along, and they never requested it.”*

Justice Karugarama turned to the prosecutors. *“What do you have to say about these documents?”*

Mutangana attempted to dismiss them: *“Honourable President, we don't even know if these documents are authentic”*

I jumped in, only too happy to help him sink further into his own contradictions. *“Are you accusing me of presenting counterfeits to the court?”* I had a hard time not smiling as I asked the question.

“That's not what I said ...,” Mutangana stammered. He didn't know how to get out of that predicament. He was really pitiful.

Justice Karugarama spoke again. *“I think we can take the time to*

examine these documents. I assume the originals are available as well?"

"Yes, Honourable President."

"Fine. Prosecutors, how long would you need to review these documents presented by Dr. Habamenshi? Is one month enough?"

Mutangana grudgingly acquiesced. *"One month is enough, Honourable President."*

"That's settled then. Let's reconvene in one month. Dr. Habamenshi, you will arrange for the prosecution to have copies of this file as well."

"My lawyer will bring them a copy of the file this afternoon so they can have their forensic experts start to study their authenticity right away."

I couldn't resist being sarcastic: I knew they would not submit the files to any forensic experts.

I felt good for the first time since my ordeal started.

CHAPTER 40

The trial was supposed to resume in December, but it was postponed at the last moment because one of the judges couldn't be there. And since the courts were closed during the end of year season, we would have to wait until January.

I decided to not think of the trial and just enjoy the Christmas holidays. My family had been so great, and I wanted to offer them a time when they wouldn't have to worry about anything.

It was my first holiday since I left government. It was probably the best holiday I'd had for years, with no official functions to attend, no protocol to observe, no photo ops, no fake smiles to return and no hands to shake.

I went to church on Christmas and New Year's Eve and thanked God for blessing me with a wonderful family. I don't know how I would have made it without them. They stayed by my side through my entire ordeal, silent witnesses to the proceedings that were going to take their son, nephew, cousin and brother away from them.

We were informed that our next court date would be in February. I tried not to be discouraged, thinking that if I was to go to jail for years, I wasn't going to complain about one extra month of freedom.

The proceedings were different from the opening session. All three judges spoke this time.

Justice Karugarama started by asking the prosecution if they had reviewed the cheques and if they were satisfied with respect to their authenticity.

Mutangana grudgingly answered in the affirmative. He seemed pathetic and defeated. The young lady wasn't there to offer him any type of support.

The judges directed the rest of the questions to me. They asked me questions about the agricultural strategic plan, the respective roles of the donors and the government, and whether any other government agency was involved in its elaboration.

I was happy to answer all their questions. I could tell that they had read the whole file and wanted some clarifications.

The questions they asked showed me that they were looking for the truth, not only in the work I did when I was minister, but the truth in this strange case for which I had been sentenced to five years of incarceration.

Justice Karugarama finally brought the session to an end. *"I think we've heard enough about this matter. Does the prosecution have any final comments?"*

Jean-Bosco Mutangana made a very brief statement to reiterate the prosecution's position that the previous guilty verdict should be upheld.

"Dr. Habamenshi, do you have any final remarks?"

"Yes, Your Honour."

I opened my trial folder and started reading the closing remarks I had prepared. Justice Karugarama interrupted me impatiently.

"Dr. Habamenshi, you've already made an opening statement, and we have it on record. The court wants to know if you have anything else to add before we go and deliberate on your case."

It was like he slapped me in the face! This was my moment, my last moment; why couldn't he just let me do it my way?

I closed my trial folder and pushed it aside and simply spoke from the heart.

“Honourable President, Honourable Judges, I am sorry if I seem to be repeating what I said before. It was in no way my intention to abuse the court’s patience. You have seen me reading from written statements throughout the trial. Those statements were the most difficult things I ever wrote and read to anyone in my life, but they were most necessary for me. I wrote those statements because I feared I might be overtaken by my emotions, leaving me paralyzed and unable to defend myself properly. Yes, I have been repeating the same points, not only during this trial, but during the previous trial, and during the prosecution’s inquiry before that and many other times before that.”

I paused for a moment, overwhelmed with emotion. I was close to my breaking point, and the judges could see that. They looked at me silently. I think that for the first time, they were all seeing me, Patrick, the individual, not the doctor, the minister, or the defendant, simply Patrick.

“Honourable President, Honourable Judges, I kept repeating the same points hoping that there was someone somewhere who was finally going to take a moment not just to listen to me but to hear me. I hope that here in this room, I was finally heard. The law puts the burden of proof on the prosecution. In this trial, I was the one burdened with the task of disproving baseless accusations. You’ve seen me coming to this court room every day with this heavy bag full of documents that the prosecution deliberately ignored in their haste to tarnish my professional and personal record. The only thing the prosecutor was burdened with was to show up with a load of bad faith.”

The judges didn’t interrupt my diatribe. Everyone was silent as I went on; even the trial recorder had stopped writing as he intently listened to my words.

“Honourable President, Honourable Judges, this is the trial of my life, the negation of everything I am and everything I ever stood for!

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I have never betrayed my country. I served it with all the knowledge and all the integrity I had, to the best of my abilities. I do not ask the court for any special consideration or to pity me. What I am asking today is simply that justice be upheld. Thank you, Honourable President, thank you, Honourable Judges”

My father, who was sitting just behind me, extended his hand and silently patted my shoulder. I could hear women, probably my mother, my sister and my aunts, sobbing in the back. I didn't want to turn and look at them.

Justice Karugarama's expression had softened. He checked his calendar and concluded the proceeding with a few simple words: *“The Court will render its decision on March 22 at 2 pm.”*

I became nervous again as I awaited for the verdict, the final verdict.

One of my friends offered to help me escape the country. *“I know people who can help you cross the border. By the time the authorities realize it, you'll be far away from this hellhole.”*

I shook my head. *“No. It's tempting, but I went too far to just throw in the towel like that. God will protect me.”*

He looked at me, probably thinking that I was too naïve or too crazy for my own good.

It was the longest 30 days of my life. And, I should say, it was the longest 30 days of my family's life, for the wait was killing my family as much as it was killing me. They had done their best to stay strong when I was around, but I could tell it was hard on them. My mother told me later that when it was too much, she would go and hide from me so I wouldn't see her crying. I was worried for my father. His health had started to decline rapidly after I was sentenced to five years of prison in September, but he kept accompanying me throughout the appeal proceedings.

I remember my lawyer trying to persuade my father to stay home the day of the final verdict in March. *“No, I must stay by my son's*

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side. I would rather have a heart attack listening to the verdict than have my heart fail me while I am home waiting for you to return without my son."

My prayer all through those days was a simple one. *"God, I will never beg them for mercy. I will never kneel for anyone but you, my Lord. Please, give me the strength to accept the outcome of this trial."*

It was a long verdict. Justice Karugarama, the president of Rwanda's High Court, had an impenetrable look on his face. What had they decided, I wondered?

The law required that they read the entirety of the original verdict before summarizing the appeal proceedings and reading the final verdict. Not knowing what was going on, my sister collapsed in shock when Justice Karugarama read: *"The Court finds Dr. Habamenshi guilty and condemns him to five years in prison."*

"Karugarama, no! Not you too!" She exclaimed before passing out. Justice Karugarama ordered that she be evacuated and continued to read.

I hadn't moved. I didn't want to look at my sister or at my parents and see the fear in their eyes. I had to be strong if I wanted to see this through. I expected to be handcuffed when he finished reading the High Court's conclusions.

But on that Wednesday afternoon, I saw God in all his glory, for Justices Tharcisse Karugarama, Isabelle Kalihangabo and Angéline Rutazana, took a bold stand against political pressures and intrigues and ended my ordeal: *"The High Court has found the accusations against Dr. Patrick Habamenshi unfounded and unsubstantiated. As such, Dr. Patrick Habamenshi is cleared of all charges against him and is exempt from further prosecution on those charges!"*

I could not stop shaking! I looked at him in disbelief, and while I was still wondering if I'd heard him correctly, I heard my lawyer congratulating me. Then my family and the friends who had

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accompanied me on this last journey embraced me, and our freely flowing tears of happiness erased my pain!

As I walked outside the courtroom and into my freedom, a freedom once lost and now found anew, my aunt started singing my favourite religious song, right there in the tribunal's compound:

Niba Uhoraho ari Amahoro yawe,

Niba Uhoraho ari Ibyishimo byawe,

Komezwa inzira watangiye, wicika intege,

Wahisemo neza, Nyagasani muri kumwe.

If the Eternal God is your source of Peace,

If the Eternal God is your source of Joy,

Don't give up, keep on going,

You have chosen the right path,

The Lord is with you.

It was glorious! My family and I joined in the joyous hymn, singing loudly, clapping, jumping and dancing. People who were passing by stopped, wondering what was going on. Many recognized my familiar face and knew from my bright smile that, against all odds, I had won my case against the Government of Rwanda!

"Thank you, God! Thank you!"

And thank you, Justice Karugarama, for upholding the court's integrity and seeking the truth, just the truth and nothing but the truth at any cost.

CHAPTER 41

I couldn't see myself staying in the country where I'd lost so much. I had won my trial, but I had lost my dreams of Rwanda. As my verdict was announced on the radio, I knew that my countless enemies had yet another reason to hate me.

I could not spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder as these criminals tried to find a more definitive way of getting rid of me. Going back to politics or to work for government was out of the question. Kagame had failed the country by allowing this whole comedy to go on as long as it did, and he had lost any credibility in my eyes. What he never understood about me is that I cared little for the glory and the privileges that came with the high offices I occupied. Though many people would have killed to get those privileges, I found that they separated me too much from the very people I was called upon to serve. Working for the post-genocide regime of Rwanda came with too high of a price; in my case, I almost paid for those privileges with my life.

I booked a flight for Toronto for May 13. My own *Midnight train to Georgia*, I thought. The Canadian Embassy had given me back my passport a few days earlier, and I was holding on to it tightly. It was weird to walk into a travel agency after so many months living in fear of spending the next years of my life in prison. I crossed my fingers that they wouldn't report me to the authorities; I didn't trust anyone anymore.

As my departure date approached, I became sleepless again. It was killing me to have to leave my family. I spent the night before

packing my luggage, deciding what I should take and what I should leave. I wanted the things that would remind me of the country that I was again forced to leave. It was a painful exercise. How does one fit five years of their life in two suitcases?

I kept busy through the night so as not to think about the loss and the cruelty of the moment. In the morning, I went to my father's room. He was very weak in those days and seldom left his room. I went and quietly hugged him. It was the longest embrace of our life, maybe the last embrace. I wondered when I would see him again. I silenced the voice deep in me that was telling me that this was the last time I would see my father alive.

The trip to Kigali International Airport was silent, awfully reminiscent of a funeral procession. In a way, it was a death: the death of my dreams, the death of my illusions and the death of my life as I'd always known it. When I received my first cabinet appointment, I was so proud to be part of a team that was reshaping this country, a country so badly hurt by decades of segregation and tribal conflicts. Little did I know that I was embarking on a journey, not to the heights of human greatness, but to the depths of human darkness.

I did not hug my mother or my brother Imanzi. I felt that if I hugged them, I would not have the strength to leave them behind.

As I walked across the tarmac to the plane, I could see the presidential jet parked by the VIP gate, a luxurious symbol of a deceitful system I wished I had never known. When our plane took off, I felt empty and started crying. The other passengers were looking at me, wondering if it was really the former minister, the famous—or infamous, for some—Patrick, sitting next to them.

I didn't care that people saw me crying. This was my life and mine alone. I had given my country all I had, and I was left with nothing but nightmares and tears. I didn't even think about the life that awaited the 37-year-old me. I could only think of the 37 years of my life that had led me to this empty feeling.



**PART VII:
THE ENEMY WITHIN**

How else would I tell you that it is Silence that kills me the most? That my life has been invaded by a pervasive silence filled with conspicuous glares, overbearing compassion and unuttered questions? That it surrounds me like an invisible yet palpable veil, cutting through me like a sharp dagger whenever I try to move away?

I write the Blues, because everything in me is chaotic and turbulent, because my head is filled with screams and cries, because my heartbeat has become a continuous sob.

I write the Blues in a desperate attempt to reach out to my friends, to help them understand why it's hard for me to open up to them!

How else would I tell them that I am scared to unseal my lips for fear that voicing my pain will paralyze me? That I am scared that talking will hurt me? That I might shout and scream in pain instead of talking normally? That my words will crash into one another in a disturbing and unpleasant cacophony? That my inner incoherence will shatter their peaceful worlds and hurl them against the walls of my lamentations?

So I just write the Blues.

Excerpt from "Survivors' Blues,"
The Poetic Journal of Um'Khonde

CHAPTER 42

I felt completely lost as I left Kigali. My whole life had revolved around Rwanda, around being Rwandan. Then, suddenly, I was like a tree with its roots cut off. I had gone back to Rwanda to heal, but instead I was leaving hunted, haunted and wounded!

I was struggling to make sense of my life. As a kid, I never thought I would ever be a refugee; here I was, in exile for the second time in my short life. I felt that the world had played a cruel trick on me again! When I had worked so hard to walk away from the pain of a life of being constantly reminded of my ethnic origins, when I had healed from the solitude of a refugee life, when I had learned to trust and hope again that Rwanda could be the paradise I once saw in my child's eyes, I was again washed away upon the lonely shores of Toronto.

I came back to Canada in May 2006. Days later I realized that I had returned to the safety of Canada exactly 10 years after I first entered Canada as a refugee claimant in 1996. Was I going to spend my life in and out of exile?

In Rwanda, I drew my strength from my family and my church; back in Canada, I had a hard time finding my bearings. I had lost any sense of direction. All my life I had been driven by the belief that there is always a better tomorrow after the storm. Now, I wasn't sure anymore. After five years living in post-genocide Rwanda, my idealism and optimism seemed all too childish and naïve, my dreams a sad bundle of pipe dreams, chimerical projections of a mind that refused to see what the world really looked like. What

if Evil was to always triumph over Good? What if I was to simply accept that I was just an odd “ethnic” piece mistakenly placed in the colourless puzzle of life?

The refugee syndrome, that cruel realization that I belonged neither where I came from nor where I now was, affected me so acutely, it almost hurt to breathe.

I was broken to a point I had not realized. I was left to myself to deal with my demons and my ghosts; a pervasive enemy roamed within me, slowly and surely killing me in a way the enemy without had failed. Although I had not collapsed before my tormentors in Rwanda, I now found myself slowly sinking into a deep and bottomless hole.

I was a sad shadow of myself. I thought I had broken free of Kagame and his acolytes, only to realize that I was shackled to their demons and had carried them abroad. One moment I would be sitting with people, and the next moment their voices would fade and instead I would hear the heavy thumps of military boots hitting the ground around me and the cold metallic clicks of their guns that were waiting to seal my fate. I would see the faces of hatred everywhere I’d go.

I was nervous around crowds, even in the smallest gatherings. One day, a few days after returning to Toronto, I was at my friend Costa’s birthday party. Though I was surrounded by people chatting and laughing, I found my mind wandering off to my military dictatorship nightmare. I don’t know how long I was gone. I felt a hand touching me on the shoulder:

“Are you okay, Patrick?”

“Sorry?” It was as though I was waking up. I tried to smile. *“I am okay, don’t worry.”*

But I knew I wasn’t okay, and if I didn’t deal with it, I was going to be damaged forever. I had to rebuild myself, find a way to be the person I used to be, the daring, life-loving, passionate Patrick who would never let anything stand in his way.

But how? All my life choices had been determined by my need to help others. And now that it came time to help myself, I felt clueless and powerless, not knowing where to start.

No one knew how to deal with the “post-Kagame” me. Even I didn't know how to deal with this new me. I was both angry and distraught at the same time, and all the time.

I could see that my friends wanted to talk to me, but they too didn't know where to start. One of the only friends I opened up to suggested that I seek professional help. I wanted to reply that I preferred to speak to my friends and not to a shrink, but I didn't say anything. I just sank a little deeper into my emotional abyss.

I was helpless, and I didn't know how to reach out and ask for help. So many times, I would pick up the phone and dial a friend's number, but when they came to the phone, I would just talk about banalities. *“I just called to say hi!”*

With time, my laconic phone calls became increasingly rare and I became increasingly reclusive.

My siblings who lived in Canada tried their best to see me through these difficult times. My brother Aimé took me out to see shows he knew I used to love and invited me to spend time with his friends. My sister Liliane, a Catholic nun, tried to help me hold on to my faith. I could tell that it was taking a heavy toll on them. They weren't in Rwanda when all this happened, and they didn't quite know how to help me heal.

One day, after we had yet another discussion about Rwanda and what they'd done to me, Aimé said, *“Patrick, you are a Christian. You must forgive them! You must let it go!”*

“That's easy for you to say! How do you forgive people who tried to harm your life? Everyone keeps telling me that I have to let go, but no one is telling me how to do that!”

It was unfair for me to lash out at him like that, and I deeply regretted my outburst.

That incident sounded a loud alarm bell. It was imperative that I step back from all of this for some time, or else I was going to hurt those who loved me. So I decided to stop talking about Kagame, the RPF, Rwanda and my tragic experience. It seemed the right decision at the time, but I now know that I was just trying to mask my trauma as not to inconvenience others. I have no doubt that I would have healed faster if had kept trying to open up.

Throughout my life, I never allowed my pain to cause others to suffer; yet it was evident that my family suffered and would have given all they had to take that burden away from me. But they couldn't.

This part of my journey was mine to walk alone, and I had to summon the strength and fortitude to continue from somewhere within myself and not from without.

I felt so empty. I suddenly realized that my life had always been about others, about Rwanda, about my community, my friends, my family. There I was, suddenly breaking free from my ties to reclaim my shattered life.

It was a task that none of my degrees nor any of my past professional endeavours could help me with.

Where does one start to reconstruct a broken self?

CHAPTER 43

Reclaiming my body seemed to be a good or at least rational place to start. I started working out every day. I would wake up early in the morning and go to the nearby gym. I would run for an hour and then do different exercises till I was so exhausted I couldn't think anymore.

That routine brought back a sense of predictability that my life had lacked of late. I started sleeping better, and little by little, my nightmares gave way to a heavy dreamless sleep that was far more reassuring.

It felt good to be in shape again. I was skinny as a teenager and into my early twenties, but when I moved to Canada in my late twenties, my weight spiralled out of control. Under the stress of government life and the political fights that were part of my daily life back in Rwanda, I gained weight. In 2004, I weighed in at a scary 250 pounds, the heaviest I've ever been in my life. My rigorous workout regimen brought me back to a more manageable weight and a more solid health.

After a couple of months rebuilding this exhausted body of mine and closing the door to the nightmares of a past that was at times too present, I was ready to renew my mind. I had no desire to go back to politics; I had seen too many former African dignitaries turn into opposition leaders overnight, with nothing to offer to their people other than an agenda of bitterness and empty promises. No. I wanted to go back to work as a simple technician, a man on the ground. I had no doubt that it was going to be difficult. If I

was overqualified when I first came to Canada with just a doctor's degree, God only knows what category I was going to fall into 10 years later with an additional graduate degree and two cabinet tenures.

Being who I am, I could not live long without a cause to defend. Years of seeing millions of people unable to feed their families back in Rwanda had made hunger relief and food security my main areas of interest. My preoccupation remained the same in Toronto. I've always found it unacceptable that more than a million people relied on food banks every year to feed their families in Canada's economic hub!

As I was going about my job search, I came across an article about the Toronto Food Policy Council, an advisory board to Toronto's Medical Officer of Health. I called and met with Wayne Roberts, the TFPC coordinator, and Leslie Toy, his assistant, and shared my interest in food issues. They invited me to attend the council's meetings.

The TFPC is a think tank of sorts, composed of citizens who bring a wealth of knowledge and experience in food-related matters. After years in the Rwandan government, it was refreshing to be able to just have an intellectual debate with no political agendas, and no constant alluding to my ethnic background. It was a fantastic forum for me to raise awareness about barriers faced by foreign-trained newcomers as they try to integrate themselves into Canada's workforce and the subsequent poverty and food insecurity in immigrant communities. In 2007, I became an official member of the council.

After months of searching unsuccessfully for a job, I decided to become a freelance consultant with a focus on food security and economic integration of immigrants and racial minorities. Today, my client base includes nonprofit organizations and public institutions.

I've never regretted this career move. I get to work on assignments where I believe I can make a difference for others. I find it morally

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rewarding to be able to use my education and my professional and life experiences to shed light on challenges often invisible to mainstream. After all, the main reason I became a development economist was not so much to learn how nations grow, but to learn how to ensure that the weakest and most disadvantaged members of society aren't left behind in the process.

Of course, as an overeducated immigrant, racial minority and former dignitary, my professional aspirations are every now and then tempered by the all-too-familiar rejection, "*You are too skilled for this position,*" or the very condescending, "*You are an experienced, dedicated and gracious man, and your abilities should be highly valued. Unfortunately we are not ready in our growth to really take advantage of it.*"

It doesn't discourage me. I learned the hard way to fight unapologetically for my rights, which include my right to professional growth.

In September 2006, I was retained as a development expert with the International Fund for Agricultural Development based in Rome. As a United Nations Expert, I get to work on a wide range of short-term assignments back in Africa. Though I love this work and the array of projects I am exposed to, it still saddens me that I can use my skills everywhere in the world but the country of my birth.

CHAPTER 44

Spiritual renewal proved more challenging than the reclaiming of my body and mind. My political hurdles had practically destroyed my sense of self.

I felt as though I had become two different people. Most prominent in my mind was the crooked minister depicted by the party's media, an unscrupulous man abusing the office entrusted to him by Kagame, "the liberator of Rwanda." The other was a man who seemed oblivious to his crumbling reality as he went about his duties, meeting partners, going into the field, attending public functions, waving at the public and smiling at the cameras while shaking hands with his enemies.

My pride and combative ego prompted me to hide how effectively the perpetual harassment was destroying me. Contrary to what people might believe, my most difficult struggle was not my public fight to stay alive and free. My biggest struggle was my internal struggle to cling to my authentic self, a self which in the last months had finally slipped away, leaving in its place to a robotic being that was as foreign to me as the distorted image of me that adorned the country's front pages.

The nightmares I had in my first weeks back in Canada were uncomfortably similar to the ones I'd had when I was under house arrest. I knew that if I wanted to rebuild the person I used to be, I had to go back and revisit that troubled period of my life.

Back when I was sequestered in my residence, writing was one

of the things that prevented me from becoming insane. Writing helps me make sense of things. Oftentimes in my life, when I am going through difficulties, I just write whatever crosses my mind, without trying to organize my chaotic thoughts. I go back to read those notes months or, in some cases, years later, when I am ready to confront whatever troubled me at the time.

What troubled me in June 2005 is plain: I was living in a house surrounded by 10 armed guards by day and 20 by night, all probably ready to harm me if so ordered by the people I once served with all my heart. I woke up every night around two in the morning, agitated. I always woke up when the men in my nightmare were surrounding me and ready to lay their hands on me. I would often stay up all night, listening to the boots of the armed guards by my window, scared that if I were to fall asleep again, I would die in my scary dream.

So I decided to write about my nightmare. Once I started writing, I couldn't stop. I wrote about my nightmare; then I moved on to write about my life, my time in government, my dreams, my hopes, my losses.

I was very apprehensive about going back and reading my notes from Rwanda. I wasn't sure I could handle reliving those horrible days, yet I knew they held the key to my present. It was painful! My notes awakened recollections of loneliness, betrayal, anger, sadness, all intertwined in a long nightmare in which I was still trapped, a year later.

I took up a pen again and started rewriting my nightmare, hoping that rewriting it would chase away the Evil in it. Something strange happened, something I still don't understand to this day: I started writing a poem, a long poem that went on for pages: "Solitude: My Untold Story."

Yesterday, I woke up in a cage, a cold, intricate web cracking my sky and covering my world with shadows, an intriguing patchwork breaking my life in a thousand sharp-edged pieces, a puzzling puzzle, an unsolvable mystery!

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Yesterday, I opened my eyes to a distorted reality, a strange yet familiar place, an overcrowded pit with people running around me, stepping over me, crying, screaming, aching, wolves barking at me, and my mind shackled to demons in green camouflage and shiny combat boots!

...

And I keep falling, faster and deeper, spinning and spiralling down the bottomless well! All is sombre and foggy! I am filled with emotions I can't control, unwelcome sensations that tear my mind apart: fear, anger, shame, outrage, angst, revolt ... and cowardice!

And me, I ask myself, how will I die? Will my death be swift and painless or my agony cruelly long and the pain unbearable? Will I show the courage of the Greats or will I shamefully beg for mercy? Will my death be glorious and save many more, or will I die like a vagabond in the back-alleys of history?

How will I be remembered? Or will I be even remembered?

For months, I kept going back to my poem, trying to understand it, trying to free myself from that time in my life. It left me more demoralized than before.

I didn't like the way it ended: *"I am trapped in my nightmare, and I can't get out."*

I wanted to get out of the nightmare, not stay trapped in it!

I tried to look elsewhere for my answer. I thought of my father and the sacrifices he made for his belief in freedom. I thought of my grandfather, Sylvestre Bulingufi, who had to flee Rwanda in 1962 simply for being Tutsi and an adviser to the king; but nevertheless continued educating the masses in his Burundian exile. I thought of my courageous mother, who had to live apart from her own father and her siblings for more than 30 years.

I thought of all the powerless victims of our country's and our continent's recurring wars, the million and more who died while the world watched rather than act to stop the massacres of 1994. I

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thought of my fellow Rwandans who were robbed day in and day out of any chance of ever living in a peaceful and stable region.

I thought of all the men and women who inspired me to find and express my own voice: Nelson Mandela, who defied a ruthless system and walked the longest road to freedom; Martin Luther King Jr., who had the courage to fight a nightmare with a dream; Steve Biko, who dared to proclaim our black consciousness till he paid for his beliefs with his life; Aimé Césaire, who defined and celebrated our negritude; Maya Angelou, who could still rise despite all that was taken from us as a people; and Myriam Makeba, who sang hymns to Africa from the shores of Exile.

So many great men and women who sacrificed so much and yet refused to give in to terror and prejudice. Then, one December day in 2006, I finally found the missing conclusion. In that missing conclusion, I found my authentic self:

“Pause! Stop! Silence! Life stand still! Fear and doubts, walk away from me! I don’t want to be remembered as a victim!

Let’s start over! Rewind. Strike. Rebirth!

...

Yesterday, I looked through the bars of oppression, discrimination, isolation and abandonment and saw Freedom, a beautiful lone midnight star shining through my solitary night!

It is my time to stand up and stay strong! It is my time to lend my voice to the voiceless.

It is my time to lend my sight to those without eyes!”

As I wrote those words, I rediscovered that that’s all I ever wanted to do, to lend my voice to those who cannot speak for themselves, either because they don’t know how or don’t have the means to express their concerns, or simply because they lost their lives without ever having had the chance to tell their story.

One of my friends invited me to do a reading at a Christmas party

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at his house. I resisted the idea at first, but then accepted. As I read my piece, I could feel the room becoming silent. Some of the women began to cry. Afterward, many people simply said “Thank you,” a reaction I don’t always understand. How can people thank me for making them cry?

I was to read this piece in public once or twice again. It was always an overwhelming experience, and I must admit that I am often scared of the effect my words have on people. “Solitude” was born from a disturbingly introspective process which, as I intended, succeeded in helping me deal with the hurt of the past; reading it to other people made me realize that I had a way of touching people that I was not yet ready to deal with.

CHAPTER 45

If you ask me how I made it through those hard times, I will smile and answer without hesitation: God made me do it!

Yet, as with every other aspect of my life, maintaining my faith has been both challenging and rewarding. One of my friends jokingly refers to herself as a “recovering Catholic.” To some extent, I would say the same thing of myself.

I grew up in a very religious home. I cannot remember the number of times we went to mass, on Sundays and weekdays alike, or recited the rosary.

“Get on your knees, close your eyes, pray. Stop asking your silly questions. God works in mysterious ways.” This is of course a caricature, but it felt that way in my young mind.

This latter injunction was most certainly intended for little curious boys like me. Even at a very young age, I had already developed a Cartesian mind that would not allow me to blindly accept things I couldn’t understand. You might say that I am still very much the same, which is probably what got me in trouble with the powers of Kigali.

Deaths were particularly hard for me to understand, let alone accept. I come from a very large family, and it seems that there was always someone dying, a niece, a nephew, a cousin, an aunt, an uncle, and grandparents. I couldn’t understand why God would let parents lose their kids or let kids lose their siblings or become orphans.

Why? I asked God when my sister Antoinette passed away during the war. *Why?* I asked when my best friend Flora died after losing her husband and first baby.

After the Genocide in 1994, my incomprehension turned into resentment towards the Catholic Church and towards God. When my nephew Cedric died at the age of 11 in 2000, I simply stopped going to church and I stopped asking why. Maybe that was just the way things were meant to be. People are born, people live and people die. Even when you love them.

Despite my estrangement from the church I was raised in, I didn't want to admit that I still yearned for God. I envied people who could just give all of themselves to God without question. I yearned for their serenity, for the peace of mind only He seemed to be able to impart to us mortals.

My return to God happened quite fortuitously. (*Yes, I know, Mom, God works in mysterious ways.*) When the guards were removed from my house a few weeks before the trial, I decided to start going for early morning jogs in the neighbourhood. I would run and run and run, just to feel the cold morning air on my face and, for one little hour a day, dream that I was free again. I often saw people coming home from the morning mass with such an air of peacefulness. I envied them.

One day, I decided to go to church instead of my morning jogging, not knowing exactly what was going to happen, maybe fearing that I would somehow be rebuked for all the years I stayed away.

I went and shyly sat at the back so no one would see me; I'd been out of the public eye since I resigned from government, and I didn't want to draw unwarranted attention to myself. If people recognized me, no one showed it. Everyone was turned towards the altar, meditating on their own situation or praising God for a problem that had been solved.

Seeing all these people turning their hopes to God made me realize that I wasn't alone. *I had never been alone!* We came from different backgrounds, but as we knelt before God, we were all the same. My

story was the story of my fellow Rwandans; our disillusion, our fights were similar.

Then they started singing what was going to become my personal hymn of spiritual liberation: “Niba Uhoraho,” a song I was later to sing and dance to with my family at the High Court in Nyamirambo, the day of my acquittal. *“If the Eternal God is your source of peace, if the Eternal God is your source of joy, don’t give up, keep on going, you have chosen the right path, the Lord is with you!”* I felt overwhelmed by a sense of peace and warmth I had long since forgotten.

I went to church that day looking for a reason to believe again. God gave me more: He gave me a reason to live and something to live for. I was finally home.

The day before the trial, I became nervous. I was not sure whether I had made the right call to confront these powerful people. What made me think that I was going to have a fair trial in a country where the rule of law seemed to be an ever-elusive notion?

I went to my room and opened my Bible. I often do that; I just open it randomly and read the first verses that my eyes fall upon. I will never forget the passage I read that day, August 3, 2005, on the eve of the trial that was going to decide my fate:

“He said: Listen! This is what the LORD says to you: Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For this battle is not yours, but God’s. Tomorrow, march down against them. You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions, stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you.” (2 Chronicles 20:15–17)

Those words touched me as though they had been written for me centuries ago just so I could read them that day.

I will always testify that it was God and God only who saved me from the jaws of that corrupt system of Rwanda. I could have died at any time in Rwanda, during the postwar period or even before or during the war of the 1990s. God saw me through where so many

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perished. There is a religious song in Rwanda that has become the song of war survivorship for so many of us: *“Mbe ni iki watanze, mwana wa Data, kugira ngo ube ukiriho?”* *“What did you give, my brother, for you to still be alive?”*

I didn't give anything: I have received. I have received the most precious gift of all from the Most High: the gift of life. To those who have received as much as I have, much must be expected. I must make every second count. Anyone who has ever faced injustice knows that you can never move away from it. You can choose to become unjust, or you can choose to devote your life to fighting for a more just society. I feel compelled to devote my life to furthering social justice for those who, unlike me, have no way of being heard.

Anyone who ever faced extreme hatred knows that you can choose to become hateful or you can decide to walk the road of love.

I choose Love.

My faith still falters at times. While I gave my whole to God in the darkest and most difficult hours of my life, I need to learn to trust Him with the smaller worries of my everyday life. It's a learning process, a lifelong education. My relation with God is like any other relation of love: it needs nurturing, and, most of all, it needs trust.

CHAPTER 46

One last thing I am learning on my spiritual journey is to let go of painful past friendships and open my heart to new friends.

For the longest time, I blamed my friends for not have been there for me during my ordeal in Rwanda. I don't anymore. In all honesty, I am probably more to blame than them. When I look back at my life in government, I have to admit that I failed my loved ones long before they failed me. I was a workaholic who missed many important life moments. I regret not having devoted more time to my friends and family, and I hope God will give me the opportunity to make amends. After all, hasn't He already given me a second lease on life?

I am learning to open up to people and to trust again. I am making new friends, shyly, but surely. I am like a baby taking his first steps, clumsy, yet bold and decisive; and like a baby, I will fall numerous times, but in the end, I will make it.

As for my colleagues in the party and cabinet, I will say this: my ordeal was an eye-opener. We spent so much time together, particularly on retreats and trips across the country and abroad. We visited each other, and I thought we were friends, but I was wrong. For two years, they stood and watched silently as I was maligned, harassed, imprisoned and tried for things they knew I could never do. I had worked with them for four years, four years in which I'd shown them the type of person I am and the work ethic by which I abide.

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My newly reclaimed spiritual resolve and my faith were to be tested in a very dramatic way just a few months after I returned to Canada.



PART VIII:
BECOMING UM'KHONDE

I want my name back! And no, my name is not pagan, animist, slave, runaway slave, nonbeliever or savage; not poor, hungry, colonial, war prone, underdeveloped, backward, primitive, unstable, refugee, third world, illegal alien, impoverished, tribalist, nigger, at risk, thug, gangsta, ethnic, inmate, visible minority or any other name I'm called! No!

I want my name back! My name that told the world in Akan, Baoule, Bamileke, Bemba, Bambara, Dinka, Haussa, Berber, Serer, Wolof, Yoruba, Igbo, Gbe, Mina, Fon, that I am where it all began, the cradle of Mankind!

I want my name back! My name that told Nations in Kinyarwanda, Kiswahili, Nyoro, Oromo, Tigrinya, Lingala, Luba, Songhai, Sotho, Shona, Xhosa, Tswana, Swazi, Zulu, who I am and the glory of my ancestry and not what the world made me to be!

Excerpt from "I want my name back!"
The Poetic Journal of Um'Khonde

CHAPTER 47

The first time my father was hospitalized, I felt it in me. It was in August, just three months after my return to Toronto. I was agitated, disturbed, though I didn't know why. A voice inside urged me to call home.

Mama told me that my father had been hospitalized that morning. I went to church and prayed that he would get better.

“God, why did I have to leave Rwanda if Papa was going to die? I went back to Rwanda to be with them, and now I am forced to be away when they need me the most! Please don't take him from us! Not now!”

I started to consider the idea of going back to that country I had fled just a few months earlier.

He was back at the hospital during the Christmas holidays. On the eve of the new year, he insisted on being released so that he didn't spend New Year's Day in a hospital bed. He was back at the hospital two weeks later, and this time he was too weak to talk on the phone. Though Mama kept doing her best to not alarm us, I could read in her voice that his health was getting worse and not better.

This time, when I prayed, I asked God to give me the strength to accept what I knew was just a few days away.

I was home watching an episode of the TV series *House* when the phone started ringing with the familiar fast-paced double ring of international calls. I was sitting just next to the phone, but I

couldn't get myself to pick it up, paralyzed. An international call so late in the night couldn't announce anything good. My brother Aimé picked up the phone, and I saw his whole body language change in a split second: "*Non, Maman, non!*" he exclaimed.

He didn't need to tell me the news. I fought the urge to cry. I just picked up the phone and called all my siblings and close relatives living abroad to inform them that our beloved father had passed away in the wee hours of January 24, 2007, in Kigali's King Faisal Hospital.

Like so many times before, the big brother in me had supplanted the hurting son. It was no time for me to grieve, because I knew that my family needed my strength more than ever before.

Mama never asked me to come home. She knew how I had suffered there and how risky it was for me to return, so she didn't say anything.

"I am coming home, Maman. Can you delay the burial till I get there?" I could feel the relief in her voice as she just said, *"Thank you, Patrick. Thank You."*

My siblings and friends asked me if it wasn't too dangerous for me to go back to Kigali. *"My father was there for me when I needed him,"* I replied. *"I have to accompany him to his last place of rest, no matter what happens to me."*

This trip was reminiscent in so many ways of my return in November 2000 to bury my little godson Cedric. It was only later when I looked at the dates on the cross of my Dad's tomb in Remera Cemetery that it dawned on me that my beloved father had died on the day Cedric would have turned 18 had he still been alive. A strange coincidence that only Life—or Fate, or God?—could have arranged.

CHAPTER 48

I got there Saturday morning after a two-day journey that took me from Toronto through Amsterdam and Nairobi. I tried my best not to think of my loss, but I couldn't. Eighteen hours in the air and more than 10 hours in transit did not let me escape the reality of what had happened. *He was gone and would never be back.*

As the plane hit the ground at Kigali International Airport, the memories of my departure less than a year before invaded my mind, vivid, as if it happened only yesterday. The last day I saw my father was the day I left the country that had given me so much and taken so much more, the country that was now claiming my dad.

My brother Imanzi was there waiting for me, a friendly sight in this place I felt so close to yet so estranged from. The city looked like a ghost town: there was not a car on the road!

"It's the Umuganda day," my brother told me. *"We had to come early before they closed the roads, otherwise you would have waited till 11 or 12 before anyone could come to get you."*

The government had instituted a mandatory "Umuganda" or community work day across the country. The word "Umuganda" refers to the Rwandan tradition of helping one's neighbour with some difficult chores, such as building a house or repairing a fence. *Umuganda* became a nationwide community activity under President Juvénal Habyarimana regime, a policy RPF took one step further by enforcing through a very strict law. Everything stopped

in the whole country for half a day, and people who didn't comply were heavily fined.

The burial was to take place the next day. It was unusual to have a burial on a Sunday, at least by the Catholic church directives, but then again, what was usual in death? My mother could not get herself to go and prepare the body at the morgue, so I went with my brother Imanzi.

What a strange goodbye in a cold room in the cold basement of King Faisal Hospital. Imanzi, our aunt Helen, who is a nurse at that hospital, and I cleaned his body with soft motions, as if he was still alive, and as we did so, I could feel the pain in my heart go away. He was finally at rest, after spending so many months in and out of hospitals and doctors' offices.

I never really knew how much I loved my father till the day I realized he would never be there again. He was so proud of all of us. Even to the day he died, he would ask about each one of his kids, what we were doing, how our lives were going! He raised us to be strong and taught us to stand up for our beliefs. He allowed us to make our own choices and supported us in all our endeavours.

His funeral was well attended. Many people from all walks of life came to testify about the positive role he played in their life. I was moved to see how he had touched so many people in his 75 years of life, people he had sent to school, helped find a job, and people he had helped flee the country in different times of social tensions. Beyond the role he played in their individual lives, my father played a key role in shaping Rwanda's destiny as early as 1961 when he took part in the successful negotiations for the independence of our country from Belgian rule.

The traditional mourning period for a father is one month. During that month, people took turns visiting our mother so that she didn't feel the emptiness in the house. At least that was the intention.

Once the mourning period was over, we travelled to Gisenyi, in the northwest, the town we came from. I hadn't been in my hometown since I left the government two years before. Oh, my

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beautiful Gisenyi! I miss you with your black dust, the lake, the high mountains, the cold, the kids jumping in the Kivu, the fishers, the red Sebeya river, the passers-by greeting people in every house they pass as they walk along the street: *"Muraho!" Hello.*

It was so strange to walk about the house we were all born in, my siblings and I, feeling his presence in all the rooms, remembering him sitting on the porch or in his favourite chair by the window in the living room, where he would read (he was an avid reader) or simply look at the magnificent view of Lake Kivu just steps down the road.

I felt lost, not knowing what to do. As I sat in my dad's favourite chair, I heard a persistent knock at the window. It was a wagtail, a little bird that's the totem of our family!

I felt overwhelmed! It was as though my father was waving at me from the grave, smiling at me. I called Mama and my brother, and we stood there by the window, looking at this tiny bird flapping its wings before flying away.

We Rwandans believe in symbolism, and this one was momentous for me. It was a sign that it was time for me too to conquer my fears, spread my wings and fly away to my own destiny.

"Papa, I will continue to walk the road you paved for Rwanda

In your never-ending fight for our freedom and independence.

I will hold on to the precious lesson you've taught me:

That it's as important to fight for freedom as it is to fight to stay free.

I will be an Umukonde like you,

With your love, I will Conquer my Life,

I will let go of my Ghosts and confront my Demons,

I will build a Legacy that will never bring shame to your name."

Rwanda, Where Souls Turn to Dust

On that beautiful afternoon, on February 27, 2007, standing in the house I grew up in, I decided to take the name *Umukonde* “Conqueror.” I would do so as a dedication to my beautiful native hills and the extraordinary man who nourished my love for the world, my pride in my ancestry and my devotion to my continent.

I chose to spell my name *Um’Khonde*, the South African way, as an additional tribute to another great influence in my life, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela and the lessons I learned from his life, his *Long Walk to Freedom* and his amazing legacy of peace.

CHAPTER 49

Being Um'Khonde has been a wonderful journey in itself. I have found life after I thought life was gone.

The end of the first part of my life marked the beginning of a new and more exciting chapter, the forging of a new self, allying the inner resilience I discovered on the political battlefields of Rwanda with the dreams and ambitions of the younger me, the idealist who was undeterred by adversity, the student who attended rallies to free Mandela and promote pan-Africanism, the president of the student association who fearlessly pressured the administration to improve the students' conditions, the activist who relentlessly called for the deportation of Rwandan war criminals hiding around the world, the statesman who tried to inspire other young people to be active in rebuilding Rwanda.

I have been on a journey of forgiveness and self-forgiveness, a journey of letting go of the anger and the hurt.

I have started writing again, and it fills me with indescribable joy. I had kept a journal since April 1994, when the Genocide started, but my last entry was dated November 2000, the month Cedric died.

It was wonderful to open my diary again, but it would be different this time. I decided to use it record my legacy in poetry and prose: I will write how I can impact the world, and not just how the world impacts me, as I used to do.

I carry my Legacy Journal everywhere I go; I even wake up in the middle of the night to write. And if I don't have it handy, I write on

napkins, on the borders of newspapers, in my gym notebook, and then I rush home to type up my notes.

It was quite unexpected, I have to say, to find myself connecting with the tradition of poetry and storytelling in my mother's family. My writing is like a poetic manifesto of sorts. Over the years, I've found inspiration in the world of the hungry and excluded, the losses of slavery and colonization, the harm of prejudice and racism and the soft embrace of love.

It's been a wonderful journey. I've shared the stage with great names of Canada's spoken word scene, and I have been featured in prestigious events, such as the International Dub Poetry Festival in Hamilton (November 2007), the closing ceremony of The Commemoration of the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Transatlantic Slave Trade (December 2007) and the Art Bar Poetry Series, Canada's longest running poetry-only reading series (February 2008).

Poetry took me, surprisingly, to the place I'd fought very hard to avoid when I was in Rwanda: prison. Yes, I was invited to perform in a Black History event organized by inmates of Joyceville Institution, a correctional facility near Kingston, Ontario.

It was one of the most amazing and humbling experiences I ever had. To see all these young men, most of them black like me, trying to rise above their circumstances and reach out to the world out there. Not only did they organize this event, but they also publish a newsletter, *Behind the Prison*, aimed at calling upon youth at risk to stop the violence. Through that newsletter, they share their stories and the lessons they learned in the lives that led to their incarceration.

I performed "The Murder of Jane Doe" a plea for the hungry and homeless. I wrote that monologue to remind people that we are all just seconds away from losing everything we have, including our identity. I also performed "I Want My Name Back." When I got to the part where I say: *"My name is not pagan, animist, slave, runaway slave, nonbeliever or savage; not poor, hungry, colonial,*

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war prone, underdeveloped, backward, primitive, unstable, refugee, third world,” one of the inmates stood up and yelled: “My name is not inmate number ——!”

While I was having lunch with them, many approached to thank me for my message. They didn't know that I was thankful to them for having taught me that leadership can come from different places, even from where we least expect it.

Through my writing and the people I met as I went on to share it, I gradually healed from all the pain and heartache. The dreamer in me started to re-emerge, smiling, strong and beautiful, and ready to fly again—one poem at a time.

CHAPTER 50

Since I came back to Canada, I have been blessed with invitations to share my thoughts on how to build a better society, a society that more successfully integrates the many individuals and families who come to Canada to build a better life. I have often shared with audiences the trauma of seeing the country where I was born reduced to ashes on the bonfires of discrimination and hatred.

I've been featured on various radio programs and have been invited to speak in different venues. In 2008, I was invited to join a program called Passages to Canada. The program is run by the Dominion Institute, an organization aimed at building active and informed citizens through a greater knowledge and appreciation of the Canadian story. The experience has been a true blessing. As a member of Passages to Canada speakers' bureau, I go to schools to share my story with students. I am always amazed at their maturity and compassion.

Sharing my story is not always easy. It requires me to look back at a past that I am trying so desperately to move away from. After telling my story, I often feel so empty, it hurts.

I remember in particular one occasion in April 2008, just three days before we were to commemorate the Rwandan Genocide for the 14th year. Canada was celebrating Refugee Rights Day, and the Canadian Broadcast Corporation's "Metro Morning Show" had invited me to share what it meant to be a refugee. While I was fine during the days leading up to the broadcast and in the few

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minutes I was on the air, I started losing my composure as I left the building.

By the time I got in my car, I could not find the energy to start the engine. The weight of the past, the paradox of twice becoming a refugee, the memories of all the people in my country and around the world who are forced out of their countries if they don't want to die—it was too much. Sitting in my car in the dark and wintry morning, I felt even more isolated, here on the empty streets of my beautiful Toronto, the city that had given me asylum in 1996 and again 2006, but where I still at times felt like a stranger.

“Why, God, why? What is the purpose of all the pain and all the lost lives? What’s the point of telling our stories if it doesn’t prevent more people from having to suffer persecution all around the world?”

I spent the day going through old pictures and letters of people long gone, trying to think of them so I would not think of myself.

In my poem “Solitude”, I wrote: *“My days have turned into never-ending todays pulling my tomorrows in an ugly yesterday.”*

Till when?

CHAPTER 51

I try not to give in to discouragement, but it's not always easy. Sometimes something happens and I feel I am back at square one. Last October, I led a mission of experts to Burundi. We were mandated by the International Fund for Agricultural Development to help the Burundian government develop an agricultural project to help smallholder farmers affected by war.

The trip to Burundi was a blessing in many ways. Burundi looks so much like Rwanda, I felt like I was back in my lost native country. Most importantly, Burundi is the country that gave asylum to my family during the 1994 Genocide, and this mission was giving me a way to repay that debt, even so modestly.

My parents were not the first in my family to find asylum in Burundi. My grandfather was a refugee there for about 30 years. I must stop for a moment and tell his story, at least part of it. In a way, my life has imitated his in many ways.

My maternal grandfather, Sylvestre Bulingufi, was a great man. His ancestry went all the way back to *Mwami* Cyilima I Rugwe, a Rwandan monarch of the late 15th century. Yet he was a very simple man, a true *imfura*, a noble man in all the meanings of that word. He was a primary school teacher in a small town called Rushashi, about 90 minutes north of Kigali. He was well respected by everyone because of his solid knowledge of Rwanda's culture, history and traditions, his Catholic faith and his wisdom.

It was his nobility of character and not his pedigree that earned

him the respect and trust of the Abiru, the main advisors to the king and hereditary holders of the royal code, a trust that led them to introduce him to the king himself. He was to become a close confidant and adviser to Mwami Kigeli Ndahindurwa, the last king of Rwanda, now in exile in the United States.

In 1962, when Rwanda declared its independence and abolished the monarchy, my grandfather was arrested simply because he was a friend and confidant of the royal family. With the help of some friends and relatives, he was able to escape custody while being transported to the infamous central prison of Kigali, known as 1930, the same prison I was almost incarcerated in some 43 years later.

Papa Mukuru (Big Papa), as his grandchildren called him, fled the country with his youngest children. He was forced to leave behind the children who were no longer living at home, including my mother. They all thought he was going to return after a few months, not knowing that it was going to be 32 years before he would come back to Rwanda. Could you imagine being separated from your own flesh and blood for 32 years just because some dictators didn't like your ethnic group! Thirty-two years!

Come to think of it, my own flight from Rwanda seems to be some sort of tragic family tradition, which I hope I will not pass on to my own kids.

So, on that trip to Burundi, I felt much more like a pilgrim than a development expert. I imagined my family walking those same streets I was walking on, buying food from the markets I passed or taking a moment to look at Lake Tanganyika, so reminiscent of our Lake Kivu.

Burundi reminded me of where Rwanda was 15 years earlier, a contradiction of images of destruction and redemption. There was so much hope in the eyes of the people we met, and children were so innocently laughing and running around, you almost forgot the war.

The government and rebels had signed a cease-fire to end 20 years

of political unrest, but you could feel the tension of the war amid the hope. There is an image I can't shake out of my head. We were heading upcountry for a field visit when we saw a horrifying scene: a body hanging from a tree in the middle of town. Everyone in the car fell silent as we passed by. I couldn't comprehend why no one was removing the body. How long had he been there? It was around nine in the morning, and it was likely he had been lynched during the night. Was it a message of some sort? From whom to whom? So many questions that I would never get an answer to, for I knew better than to ask.

I truly hoped projects like the one we were designing could help bring about peace, and I felt humbled to play a role, even so small, in the Burundian's path to a better future.

We stayed in Burundi for a couple weeks before continuing on to IFAD's headquarters in Rome to draft our report. Claus Reiner, a colleague who was in charge of Rwanda, approached me with a request that took me completely by surprise.

"I am planning several missions to Rwanda, and I thought of you. You are the perfect candidate to head these missions. You have an intimate knowledge of the country, plus you know all the projects in IFAD's portfolio in Rwanda."

I asked him if I could have a few days to think about it. There wasn't a day that passed that I did not think of Rwanda, but I wasn't sure if I was ready to go back. Since I had been so lucky get out of it alive, should I tempt the devil by going back to work with the same people I fled just three years before?

On the other hand, I felt I needed to go back and confront my demons. When I went back to Rwanda back in 2001, I dreamt of working to reconstruct my country. Politics had robbed me of that opportunity. Going back as an expert would give me a chance to work with farmers without being entangled in the party's machinations.

I called my mother and siblings to ask them what they thought of it. They had a right to speak, as anything that would happen to

me, good or bad, would affect them. They all encouraged me to accept.

“That will show them that you have moved on and that you don’t hold any grudges. You are as Rwandan as anyone else, and no one should take that away from you.”

I talked with Claus Reiner and told him that I was interested in going to Rwanda. Because of my past political “situation,” we agreed that I should call the new minister of agriculture to ask him what he thought of me coming as a UN expert to review a project in his ministry.

I was nervous as I made that awkward call. The ministry was now headed by Christophe Bazivamo, vice president of the ruling party. I didn’t want to think too much about his position in the party. I had known Christophe for years, even before we both entered government. We had sat on the board of directors of the Rwandan Tea Authority, and I liked to believe we were good friends. The last time I spoke with him was on my first day under house arrest; he’d phoned to inquire how I was doing. It was an awkward five-minute conversation.

When I phoned Christophe and told him why I was calling, I insisted that I would not come if they thought my coming back in this way was inappropriate.

He dismissed my apprehensions. *“What are you talking about? We’d love to have you here, Patrick. That way you can come and help us with the projects you started!”*

I should have known better than to believe him. When IFAD sent a correspondence announcing the first mission I was to lead on behalf of the UN agency, the Ministry of Agriculture replied that they didn’t want me on the team in any capacity whatsoever.

I will never understand why we say one thing when we mean something else. Why not simply say no and not have IFAD find itself in the awkward situation where a country refuses the proposed head of mission.

I later found out that the Rwandan government did want me to come back, but only if I would first apologize for humiliating them publicly when I went to hide in the Canadian Embassy in May 2005 while Rwanda was receiving foreign dignitaries attending the COMESA summit. What? Who was going to apologize to me for the baseless accusations, the persecution, the house arrest, the phony trial, the heinous articles? I had forgotten how arrogant they were. It was they who almost robbed me of my freedom, and now they were the ones to sit and wait for an apology from me! How laughable!

I was demoralized for several days. The incident brought back all the memories of my last years in government, memories I thought I had let go of. People often tell me that I can be very naïve; I defend myself saying that I am idealistic, not naïve, but I guess this quid pro quo somehow proved them right. It was definitely naïve of me to think that because I had decided to move on, they were moving on too. This showed me that it wasn't over for them.

There are days when I regret having worked for the Rwandan Patriotic Front. That October in Burundi was probably one of the times I would have given everything I have to go back to the days before I received that call in 2002 from Charles Muligande, the party's secretary-general, the call that led me to the path I was now on.

CHAPTER 52

I didn't like what this was doing to me. I needed to find something positive in this incident, otherwise it was going to take me down again.

It was hard to think that I was unwanted in my own country just because some mob decided that they were the only ones entitled to live there. But it could have been worse: they could have said yes to my coming back and then made my life miserable once I was there.

The other important thing is that this event showed me that I had healed in ways I could not have imagined before. When I left Kigali in May 2006, I was a completely broken man. To see that I could consider going back to work there, even if in a different capacity, was in itself a clear testimony of who I had become since.

Birthdays are always a day for me to reflect on my life and try to make important resolutions for the year to come. I celebrated my 40th birthday in Rome, just a few days after that fiasco. No one can stay sad very long in Rome, one of the most beautiful cities in the world, not even me. I decided that I should move on once and for all. God had given me so much, so I should stop dwelling on what I don't have.

Leaving Rwanda gave me an opportunity to start everything over. I know for a fact that so many people never get a second chance in life. But I was enjoying a new career that was taking me places, to Guelph, Burundi, Comoros, Benin and so many other places.

Rwanda, Where Souls Turn to Dust

I might never go back to live in Rwanda, but I was going to make my life an expression of the Rwanda I always dreamed of, the Rwanda that had been obscured by the clouds of hatred and prejudice. The great American poet Claude McKay wrote: “Cherish your strength, my Strong Black Brother. Be not dismayed because the struggle is hard and long. O, my warm wonderful race. The fight is longer than a span of life; the test is great. Gird your loins, sharpen your tools! Time is on your side. Carry on in organizing and conserving your forces for a great purpose—for the Day.”

My tools are my words. Writing is simply my life. Writing formed me when I didn't know who I was, saved me when I thought I was going to perish, healed me when I thought I was wounded forever. My fight is a fight for a more just society, a society that defends and does not step on the defenceless.

I use my words to inspire other people to rethink what they take for granted, to revisit and question history, to think of the human condition, to teach people to see and be seen.

CHAPTER 53

I am learning to own the good and the bad in my life as I write and share. I am embracing all of it, for it was the road that led me to where I am today and is the foundation of the new life I am building.

I had an extraordinary and quite unusual life. I became a doctor at 25 as I was losing my country to Genocide; but at the age of 27, I could only find work as a manual labourer in Canada, the country where I sought and received asylum, learning as I went to unlearn all I ever thought my life would be; at 30, I went back to school to get a master's degree; at 33, I was a lecturer in the University of Rwanda before becoming the youngest member of cabinet; at 35, I headed one of the biggest economic ministries in my native country. I resigned from office at 36, was locked in my house by my former employer, was tried, convicted and acquitted for a crime that never existed. And at 37, I started everything over in Canada, my dear second nation.

I lived through three dictators, and I can proudly tell the world that I survived all of them.

And I have to recognize that not all was bad when I was in government. Despite how it ended, being minister at such a young age was an honour. It was a time of extraordinary learning, learning about my profession, my country, my people, myself.

I met heads of states, heads of governments, members of governments and leaders from all backgrounds and from all the

continents. I met extraordinary people, some whom I admire greatly, such as Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, Benjamin Mkapa (then president of the United Republic of Tanzania), Jakaya Kikwete (soon to become president of Tanzania), John Kuofofor of Ghana, and Donald Kaberuka, my compatriot and friend, the president of the African Development Bank. I was received by Jacques Diouf, the director-general of FAO, Lennart Bage, when he was president of IFAD, and Ambassador Robert Zoellick in his days as the U.S. trade representative. And I also met many others whom the world would be much better off without.

I travelled to places I never thought I would ever set foot in. I represented Rwanda on IFAD's Governors Council and at FAO Conference, I led delegations to the discussions with the United States on AGOA and the Doha Development Agenda, meetings with the European Union in Brussels, and meetings with members of Parliament in the United Kingdom. I met colleagues from various governments all across the African continent.

I received numerous delegations from almost every continent, representatives of donor countries and international and multilateral agencies, international and national nongovernmental organizations and business leaders wanting to be part of the revitalization of Rwanda's economy.

But despite all the glitz and perceived glamour of my VIP life, my fondest memories of Rwanda are the times I spent with my students at the National University in Butare and the hard-working farmers in the countryside. Both groups helped me stay grounded. It humbled me to know that I was entrusted with the power to better their lives and that I should endeavour to use it wisely. I reminisce with fondness on my visits to maize growers in Ruhengeri and Bugesera, the wheat growers in Byumba, Gikongoro, pyrethrum growers in the volcanoes region, potatoes growers in my native Gisenyi, horticulturalists in Kigali, and cattle keepers in Gishwati and Umutara.

I have a new life, a life as far removed as it can be from the excellencies, majesties, generals and honourable colleagues, from

state protocols, bodyguards, chauffeurs and executive obligations. I have no qualms about travelling by public transit or flying coach. I don't live in a luxurious 200 million franc mansion like that attributed to me by the demented shadow powers of Kigali. My life is simple, and I love every second of it because all of it is authentic.

At times, I even manage to laugh about my sojourn in Rwandan politics, especially when my literature-loving mind pictures that time of my life as a real cross between Aimé Césaire's *The Tragedy of King Christophe* and "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" from *One Thousand and One Nights*. Major General Paul Kagame suddenly becomes more pitiful than scary when cast as Christophe, the tragic Haitian ruler who desperately wanted to become royalty, or the nameless Head Thief, hiding his unlawfully acquired treasure in a cave and killing anyone who uncovered his dark secret. Simply pitiful.

It has taken me almost four years to write this book, four years since that day of June 2005 when I tried to cope with solitary confinement by writing about my recurring nightmares. And in those four years, I went back to my first days in Canada, from my life in a shelter as a refugee claimant to graduating from one of Canada's most prestigious universities. I relived the loss of my godson and my return to my birth country. I retraced my journey back to exile and my battle against my inner demons.

The process was quite painful at times. I had to go back to memories I wish I could part with. I had to relive every moment of the infamous 1994 Genocide and the days that preceded it, and everyday of my seclusion and trial.

At the same time, recollection liberated me in ways I never imagined possible before embarking on this trip down memory lane. One of the strangest realizations I came to on this amazing journey, is that I have long forgiven Paul Kagame and his entourage for everything they subjected me to during my last years in Rwanda. And in forgiveness, I found my true liberation: the liberation of my soul.

I believe that the new powers of Kigali did not hate me personally as Patrick. I believe that they hated, or rather feared, what I represented, the idea that there were people out there who did not view Rwanda through ethnic or regional lenses, people who believed that we were all one and all meant to live together in harmony. Their fear was so great, they resorted to same means used by the regime that led us to the Genocide; they used the media, the police, the army, the prosecutor's office and the Parliament just to destroy someone who wasn't "one of theirs."

This idea frightened them the same way it frightened previous regimes; and like previous regimes, they tried to ascertain their own worth by robbing me of my value.

I am every Rwandan who dreams of a better future. By persecuting me, they expressed as much hatred for themselves as for me as I am their own flesh and blood whether they want it or not.

That fear of a different Rwanda is our country's worst enemy, an Evil rooted in our troubled past and anchored in our divided present.

Already in my lifetime, millions of innocent people have been cruelly killed or exiled. Sadly, my story is likely not the last such story. As long as we of Rwanda allow hatred and not love to guide our destiny, we will not rise from our shameful ethnic trap, and many more will be sacrificed.



**CONCLUSION:
MY LEGACY**

*Would you have envisioned such a wonderful conclusion
If you had seen where my journey started?
Could you have imagined me here today,
Standing at the Gates of My Dreams,
iJabiro, my Day Dream to build my life on,
My own promised land of poems and lyrics
Telling tales of dreams and dreamers
To better the world for the forgotten and the overlooked,
Singing Hymns of Liberation built on beauty and sorrows?
Could you have imagined that I would once again
Spread my wings and fly high, up to the sky
So I can leave my past behind?*

Excerpt from “*The Sacred Gates of iJabiro,*”
The Poetic Journal of Um’Khonde

MY LEGACY

When I came back to Canada in May 2006, I promised myself I would never be a hostage of those last years in Rwanda, which were filled with so much hatred, disillusionment and solitude. Yet whenever I start thinking of those times, I am filled with such sadness, I know I am still tied to my past in so many ways.

Writing this book has given me permission to stop my life journey for a moment and grieve for my losses. As time goes by, I can feel my ties loosening up, and I hope—I know—I will one day be completely free of that part of my life that wounded me so deeply and almost destroyed me forever. Once just a survivor, I am now becoming an overcomer, stronger than I've ever been before.

I must stop looking at my life through the grey lenses of exile. Exile can only keep me trapped in the memories of what I lost, preventing me from embracing all the exciting things awaiting me in my new country, Canada, and in the world. For much too long, I have tethered my life to the bad things, the loss of my loved ones, the loss of my dreams, the loss of my native land. It is time to centre my life around the good in it, the good in me, the good that is and the good that can be.

So many times in my life, I allowed others to determine which opportunities I should or should not have access to. And by doing so, I tacitly allowed others to determine what my legacy will be. It's

my time to define my own aspirations and build my own legacy, a legacy free of hatred, free of prejudice and free of fears.

It will not be an easy journey, but who said it should be? I will make mistakes and misjudgments, but with God by my side, I will have the humility to learn from each and every one of them and have the wisdom and the strength to undo the wrong. I know that my father and the long lineage of Bakonde will look over me, their own, the latest Umukonde. They will hold my hand and guide me as rise to conquer my fears and embrace my purpose.

We are the generation of new beginnings. Our generation tore down the Berlin wall, witnessed the crumbling of the Soviet Union, saw the end of apartheid and celebrated the independence of the last African countries under foreign rule.

Despite all that happened to me, I still believe that we are the generation of renewed pride. We saw Mandela come out of prison and lead South Africa to freedom. We witnessed Barack Obama walk from Springfield, Illinois, to Pennsylvania Avenue, becoming the first black man to occupy the most powerful office in the world.

I will continue looking for inspiration in this unfolding legacy of Barack Obama, in the continued legacy of Nelson Mandela and in the lives of all the great men and great women who have demonstrated throughout history that all is possible to those who believe.

Healing one's spirit requires the courage to look at your psychological wounds and confront the events, however tragic or traumatic, that inflicted them.

Writing this book is my way of embracing my healing, of ceasing to hide my scars and instead proudly exhibiting them like the most precious heirlooms, priceless medals of honour earned on the battlefield called My Life.

This is my story so far. It's not the end but merely the beginning,

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the beginning of yet another journey in the wonderful world of limitless dreams.

I can't wait to find out what life has in store for me and what my contribution to the world's legacy will be. My own Legacy is beautifully unfolding before my eyes, and I love where it is taking me. Do you care to join me?

My Legacy is a road of expectations, of new happy moments and new memories. It's a road of laughter, passionate and intense. My Legacy is made of kind moments, the excitement of new friendships and new loves, of loving and being loved, of inspiring and being inspired, of new dreams to fulfill, of exotic places to explore, spicy scents to discover, vibrant music to dance to, world foods to feast on, a legacy of body, mind and spirit reclaimed.

My Legacy is a poem ready to be written, a song ready to be chanted, a conversation ready to be held, a project ready to be developed. My legacy will be marked by tragedies I will report, injustices I will stop, abuses I will expose and Evil I will defeat.



EPILOGUE:
THE SACRED GATES OF IJABIRO

(The Gates of My Dreams)

*Would you have predicted my present
If you had known me in my past?
Would you have imagined my bay window
My unique view of the world in royal purple,
My private silky way to the stars,
Ever shiny, bright and bold,
High in the sky, so near, so far,
My private bridge to infinity,
Mine and mine alone?*

*Would you have foreseen my Freedom
If you had seen me in my cage?
A refugee with nothing but nightmares,
Eight dollars in my pockets
And a greyhound ticket to my Freedom,
Skyscrapers hiding the lake to my cold shelter,
Loud factories to bind my mind and destroy my soul,
A metallic beat to pace my dance in steel-toed boots,
The smell of hot paper off the printers to write off my story,
Telephones ringing off the hook to sell out my dreams.*

*Would you have known that I once flew
If I hadn't told you of the day they clipped my wings?*
A stranger in the place I was born,
Gagged so the world would not hear my shouts,
Locked away so the world would not see my tears.
A Today made of desolate yesterdays,
Drinking fair trade coffee to mask the smell of loss
And wash away the dust of my own unfair trade
Of betrayals drying up my throat.

*Would you have envisioned such a wonderful conclusion
If you had seen where my journey started?*
Could you have imagined me here today,
Standing at the Gates of My Dreams,
iJabiro, my Day Dream to build my life on,
My own promised land of poems and lyrics
Telling tales of dreams and dreamers
To better the world for the forgotten and the overlooked,
Singing Hymns of Liberation built on beauty and sorrows?
Could you have imagined that I would once again
Spread my wings and fly high, up to the sky
So I can leave my past behind?

Could you have imagined?

**THE POETIC JOURNAL
OF UM'KHONDE**



Poetic Journal entry, May 22, 2007

Crossroads. A few days ago, I celebrated my first year of Freedom. Quietly. Silently.

In a few days, I will remember that day that changed my life and liberated me from my hell: May 30, 2005, the day I abruptly left government.

I bought this journal in 2000, yet I never wrote anything in it. Probably because 2000 was the year I lost my little godson Cedric and nothing made sense anymore after that.

Today, my journal will be opened for business again, but a different business this time: I will use it for my poetry.

I am sitting at the Trane Studio, one of my favourite spots in Toronto. It's open mic tonight, but I won't be performing. No. Today, I'll just lay back and enjoy the moment.

It's still quiet, a little past 9 pm. The crowd often arrives later, around 10. Tonight's featured artist is a singer called Mellow D. He's from Ottawa.

Let the poetry begin!

Things I Never Say

There are things I never say in my poems
Probably because I am scared to immortalize my pain.
I am scared of letting my guard down,
Scared of letting anyone know
That my Exile hurts as acutely as Prejudice,
That the Evil I saw in my life still haunts me
Even when I look up to God,
That Hatred has barricaded me for life
In a cage of doubts about humanity,
That I have scars deep in my soul that you would see
If you only took the time to look me in the eyes.

There are things I never express in my poems
Probably because I am scared to immortalize my distress.
I am scared of letting my mask down,
Scared of letting anyone know
That my true MA is in Mastering the Art
Of hiding the scars in my eyes and the pain in my heart
By looking through the world and not at the world,
By smiling to the world and not with the world.

There are things I never say in my poems,
So many things, too many things.

Solitude: My Untold Story (*The End*)

I stopped counting the days. What's the point? Every day looks the same. My days have turned into never-ending todays pulling my tomorrows in an ugly yesterday.

Oh, yesterday!

Yesterday, I woke up in a cage, a cold, intricate web cracking my sky and covering my world with shadows, an intriguing patchwork breaking my life in a thousand sharp-edged pieces, a puzzling puzzle; an unsolvable mystery!

Yesterday, I opened my eyes to a distorted reality, a strange yet familiar place, an overcrowded pit with people running around me, stepping over me, crying, screaming, aching, wolves barking at me, and my mind shackled to demons in green camouflage and shiny combat boots!

Yesterday, I woke up in a cage. Was it built overnight while I was sleeping, or had it been there all along? I can't recall!

When I look back at my childhood, I can't remember any shackles or any chains. When I look back at my childhood, all I can remember is being a dreamer, a relentless dreamer. I would dream in broad daylight! I would close my eyes and dream that I had wings and that I could fly.

Oh, *in My Dreams!* *In My Dreams*, the world was cheerful, unchallenging, welcoming. *In My Dreams*, the scenery was breathtaking, with magnificent emerald mountains, lavish copper-coloured rivers, steamy waterfalls and crystalline azure lakes! *In My Dreams*, the wildlife was elegant: giraffes dancing with cassias, orchids with gorillas, ibis with jacarandas, eagles with palm trees and all birds of paradise claiming their birthright to majesty!

Did I spend my life hiding behind a dream that was not? Did I dream all the time so I can evade the harshness, the coldness, the senselessness of this world around me? Did I dream my life away?

Everything in my cage seems so sordid and awkward! I can't feel my wings anymore, even when I close my eyes! When I jump in the air, I fall, and my fall isn't stopped by anything! I fall in an endless trap, dark and frightening!

I am surrounded by cold and shivering images of the underworld, Ghosts, my past, my present, you, me, illusions and visions of a life fading away before it even started!

I see tortured souls, bleeding like wounded flesh! I see our freedom fighters, Marcus, and Martin, and Malcolm, and Sankara, and Biko, and Mandela, bashed and murdered repeatedly!

I see Dark Mad Men! Stark, dark, darker than charcoal, colder than ice, killing their own with sharp machetes, piercing their defenceless bodies with wooden sticks, slaughtering our children, raping our sisters and burying our elders alive! Infanticide! Fratricide! Genocide!

And I keep falling, faster and deeper, spinning and spiralling down the bottomless well! All is sombre and foggy! I am filled with emotions I can't control, unwelcome sensations that tear my mind apart: fear, anger, shame, outrage, angst, revolt ...

... and cowardice!

And me, I ask myself, how will I die? Will my death be swift and painless or my agony cruelly long and the pain unbearable? Will I show the courage of the Greats or will I shamefully beg for mercy? Will my death be glorious and save many more, or will I die like a vagabond in the back-alleys of history?

How will I be remembered? *Or will I even be remembered?*

No music is playing anymore, no kids are laughing anymore! Brutality and hatred have invaded everything; violence has replaced violins, trees are leafless, flowers are dry and purple! There are no lakes and no parks! *Life* and *My Dream* have fused into a tenebrous, pervasive and invasive *Nightmare!*

Yesterday, I woke up in a nightmare, a sordid play that keeps pulling me and forcing me to stare at it, to star in it, to feel it, to breathe it, to smell it! My nightmare is shady, sweaty, smelly and filthy!

Friends, where have you gone? You used to be my brothers and my sisters, my companions, but today, you've abruptly vanished from my life, without warning!

My house is now my prison! They've taken possession of my yard like an army of mercenaries in a lawless land! They've invaded my place of solace, my tropical garden! The drumming of their ever-polished black boots on the ground and the clicking of their guns against their bodies as they pace back and forth have now replaced the singing of the birds; butterflies have stopped dancing, awaiting what can only be a fatality: *my September, fall of my life!*

I see them before me, behind me, everywhere, surrounding me! They are blocking my path, restraining me, demeaning me! My face is pressed onto their dirty world; I close my eyes, but it doesn't go away! Death has become me, flocks of vultures are circling me tirelessly! How did it come to this? How did I let my life drift away from me?

I am dragged to their death squad in black robes! Mirrors are breaking at my passage, shattering like my dream! The wind

blowing through the broken doors is devilishly calling my name!
It's raining blue, black and grey tracts, all echoing my torment
in hideous red type, repulsive lies, small and large, pointing to
my picture, a bodiless, dismembered, two-dimensional replica of
me, a parody of what I used to be, sternly staring at the ceiling!

What has become of my beautiful dreams? I am besieged
by vindication and terror! Hate is pouring over me, wet, damp,
salty, assaulting my life, hitting me hard like stones, violating my
being, crushing my beliefs! I've turned into a phantom, a spectre,
a satiric character in yet another African *fait-divers*! Who's
bestowed upon me this malediction? Who cursed my bloodline?
Who cast this deadly spell on me? I am wearing my mixed
blackness like a crown of thorns, the unwanted mulatto of a race
torn apart!

Where are the kids so they can sing away my sorrow?
Where is Lake Kivu so it can wash away my tears? Where are
the wild horses to whisk me to the Land of the Bakonde? Where
is the Ambassador Bridge so I can cross over to the safety of my
Country of Asylum?

Where is God so His mighty army can shield me from my
tragic demise? I am living in this endless nightmare! I want to
get out, but I can't. I am trapped in my nightmare, and I can't get
out!

An Indian Summer Dream

I dream our Canadian Mosaic
As beautiful Stained Glass,
Like those in places of Worship,
Stained glass that would make you feel so at peace
Just by standing by it.
I dream our Canadian Mosaic
As beautiful Stained Glass
Featuring a happy Canadian family,
All ages, all colours, all genders,
With colourful clothes and eccentric accessories,
A golden mural of autumn maple leaves in the back,
A sweet and sour meal to treat their palates.
I dream our Canadian Mosaic
Was a beautiful Dream on Stained Glass,
An Indian Summer Celebration
To be painted by all of us.
And unlike those abstract paintings
Fancied by galleries and museums,
No art expert would need to tell the rest of the world
That *An Indian Summer Celebration*
Is the true master of all pieces!

My Destiny?

A distressing question
One day invaded my mind,
One of those unnerving queries
That keeps nagging you and bugging you
Till you can't think about anything else,

One of those silly queries
That drags your mind
In a one-way street of uneasiness
On a crank quest to an unpleasant destination.

It was a cold winter night;
I was coming from work
On a crowded midnight bus,
My back aching from handling with care
Tiny fragile parcels
And loading oversized and overweight boxes
Onto a truck to Orillia, and three trucks to Ajax, and two to
Montreal.

At first, just a whisper
As we passed Mount Pleasant.
Just shook my head
And sent it flying by the window.
It was back before we reached Leslie,
And by the time we passed the valley,
It was all I could hear
In my troubled and tired head.

I tried to contain the flow, but could not.
Had to rush off the bus
Before I even reached Kennedy
For fear of waking up
The other ghosts sitting by my side.
What if this was my reality? was the troubling question.

*What if this life of midnight shifts and sleepless nights,
These humiliations and losses, my lot for far too long,
Were all along meant to be mine?*

What if this was in fact my real destination
And not just a transition to a happier destiny?
I would have probably kept wondering
As I wandered down the empty road,
If my primal will to survive the sharp winter cold
Hadn't forced me out this icy trap.

But I stayed troubled and angry for several days,
Not at the question, but at myself,
And at this society that forced me into
This midnight query of uneasiness.

Solitude: My Untold Story (*The Beginning*)

Pause! Stop! Silence! Life stand still! Fear and doubts,
walk away from me! I don't want to be remembered as a victim!

Let's start over! Rewind. Strike. Rebirth! Yesterday,
solitary confinement liberated me!

Yesterday, solitary confinement liberated me from *mental
slavery!*

Yesterday, I looked through the bars of oppression,
discrimination, isolation and abandonment and saw *Freedom*, a
beautiful lone midnight star shining through my solitary night!

Yesterday, it took *physical shackles* to make me realize
that I was free, freer than I've ever been, freer than I will ever be,
freer than the wind, because *My Soul* was free!

I found freedom in my family's unconditional LOVE, I
found freedom in the sacrifice, in the gift of oneself for others, a
gift I received a thousand times throughout my life, even before
my life had started.

My soul was freed from bondage long before I was
born, freed through the sacrifices of all the brothers and sisters
who, throughout history, have stood up against injustice and
subjugation *so that We, so that I* will never be silenced again!

I found God within my inhumane cave. I found God in
the land of the ungodly. I found God in the dark corners of my
solitude. It is my time to surrender to His Will, with no questions
asked and no hesitation! It is my time to stand up and stay
strong! It is my time to lend my voice to the voiceless. It is my
time to lend my sight to those without eyes!

Liberty is my sanctuary, and I will not give in to terror!

I will not be silent in the face of tyranny! My deeds will be my legacy; my words will rain on my oppressors like a thousand swords! Even my tiniest whispers will travel through space and time.

The struggle will wage on, for from my dust will rise a million more, strong, proud, undefeatable and peaceful black freedom warriors!

I will look death in the eye! And when the bullets hit my flesh, my shackles will fall off and I will fly again!

I will rise and go to a place where children play and run around freely, innocently laughing under the sun, and I will meet Douglass and Du Bois, and Martin and Malcolm, and Marvin, and Marcus and Rosa, and Harriet, and Marley, and McKay, and Fanon, and Ellison and Langston, and Wright and Nkrumah, and Biko and Baldwin, and Robeson, and Cheikh Anta, and Sankara, and Rudahigwa, and Shaka, and Sélassié!

And I will sit with my father again, and with Antoinette, and Flora, and Cedric, and Agathe—I will sit with them on a bench of precious wood.

Eternity, a place where music never stops playing.

I am Um'Khonde, a Child of Africa. This is my world.

Did I Tell You of the Day I Died?

I will never forget the day
A Man on a Red Velvet Throne
On a big pedestal before a muzzled crowd
Sent me to my death,
Ten masked hunchbacks invoking the Devil,
Cold and senseless motions
To end my dream.

Raindrops of blood on a marble floor,
Rays of sweat and tears
Shining through the night
And three angels crying
At the sight of my drowning hopes.

I will never forget Ntebe,
The Palace of Deceit;
A Man on a Red Velvet Throne
In a soft voice: Destroy him.
Mantra of hatred and a smiling Judas
And a blindfolded crow,
That's all it took.

Silent claps on a dusty place,
Illusions of peace, broken
And tortured and killed
For a borrowed chair
And a field of nothingness;
Worthless pawn
In the land of death.

I will never forget the day
A man on a Red Velvet Throne
Sent me to my death,
Because the skies opened wide
And, cutting through the shadows

Amidst midnight thunders
And blinding light,
Here was the Hand of God
To lift me in the air.

I will never forget the day I died,
Because that's the day I started living
For the first time in my life!

Children of Shitani

Rwanda dying in me every day,
My tears and my blood
In a darkness that is forever mine.
Liberation. Extenuation. Fabrication.

The Children of Shitani,
Red eyes and crocodile smirks,
Murderers and Thieves,
In Castles of Gold bricks,
Rise of the Faithless,
Destruction of Gasabo,
Silent drums painted with our children's blood:
Rwanda, Will you be forever lost
On this purposeless journey?
Sleepwalkers and Motionless spirits,
Dead-end dreams and no way out,
Breeding refugees and orphans—
Puzzle to the world!

Puzzle to me!
Death of the innocent
Toads crawling from putrid holes,
Hoarse barks sparking,
Calling us from the bridge to hell.

Puzzle to me!
Frightened flocks of human decay
Walking at a mechanical pace
With vacant eyes and vacated souls;
Mothers living in a never-ending mourning,
Children crippled by your hand.

Rwanda, close your eyes,
And let this pass,
Heavy heads and heavy hearts,

Wrinkles and scars
On the face of hatred,
Aching lips cracked under the sun,
Opened mouths and sore throats
Of those who forgot how to speak.

Rwanda, I feel your hurt deep inside my soul.
Tell me what it will take
To heal your wounds
And appease your restless soul.

Survivors' Blues

Can someone stop and listen to my story, please? I know you don't know me, but I tried talking to my friends, and they were busy. You know how it is, life, work ...

My name is Um'Khonde, and I write the Blues. I write the Blues, because that's the only way I know how to share my life without breaking down.

It all started when my country was stolen from me, you know? My life was reduced to ashes on the bonfires of hatred. And even to this day, I can't let go, I won't let go! I can't stop thinking of how things used to be and how things will never be again.

I am a stateless, identity-less wreck, drifting from one land to another in hope of finding a place to rest my soul.

So, I just write the Blues.

See, when it all happened, I wanted My World, my friends, to stop and share in my sorrow. But it's only the strangers who saw me, approached me and lovingly patted me on the back. My World kept moving, laughing, chatting and passing me by, with the indifference and self-assurance of those who were never wounded.

So, I just write the Blues.

See, I write the Blues, because it's the only way I can tell people how it feels to live among the dead when you are alive, or how the memory of their smiles or the echo of their laughter brings tears to my eyes even when I am in public.

I write the Blues, because I miss being a kid. I was known for my happy character and my laughter! In fact, I loved laughing so

much that even the mere threat of tickling me would make me burst into unstoppable laughter!

But today, I can't remember the last time I laughed like that. I lost touch with the child in me. I lost him along with my hopes and with my dreams, and he won't come back.

So, I just write the Blues.

See, I write the Blues, because it's the only way I can say how it feels to have nightmares even when you are awake, or how it feels to be scared of public celebrations because firecrackers remind you of gunshots and because news choppers turn into military killing machines when you blink your eyes.

So, I just write the Blues.

How else would I tell you that it is Silence that kills me the most? That my life has been invaded by a pervasive silence filled with conspicuous glares, overbearing compassion and unuttered questions? That it surrounds me like an invisible yet palpable veil, cutting through me like a sharp dagger whenever I try to move away?

I write the Blues, because everything in me is chaotic and turbulent, because my head is filled with screams and cries, because my heartbeat has become a continuous sob.

I write the blues in a desperate attempt to reach out to my friends, to help them understand why it's hard for me to open up to them!

How else would I tell them that I am scared to unseal my lips for fear that voicing my pain will paralyze me? That I am scared that talking will hurt me? That I might shout and scream in pain instead of talking normally? That my words will crash into one another in a disturbing and unpleasant cacophony? That my

inner incoherence will invade their peaceful worlds and hurl them against the walls of my lamentations?

So, I just write the Blues.

You ask yourself why my writing is so sad and so blue. Well, when you've lost about everything that really matters to you, all you can do is to cling to your right to have the Blues.

Departed

Why does everyone tell me you've departed
When I know that you are still here?
Your voice and your laughter
Are the first things I hear
Every morning when I wake up,
And your smile
Is the last thing I see
Every night before I go to sleep.

Why does everyone tell me to let you go
When you are the only reason I won't let go?
What else, if not your love,
Makes me stronger
When the world made me a cripple?

Your eyes are the ever-shining light
Seeing me through the clouds of sorrow
And through the shadows of solitude.

Everyone tells me that you are gone,
But me, I know that you are here,
Yes, I know that you are here.
Tout le monde vous dit partis,
Mais moi, je sais que vous êtes là.
Oui, je sais que vous êtes là.

Sometimes

Sometimes,
When I hear stories of missing people,
Missing people reunited with their families,
I start dreaming.

I start dreaming
Just for one happy moment
That my dear departed did not die.
I start to dream that they too
Will, one happy day,
Walk to my front door.

I start imagining
Just for one silly instant
The way I will run,
Heels over head and head over heels,
To greet them and hug them
And kiss them, and cry and laugh,
And all the pain will be gone.

Sometimes,
Just for one happy moment—

Sometimes,
Sometimes.

I Want My Name Back!

If I am so well spoken, why is it that, whenever I try to speak my mind freely, my every word is met with indignation and contempt?

If I am so “articulate,” why is any attempt of mine to spell out the makings of my pain received with such grief and resentment?

Is my ability to put down in rhymes and break down in verse the mishaps of my race such a threat that I should be wise to stand mute? Am I feared of being so eloquent that my prose will ignite fires and my poetry will bring the world to a sudden stop?

Is my voice so powerful that upon hearing it, countries will tragically turn into shambles?

I don't understand the commotion, really, because what I want is so simple: *I just want my name back!*

I want my name back! And no, my name is not pagan, animist, slave, runaway slave, nonbeliever or savage; not poor, hungry, colonial, war prone, underdeveloped, backward, primitive, unstable, refugee, third world, illegal alien, impoverished, tribalist, nigger, at risk, thug, gangsta, ethnic, inmate, visible minority or any other name I'm called!
No!

I want my name back! My name that told the world in *Akan, Baoule, Bamileke, Bemba, Bambara, Dinka, Haussa, Berber, Serer, Wolof,*

Yoruba, Igbo, Gbe, Mina, Fon, that I am where
it all began, the cradle of Mankind!

I want my name back! My name that told
Nations in *Kinyarwanda, Kiswahili, Nyoro,*
Oromo, Tigrinya, Lingala, Luba, Songhai,
Sotho, Shona, Xhosa, Tswana, Swazi, Zulu,
who I am and the glory of my ancestry and not
what the world made me to be!

I want my name back! My name that
stretched from Timbuktu to Meroë and
Kerma, my name that crossed the Rainforest
and the Savanna, my name that curved along
the Nile, the Congo and the Zambezi, my
name as high as the Kilimanjaro and as deep
as the Tanganyika, my name that tanned under
the Sahara and the Kalahari sun and was
cleansed by the oceans.

I want my name back! My name depicted in
hieroglyphs that confounded explorers, my
name written in old Nubian that perplexed
anthropologists, my name pronounced in
Amharic that intrigued doctors of philosophy,
my name in the Rift valley that contradicted
the history of Civilization, my name in
Gold and Diamonds that caused Majesties,
Highnesses and Excellencies to lose their
minds!

I want my name back! My name painted on
Papyrus and Bark cloth that stood the test of
time, my name symbolized in Adinkra that
called upon Peace to the World and my name
ritualized in Vaudou that caused the world to
fear my Gods!

I want my name back! My name behind
Dogon doors and Ndebele painted walls, my
name on ebony thrones and leopard skins, my
name clothed in Kente and Faso dan fani, my
name crowned with precious pearls and gold,
my name with copper bracelets and silver
rings, my name with raised arms and painted
faces.

I want my name back! My name violated but
never replicated, my name in the mystery of
the Pyramids and the mystique of the Sphinx,
my name within the sanctity of Axum and the
sanctuary of the Great Zimbabwe, my name
under the vigilance of Alexandria's lighthouse
and the luxuriance of the Ngorongoro!

I want my name back! My name on the lips
of Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, and on the hips
of Makeda, Queen of Sheba, my name in the
fist of Shaka and at the feet of Sounjata, my
name on the shoulders of Barack Obama and
on the chest of Mandela, my name in the voice
of Lumumba and in the eyes of Soyinka, my
name in the drumbeats of Doudou Ndiaye
Rose and the songs of Makeba that captured
the heartbeat of Humanity!

I want my name back! My name with the
nonchalance of the lion and the elegance of
the crown crane, my name with the speed
of the cheetah and the grace of the impala,
my name with the flamboyance of the red
flamingo and the insolence of the baboon, my
name with the quietness of the silver-back and
the mercilessness of the black mamba.

I want my name back! My name moulded in Clay and melted in Bronze, my name carved in Wood and sculpted in Stone, my name woven in Cotton and interlaced in Sisal, my name painted on Bogolan and Batik, my name coloured in indigo and mud, my name in the nostalgia of Césaire and the Tears of Rwanda!

I want my name back! My name flavoured with Coffee and scented with Coconut, my name served with Atcheke and Aloko, my name blessed with Milk and sweetened with Honey, my name healed with Tamarind and sealed with Masé.

I want my name back! And no, my name is not pagan, animist, slave, runaway slave, nonbeliever or savage; not poor, hungry, colonial, war prone, underdeveloped, backward, primitive, unstable, refugee, third world, alien, impoverished, tribalist, nigger, at risk, thug, gangsta, ethnic, inmate, minority or any other name I'm called! **No!**

I want my name back! My name is AFRICA, A.F.R.I.C.A., AFRICA!
I'd like it back right now! Is that too much to ask?

The Covenant

I made a promise to Motherland
Over the graves of Rwanda
To never stay silent
In the face of oppression,
To never rest
Till the last of my kin
Is set free
From the Prisons of Modern Slavery.

I will never stop denouncing
That my tribe was sold out
For a gallon of Oil
And a Forever Diamond necklace
By the monks of the Devil,
Crippling my race.

I made a promise to Motherland
Over the graves of Rwanda
To never stay silent
While my brothers and sisters
Are chained to a past
That keeps haunting us
And hunting us down,
While my brothers and sisters
Are trapped in the prisons
Of our History disrupted.

I will never stop denouncing
That my land and my future
Were exchanged for a gun
And a pied-à-terre on the Riviera
And a numbered account
In a Secrecy-bound Swiss Bank.

God made me a promise

Over the graves of Rwanda
To inspire me with the words
And impart to me the fortitude
To carry this mighty task to the end.

No More Silent Drums

No more silent drums
Till the whole world starts dancing
To the rhythm of our feet
And the clap of our hands
And the snap of our fingers.

No more silent drums
Till the whole world is filled
With chaotic noise and harmonious chaos
Emanating from the depth of our souls
And the tempo of our hearts.

No more silent drums
Till the whole world is painted
In Rich Black, Carmine and Dark Red,
Yellow and Gold,
Sky Blue and Grass Green,
With mud, clay and squashed berries
By Children of the Rainbow.

No more silent drums
Till Dust gives us back our Stolen Souls
So our ancestors
Can finally
Cross the river to the other side.

A Crossed World Puzzle

I need your help!

I've been trying
To solve this giant crossword puzzle
Since Stanley and Livingston
Crossed my World
And left me wandering
In this labyrinth of cryptic squares and invisible lines,
Vertical and Horizontal barriers
To my self-realization!

I need your help!

I need to retrieve my freedom
Hidden between two dark squares
And seven unknown coordinates.
But I must be doing something wrong;
I keep missing my clues
And mixing the keys
And getting all the answers wrong!

This one for instance, you tell me:

*One across, definition: the result of training, study or instruction.
Education? I answered: Mis-education!*

I am talking about Rosa, Rosa, Rosam, Rosae, Rosae and Rosa;
And Eta and Theta and Kappa, and Iota, and Lambda,
And other tragedies and mythologies of Dead Colonial Empires
Supposed Sesames to a life of success that I am yet to see;
I am talking about Pythagoras, and Pascal and Pi (π) equals
3.14159,
Useless variables in my non-Cartesian and nonmathematical
equation:
I am talking about my plight!

But they keep telling me that that's beside the point,
'Cause calculus, theorems and trigonometry
Were meant to "rationalize" my emotional ways,

While Greek and Latin were meant to “civilize” me
And teach me the ways of the World!

And this one:

Five down, definition: the process by which cities grow.

Urbanization? I answered: Marginalization!

I am talking about Prejudice and Apartheid,
Ghettos called townships and *favelas*,
Housing called Projects, and projects with no start date and no
money.

I am talking about broken infrastructures and intrusive police
patrols,
Under-funded school programs and unaffordable medical care.

But they keep telling me that *Favelados*, dwellers of the *favelas*,
are very happy people.

What are you talking about?

Haven't you seen them in the Carnival in Rio, dancing the Samba
and the Lambada,

Don't they look happy to you?

And anyway, that's beside the point I am told,
'Cause we are committed to Universal Health Care,
That's health care for all,

And after all, I am reminded that we live in the Free Economy;
Get a flexible interest rate and a subprime mortgage,
And you might fast-track your way out the hood!

And here we go, another one:

Thirteen across, definition: income put aside for a later use.

Savings? I answered: Illusion!

I am talking about factories mimicking sweatshops,
Brothers and sisters stuck on minimum wage and entry-level
positions.

I am talking about Exploitation,
Being overqualified, underemployed,
Working twice as hard for an elusive paycheck and a lifetime of
debts,

Six minutes of *buy-your-own-coffee-at-the-vending-machine*
lunch breaks

And no breakthrough,
I am talking about the *Poverty Trap!*

But they keep telling me that that's beside the point,
'Cause we are committed to Equal Employment,
And if that's not enough,
We can always try Affirmative Action.
And I am also told that today's divide is not social, it's digital,
A personal computer and a high-speed connection,
That's all I really need
To upgrade my skills.
And they keep asking me if I can act or sing,
'Cause if I can, Hollywood doesn't require any MBA!
Or if I can jump high and stand tall,
There's always the NBA!

Please help me!

I must be doing something wrong!
I keep missing my clues
And mixing the keys
And getting all my answers wrong!
Maybe I can't spell right?
Or is it because I try to read between the lines?
Or perhaps I have been crossing my eyes and dotting my tees?

I don't know!
But I have an idea: I am going to try and squeeze four letters into
the same box.
After all, hasn't history repeatedly crammed us in tiny spaces?
I am talking about the *Middle Passage*,
Cargos of human stock called *Wildfire*, *Bogota* and *Amistad*;
I am talking about Slave houses called Castles;
I am talking about *The Door of No Return!*
But they keep telling me that *La Amistad* is Spanish and not
English

And means "*friendship*" and not "*slave ship*."

And anyway, they keep telling me that squeezing four letters into
the same box

Is not only against the rules but it's beside the point.

I am reminded that the slave trade is a thing of the past,
Since I was "*Liberated*"—or should I say, "*Emancipated*"?—200
years ago.

I am asked to just keep quiet and enjoy the Commemoration,
'Cause they keep telling me that those reparations we talk about,
While they cannot repair the past,
They may impair the present,
And stirring up old memories could only upset Her Majesty!

I need your help to make sense
Of this Make-believe Crossed World
Of giant black squares
Lost in an ocean of emptiness!

Never Again!

"Never again!"

Read the fine print, some conditions and restrictions may apply.

Never again in the same place?

Never again in the same century?

In the same decade? In the same year?

Never again in the same language?

"Never again!"

Why do we say and write it in every UN language:

English, French, Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish,

If all we mean is "And Ever Again?"

Shout it with me: Never Again!

Let's shout it together

So our voices can be heard by the Survivors of Rwanda!

Let's shout it together

So our voices can be heard

By the war cripples of Sierra Leone and Liberia!

Let's shout it together

So our voices can be heard

By the orphans and widows of Darfur!

Shout it with me: Never Again!

Let's shout it together

So the children born in exile

In the Forests of Congo

And the Refugee camps of Africa

And in the Shelters of the world

Can hear us!

Let's shout it together

So Africa can stop counting its dying children!

Shout it with me: Never Again!

Shout it till there are no more mass graves! *Never Again!*

Shout it till there are no more rapes! *Never Again!*

Shout it till there are no more mutilations! *Never Again!*
Shout it till there are no more land mines! *Never Again!*
Shout it till there is no more indifference! *Never Again!*
Shout it till Darkness becomes Light! *Never Again!*
Shout it till it hurts not to shout! *Never Again!*

Shout it Everywhere and Every Time
So they know we finally mean it: NEVER AGAIN!
Let's shout it together so the dead can finally rest in peace!
Let's shout it together so it stops happening
Ever and All over Again!

If I Could Rewrite the World

If I could rewrite the world
I would start with one word
And another,
Add a rhyme or two,
Some rhythms and a beat,
Three steps and some soul.

If I could rewrite the world
I would write it as a big poem,
A Song,
My Love Song for You and Me.

The Murder of Jane Doe

Officer, I am here to report a crime!
That young lady who was found dead last weekend
At the corner of Past Boulevard and Future Avenue
Under the Bridge of Forgotten Dreams,
The same one you called Jane Doe like all the unclaimed
casualties of metro's night,
Well, she was murdered!

She was murdered and I defy anyone to tell me otherwise! She
was murdered!

And don't be quick to quote me the hastily written and scarcely
documented coroner's report. I read it too! "No internal or
external trauma," it said. "Advanced emaciation suggests death
by starvation and dehydration!"
And I also read the laconic police conclusion: "Died of natural
causes"!

She was murdered!
What else do you call being killed by Hunger and Thirst in a
Nation of Wealth and Surpluses?

She did not die of natural causes!
How natural is it to die underage when the happy majority walk
unharmd into their eighties?
How natural is it to die on the streets like a dog in a country with
empty houses?
How natural is it to die alone and away from your loved ones?

She was murdered and I defy anyone to tell me otherwise! She
was murdered!

And don't give me that attitude! Yes, I know whodunit:
She was murdered by society's depraved indifference!

She was murdered, Officer, and I demand that a massive investigation be launched to probe this tragic event!
As we speak, Officer, clues should have been reviewed, leads should have been followed and witnesses should have been interviewed!
Our Humanity, Our Compassion and Our Tolerance should have been questioned on their whereabouts on the night she was robbed of her name and stripped of her dignity!
Our Selfishness, Individualism, and Egocentrism should have been lined up to be identified by the witnesses who saw them cowardly fleeing the scene of this horrendous crime!
Our shady alibis—I was busy dealing with my own problems!—should have been refuted!
Our collective self should be indicted for condemning the weak to live and ultimately die in the dark corners of our unmindfulness!
And, Officer, our urban egos should be found guilty of criminal negligence and reckless endangerment!

She was murdered, I say to anyone who cares to listen! She was murdered!

And those forensic anthropologists, where are they when you need them?
Are they too busy with their talk shows, reality shows and late night shows where they boast that they can talk with the dead! Please!
If they are so eager to speak with the dead, why don't they come and strike up a conversation with our Jane Doe? Why don't they talk to her?
They could start, for instance, by asking her if the eclectic clothes were the last vestiges of trips to the mall with a loving mom, or just the gift of a charity caring for the naked and the hungry?
Or they could ask her if the scars on her face are signs of traditional rituals she might have undergone as a kid, or the signs of violent encounters with death?

But what we all want to know, before anything else, is why don't those forensic-anthropologists-who-are-dying-to-speak-with-the-dead ask for her real name? You and I know her name is not Jane Doe! Why don't they ask for her real name?

Maybe we'll find out that her real name was *Roberta*, the girl who refused to confine herself to the quarters of marginalization but went missing before being accepted in the chambers of integration;

Or that her real name was *Daya*, the young lady who escaped war but never made it to peace;

Or *Marita*, who tried fleeing insanity but was lost in the torments of madness;

Or *Eileen*, who was kidnapped between her school and her loving home!

Officer, her real name is not Jane Doe! We cannot and must not call her Jane Doe! Calling her Jane Doe freezes her precious life in the last place she was found,

That Bermuda triangle between locked doors and unmarked graves,

That intolerable state between hunger and a loaf of bread;

That last instant where souls are trapped between hurt and trauma,

That last instance were bodies lie between human nudity and inhumane nakedness,

A torturous place of abandonment called Solitude!

Officer, let us team up with science so we can find out who she was! We must promise we will not let society get away with the murder of Jane Doe.

That we won't give up on her in her death the way we gave up on her throughout her life!

Black Thing

I tried to write an essay
Titled: "The Black Journey."
I wanted to tell the amazing story
Of my resilient People,
My people who've come such a long way,
My people who've overcome such odds,
But I had a writer's block: all the words I wanted to use
Told a story of their own.

I had a writer's block
Searching my mind to find new words
To tell our Story.
I could not use the word Slavery,
Because Slavery dehumanized all the words;
Colonization? Colonization stole them all;
Apartheid? Apartheid demeaned them all;
Genocide? Genocide took them all;
War? War confronted them all;
Prejudice? Prejudice excluded them more;
Exploitation? Exploitation exhausted them all;
Poverty? Poverty robbed them all.

The only word I finally stumbled upon,
The only one left for me to use
Was the word Survival.

So I started writing:
"Survival is a Black Thing
The kind of thing
Beyond any known words,
The kind of thing
That scars you and liberates you at the same time.
Survival is a Black Thing,
The type of thing
Only those who went through it

Can spell accurately: SURVIVAL!"

And I wrote Survival again,
I couldn't stop:
Survival and Survival again,
Survival till I run out of paper,
Survival till I run out of ink,
Survival till I run out of breath,
Survival,
Survival,
Survival!

Voices Outside My Head

I hear voices outside my head,
Sometimes faint and almost inaudible,
Most of the time loud and obtrusive,
Voices urging me to keep my opinions to myself,
Pressuring me to abandon my bluntness,
Trying to lure me
Into the nonconfrontational conformism of mainstream.

I hear voices outside my head,
Sometimes faint and almost inaudible,
Most of the time loud and obtrusive,
Especially in my moments of profound disillusionment,
Trying to con me into celebrating the abuser and bashing the abused
Through the ambiguity of the politically correct
And the duplicity of the historically incorrect.

I hear voices outside my head,
But I know that I must never be tempted
To have a bite of their poisonous fruit,
For it is in those moments of exhaustion and human weakness
That our Black Voices must be the loudest,
To keep on breaking the silence left behind
By all the brothers and sisters who, throughout history,
Were humiliated, harassed, banned, exiled,
Accused of conspiracy, treated like criminals,
Arrested, held as political prisoners,
Tortured and beaten to death, and ultimately sacrificed
For standing up against injustice and subjugation
So none of us would ever be shackled again!

I hear voices outside my head,
But my Black voice must resonate louder,
For I owe my right to speak to so many
Who never stayed silent, even when it meant
Losing their right to be alive.

Confessions of a World Citizen (*October 17, 2007*)

Who am I?

I will start by saying that I am a citizen of the World.
I am a citizen of the World,
But having so proclaimed and professed my internationality,
I must confess—O sacrilege—
That my statement is too many times not motivated
By my strong belief that the world should not know any
boundaries
(And rightly so, it should not)
But by a painful knowledge
That the world we live in does have boundaries,
And within those boundaries as set by History and by Men
I have never truly found a place to call my own,
Not even in the forgotten corners called *No man's lands*.

I am a citizen of the World born in Rwanda,
And underlying this undeniable fact
Is my life as I know it,
My life of desperately wanting to belong to a country
That saw me come to life
And where I ultimately almost came to die.

I am a citizen of the World born in Rwanda
Of a Hutu and a Tutsi,
And though I grew up in a loving family,
I also grew in the illusion
That I belonged to both Hutu and Tutsi,
Till war cruelly taught me that I would never be claimed by
either,
A hurtful awakening when you have nowhere else to go to.

Who am I?

A simple question for most, a troubling quest for me.
Who am I in this world where your ethnic, tribal, racial origin
Seems to define and seal your fate?

Who am I?

I have been called Half-cast, Out-cast,
Mulatto, Icyimanyi, Imvange, Hutsi—
Castigated and rejected
When I yearned to be just the same as everyone else
And not the unpleasant and persistent reminder of the Others'
existence.

Who am I? I ask myself.

So like every other crossbreed and hybrid of the world,
I find myself endlessly, and often aimlessly,
Wandering the corridors of the Past
Hoping to find in the contradictions of History
The keys to my disconcerting and confusing Present Story,
A match to light the lights that will guide me to my own
Promised Land.

Who am I?

I might never know. I might never find that truth that is said to
set every man free,
But I know I have no life if I do not reject the lies
That kept me caged for much too long.
I am a Citizen of the World,
Yet I have lived half my life with the troubling knowledge
That some of us will never truly belong anywhere.

I am a citizen of the World Living in Canada,
And underlying this reality
Is my new life as I dream of it,
My life of desperately wanting to belong to this country
That saw me come back to life—
Not once but twice—
From War and tragically from Peace
And where I might spend the rest of my life.

But having so proclaimed and professed my Canadian
citizenship,
I must, once again, confess
That I know that I do not belong to Canada either, at least not
yet,
Even if I want to.
There isn't a day that goes by
Without someone asking me where I come from.
Maybe they want to trace the origin of the shade of my Dark
Complexion
Or crack the formula to my blend of exotic accents.

Sometimes I will playfully answer that I come from Toronto.
After all, isn't that where I lived when I was naturalized?
But the inquiring mind will always insist:
"You know what I mean, before you came to Canada."
And when I tell them that I was born in Rwanda,
The inquiring mind grows more interested,
Understandably fascinated to have encountered in real life a
specimen
From the country made infamous by Genocide.
So, the inquiring mind will always proceed to ask, *"Are you Hutu
or Tutsi?"*
"Well," I answer with a smile, *"I was born of a Hutu and a Tutsi,
So you tell me, what does that make me?"*
A mask of false detachment to hide that, ironically,
I have been asking myself
The exact same question for most of my life.

I am a citizen of the World,
Born in Rwanda and living in Canada,
One of those people carrying the painful knowledge
That the world we live in does have boundaries
And within those boundaries as set by History and by Men
Some of us will never truly belong anywhere,
Not even in the forgotten corners called *No man's lands*.

Powerless and Defeated

So powerless and defeated:
That's how I feel
As I look at yet another
"Rejected" stamped red and square
Across a new segment of my life.

We are sorry,
(Empty words that always seem to mean otherwise)
We are sorry,
We cannot grant you your request at this time.
We are sorry,
Your claim could not be processed at this time.
We are sorry, we are sorry.

So powerless and defeated:
That's how I feel
As I am profiled
And fingerprinted
And my mug shot is taken
And filed like a sample
For a cruel anthropological study
On how long a people
Can be abused before breaking.

So powerless and defeated:
That's how I feel
As I look at yet another
Setback and backstabbing
Of a society where it's increasingly harder
To just pretend, even when I close my eyes,
That we are all the same
When I am stamped
(And profiled
And fingerprinted)
"Otherwise."

Will You Ever Forgive Me?

I went to Elmina Castle a thousand times
To cry out your name
To the waves and the rocks,
Kneeling at the Door of No Return
So you would know
That I have never forgotten you.

Will you ever forgive me
For not being strong enough
To combat this Human-looking Evil
And stop it from taking you away from me?

I hear you in my dreams, every night
Of every passing day,
Helplessly and hopelessly calling me
From the distant shores of your solitude.

I can feel in the dark nights
The Loneliness of your long journey
To that land that knows no humanity.
I can hear you crying
In the crashing
Of the waves on the rocks,
Crying to a cruel master
To stop working you to your death.

I wish I could be right there
And help you bear
Those cotton fields and sugar cane,
Hideous backdrops to your pain.

I went to Elmina Castle a thousand times
To cry out your name
To the Forts and Fortresses of luxury,
Shouting at cannons and vigil towers

That stole my love from me,
And asked for your forgiveness,
Kneeling at the Door of No Return,
For not being strong enough
To combat this Human-looking Evil
And stop it from taking you away from me.

The Children's Why

What will we tell the children
When they stop celebrating
The Changing of Seasons and the Coming of New Days?
What will we answer when they start asking us
About the Seasons of Mourning,
The Days of Tears and Blood,
The Calendars with Fields of Crosses and Tombstones,
Of all the Dreamers who die too young?

Will we tell them of Snow White and Christmas Tales
So they don't ask us about the winter ghosts,
The red splatters on white flakes,
The bullets of history's bullies
Silencing fathers before their children?

Will we send them looking for the Easter Bunny and Chocolate Eggs
So they don't learn that a spring just like this
Sent away a Non-Violent Dreamer
And un-peacefully gunned down
Our aspirations to a better shared tomorrow
At the dawn of love and forgiveness?

Will we distract them with Fireworks in the Summer Sky,
So they sleep through the Hot and Dry Afternoons
That once beat to death their Black Consciousness,
On the dusty roads where the Voices of History were tortured,
To postpone our Freedom, *our Independence* they dared to
claim?

Will we cover their eyes with Copper and Yellow Leaves
When they walk by the nameless graves
Where a new Africa was buried with its fallen heroes,
But not the bloody weapons still killing us every day
In the restless land of elusive integrity?

*How will we answer when the children ask us "Why"?
Will we be able to look them in their tearful eyes
When we tell them that sometimes,
Sometimes, Freedom must die before Freedom even begins?
Will we be able to keep that hope in their smile
When we tell them that too many times,
Too many times, Dreamers do die young for their Dreams to live
on forever?*

*Or maybe, will we perhaps find it much easier to simply shush
them,
Shush them through our scarred lips with a broken finger,
Shush them till they stop asking us all those questions,
Shush them till they find the answers on their own?*

*Why, Daddy?
Shhhhh!
Why, Daddy?
Shhhhh!!
Why, Daddy?
Shhhhhhhh!!!
You are too young to understand!!!!*

Black Hatred

My story always seems to begin at the end.
Habayeho ntihakabe,
Once upon a time that should have never been,
As he was going to his friend's birthday party,
An 11-year-old boy
With a smile on his face
And a gift in his hands
Was caught in a gang game,
"War Lords on Metro Streets,"
And looked at the sky and asked God,
"Nkosi, what have I done for them to kill me?"

Crossfires of Black Hatred,
Urban battlefields,
Around the corner
Candles and flowers
To remember,
A birthmark on the curb!

My story always seems to begin at the end.
Habayeho ntihakabe,
Once upon a time that should have never been,
As she was waking up from a dream,
A little baby girl
Fell under her father's fist
As he was aiming at her mother,
From a glass of hard liquor
And a job he had just lost,
Bed Stories of Domestic Tragedies,
And she looked at the sky and asked God,
"Nkosi, what have I done for them to kill me?"

Body counts
Of innocent children,
No more celebrations,

No more laughter,
On my dark streets!

My story always seems to begin at the end.
Habayeho ntihakabe,
Once upon a time that should have never been,
As he was coming from the library,
An unarmed 15-year-old boy
Heard his name, shot 41 times
Under a slogan To Serve and Protect,
Autopsy of Police Abuse,
And he looked at the sky and asked God,
“*Nkosi, what have I done for them to kill me?*”

Hate crimes, massacres,
Slaughter of the Black Male,
Breaking news
Feeding off our broken lives!

My story always seems to begin at the end.
Habayeho ntihakabe,
Once upon a time that should have never been,
As he was walking the Road of Science,
An African student in St. Petersburg
Saw his life slain with a sharp knife
That killed only those who were too different,
Anthology of a Race Struggling to Stay Alive,
And he looked at the sky and asked God,
“*Nkosi, what have I done for them to kill me?*”

Let's stop the masquerade,
The death of our race.
Let's stop the massacres
So we can all be!

My African Dream (*I am here to sing your song*)

The Empire of Kerma turned into a colourful celebration
When Drums proclaimed and echoed
The exciting news that you had reclaimed your Freedom.
I can still hear their echo in the distance.

I have travelled to the horizon,
Guided by an African Wagtail,
Protector of my Tribe.
I have seen the moon twelve times;
My clothes have been stained with mud,
And my face washed and dried by storms of water and sand,
But my heart remained light and joyful
On my journey of a thousand miles
To come and kneel at your blessed feet.

I am *Um'Khonde from the House of the Bakonde*.
I come from a long tradition of Abasizi,
Praise Singers to the Greats,
And I am here to sing your song.

I do not bring you any gold or any precious stones,
Only my poetry and my drum to sing your song.
But *with my poetry and with my drums*,
If you let me, I will rebuild the ruins of your stolen life.

With my poetry and with my drums,
I will tell the world about your trials and tribulations,
How you were dragged from your Motherland
And forced into servitude.
I will praise your resilience and your nobility,
Never flinching under the whips of men's hatefulness
Defiantly shouting: *Mayibuye i Afrika!*
Because you were born to be Free,
And Free is who you are!

With my poetry and with my drums,
I will rejoice in your triumphs and victories.
I will tell how you held high the sceptre of your Fathers,
Never losing your humanity and your dignity,
Never begging the nations you helped build
To share with you their unlawful wealth.

With my poetry and with my drums,
I will tell Frederick Douglass
That in you, I found his fire, his thunder and his
earthquake,
The Storm of all Storms called upon
To Shake and Shape the world.

With my poetry and with my drums,
I will clean your wounds with healing waters
And rub your feet with scented oils.
I will carry you on my shoulders
Through the days when you are so tired,
You almost give up.
I will build you a monument
More beautiful than Ethiopian marble
And more precious than Tanzanite,
Ny'Ebisu By'Emisango,
Black and blue like a moonless night.

With my poetry and my drums,
I will celebrate you,
My African Dream!
You are the Dream of those who died too many deaths.
You are the Dream of those who were bent but never broken.
You are the Dream of the children looking to the sun for a better
tomorrow.
You are the Dream of Ndlovu Kazi, the Mother of All Kings,
And the Dream of the Elders, who taught us to never give up
hope.
My African Dream!

I am *Um'Khonde from the House of the Bakonde*.
I come from a long tradition of Abasizi, griots to the Greats,
And I am here to sing your song.
I do not bring you any gold or precious stones, just my words
and my drum.
But if you let me, *with my poetry and with my drums*,
I will heal you and help you forget the thousand wounds
You have endured for you to be standing here,
Tall, Strong and Proud,
In all your Majesty,
My African Dream!

Someone's Stalking Me

Someone is stalking me,
Following me everywhere I go,
Appearing in the oddest places,
Unapologetically embarrassing me
Whenever I am standing to make a speech,
Arrogantly joining in
When I sit in an important meeting,
Or impolitely strolling by
When I am casually walking down the street.

Someone is stalking me,
Following me everywhere I go,
Showing up uninvited
In every corner of my life,
Stealing any moment I get in the spotlight.
You see him more than you see me;
You pay attention to what he tells you,
Even when I am the one speaking to you,
Desperately trying to win you over
From his snapshots of manufactured reality.

Someone is stalking me,
Following me everywhere I go.
I tried to lose him, but to no avail,
So I find myself forced to speak louder,
Shine brighter and aim higher,
Hoping that if you were to see me
Even for just a brief moment,
You would stop looking at him
And see all I can be for you.

Someone is stalking me,
Following me everywhere I go.
At times he even arrives before I do.
If you've seen who I am talking about,

Then you have the power to make him go away,
Because he lives in your mind,
A cruel figment of your imagination.
You like to call him "Perception,"
But his real name is "Prejudice."

Poem of a Lifetime

If I was to write one last poem before I die,
What would it be about?
People who know me are probably speculating
That I would write about
The similarity of ethnicism and racism,
Or the injustice of prejudice,
Or the debilitation of exclusion.

But at the risk of surprising you,
But hopefully not disappointing you,
I will not write about any of those things.

No, if I have to write one last poem before I die,
I would dedicate it to one cause and one cause only:
The cause of Love! Yes, love!

And if I was to write one last poem before I die,
How long would it be?
People who know me are probably
Thinking that if I can write no less than 1,000 words
On the ubiquity of our ethereal spirit
And the complexity of our ancestral identity,
We can surely expect at least three volumes
On the subject that has scorned and yet fulfilled so many
And left so many poets at a loss for words
Yet unstoppable in their verse.

Well, at the risk of surprising you,
But hopefully not disappointing you,
My poem of a lifetime,
Will be my shortest poem ever!

It will have only three words,
But not any three words;
It will have the three words that matter the most in the world:

"I Love You!"

My poem of a lifetime
Will be called *A Poem of A Love-Time*.
It will be my shortest poem ever,
Because if I am to die tomorrow,
I will be too busy living today
And loving you
To be able to think, let alone write, about anything else!
"I LOVE YOU!"

Dear Unknown Friend (*When I was hungry*)

Dear Unknown Friend,
When I was hungry, you fed me,
And I want to thank you.
When I was hungry, you fed me,
And today, I am hungry to meet you.
I am hungry to meet you and touch you,
And embrace you, and see the brightness of your smile,
And rejoice in the kindness of your giving heart.

I am hungry to know you
More than what I could tell from the anonymous box
You left for me
At the drop-off entrance
Of my neighbourhood food bank.
Were you once an alien too,
Washed like me on these unfamiliar shores?
Did you once starve for dignity and humanity,
For you to relate so to my pain?

I am hungry to meet you and tell you my name.
I am hungry to tell you my story,
To tell you about the red dust and clear skies,
The green mountains and dry savannas
Of my native land.

I am hungry to hear you laugh
So I can forget all the nights I have been crying
Since I was chased from my paradise
By hatred and prejudice,
For I was born on the wrong side of their crimes.

I am hungry to invite you to come and seat at my table
With Farida, and Rakesh,
And Amal, and Djemila, and Muntu
And share a meal or two

With just a few of those
That you fed with a box full of food, and peace and love,
When we were hungry.

I am hungry for you to see me, to recognize me,
And stop and greet me when I pass by you on the street
And ask me how I am doing,
Because there are days I am not doing so well,
Days when I am reminded once more
That the colour of my skin and the distant village that saw my
birth
Are too often reasons or pretexts to relegate me
To the servants' quarters
Of this yet colourful metropolis,
Denigrating me in the familiar and hurtful fashion
My ethnicity did back in my restless land.

I am hungry to ask you
To hold my hand and help me cross
The busy streets of my new country,
My country, your country.
I am hungry to have you help me carry
My heavy load to the summits of this society
That seems as high and unsettled as my childhood volcanoes.

When I was hungry, you fed me,
And today I am hungry
For you and I to share Food
And Peace and Love
With the millions of those, who,
Unlike us, are still hungry
And have yet to be fed.

I Will Grieve Tomorrow

I will grieve tomorrow
Because today I must stay strong
So my Mom has a shoulder
To lean on.

I will grieve tomorrow
Because today
I must stay tough
So my sisters and brothers have my arms
To embrace them softly and let them cry.

I will grieve tomorrow
Because today
I do not want to accept
That my father is gone and will not come back.

I will grieve tomorrow
Because today
I do not want to accept
The emptiness he is leaving behind.

I will grieve tomorrow
Because if I start and cry today
I will not be able to go on.

I will grieve tomorrow
Because if I start and cry today
I will lose the strength I so much need
To see tomorrow.

A Sense of Freedom (*At Knowledge Book Store*)

Voices of Freedom
I feel you in this room,
I hear you in the crackling of the stairs,
I sense you in the hardness of the walls,
I see you,
Holding me so I don't fall,
Watching over me so I don't fail,
Harriet and Haïle, Thurgood and Nkrumah,
Josephine Baker to set the beat,
Booker T who thought too much
For many who thought too little.
Hands of Freedom
I see you raised in a furious fist
For shackles to never touch me again.

Looking for the Ethnic Waldo? (*My ethnic right to respond*)

The other day I was abruptly stopped in my steps
By a rather disturbing headline:
“Party Targeting Specific Ethnic Voters.”
The former refugee in me instantly panicked.
What if they were looking for the Ethnic Vote,
Not to cast it but to castigate it or get rid of it altogether?

What I should do, I wondered?
Should I go and report this divisive literature to the authorities?
Should I alert Human Right Watch and Amnesty International
That Ethnic Voters are being hunted down in Canada?
Should I call 911? But then, how would I describe my
emergency?
That I have been attacked by an ethnically offensive headline?
Should I instead dial one of those 800 numbers I received upon
landing,
You know, those 800 numbers you call if you’re ever the object of
racial, gender and/or religious discrimination.
The trouble is that I never bothered to remember any of them,
As I never thought I would ever need to punch them so urgently.
And I could see no white or yellow pages (no offense intended)
in sight to refresh my faltering memory.

The Catholic in me would have had me rush and hide in a
church,
If I didn’t know that churches stopped being sanctuaries
When they adopted Closing and Opening hours,
To which they abide more strictly than to the Ten
Commandments.

Then I remembered that I was in Canada, and not Rwanda—how
silly of me!—,
And Canadians do not entertain ethnic discrimination!
So I got a grip on myself, hesitantly opened the paper,

And trembled my way to section A, page 14,
Still not sure that I wouldn't find a page full of mug shots of
ethnic voters,
You know, people looking like you and me,
The type of mug shots that say:
"Very dangerous individuals.
If you see them, please report them to the police."

Calm down, there were no such mug shots!
The only shot to illustrate the article did not feature any mugs;
It featured a harmless-looking crowd of unspecified ethnicity,
Reunited for some celebration the reporter did not feel obligated
to tell us about,
His caption only informing me that they were part of a team,
Two Men and One Woman,
Bluntly called the "Ethnic Outreach Team," created when the
Party misconcluded from our voting patterns that Ethnic Voters
didn't know or understand The Party!

I naïvely became very hopeful: maybe the "Ethnic Outreach
Team" was going to develop a surprise strategy to alleviate
poverty in the Ethnic Vote population.
Nope! The article contained no such rejoicing prospects of
wealth redistribution to the Ethnic Vote population—I should
have known better.
Apparently, the Ethnic Outreach Team's mandate was limited to
securing the Ethnic Vote for the Party and, quite obviously so,
before the upcoming Elections.

After my first moment of fear followed by a glimmer of hope and
a sharp disappointment,
I became concerned, then disgusted and finally angry at this
scheme that would involve building a large database of Ethnic
Voters by renting or buying lists of names and collecting
business cards and guest lists at major "Ethnic Events"!

And The Party is wondering why the Ethnic Voters don't

understand their politics! Don't they know that Citizenship will sink if carried on Ethnic ships?

Well, I know, and they can count me twice in their estimated 20 per cent "non accessible" ethnic recruits! Non mais! Crap!

Ever since I read that article (that was in October, on my Ethnic Birthday),

I've been waiting for the "Ethnic Outreach Team" to venture into my ethnic neighbourhood looking for "Ethnic Events" in the East End,

So I can give them a piece of my ethnic mind.

And trust me, it won't be peaceful at all!

I will tell them—my mood of the day will determine my choice of words, Sunday being the day where I will be the least friendly to ethnic-minded-, pseudo-, politico-strategists—:

Listen you "Ethnic Outreach" people, you want to secure the Ethnic Vote?

Well, why don't you start by helping the Ethnic Vote feel more secure in their neighbourhoods?

*And why don't you help the Ethnic Vote feel less food insecure
In the country where the majority of the poor belong to the so-sought-after Ethnic Constituency?*

That is, if I don't slam my ethnic door in their face!

And just in case they skip my neighbourhood in search of more ethnically accessible votes, I wrote this essay, "Looking for the Ethnic Waldo,"

So I can cast it with my ballot

Come Election Day!

Urugamba rurarese! (by Callinie Kayisenge, my mother)

Nazengurutse isi yose
Ndara ngenda kandi ndyamye
Mbona amahanaga arasumbirijwe

Umuyaga bise amazina muntu
Ufite umuvuduko utagira ibambe
Umwuzure ntabona inzuzi
Amazu akarengerwa n'ibiyarimo
Ayo magorofa ahanitse cyane
Akarindimuka uko yakabaye
Abatuyemo ntibarokoke
Ubihonotse akabura iyo agana
Akamanjirirwa ubwo akigunga
Akabura ijambo agacika intege!
Ahandi nkabona imiliro iratse
Amabuye imbunda ari urufaya
Umuvu w'amaraso utemba hose
Ingoga umugenda n'imiborogo!

Nyuma nza kwumva induru ndende
Amerika yose imwe mpatse imihugu
Ubushinwa icyaduka mu bukungu
No mu Burayi, bahindagara
Ngo ubukene bwugarije iyo iwabo

Ibihangange abatwara imbaga
Bakoma impuruza bafata ingamba
Bazibe icyuho kibugarije
Birarenga kugeza n'ubu

Nkebuka Afurika ihora mu kaga
Indwara, intambara z'iteka
Ubujiji n'ubukene by'akarande
Aho kwikinga naho haragumye

Abafite amikoro baradadiye
Bagundiye ubutakirekura
Imitima iboheye mu bwinkunde
Intero iboneye “mpemuke, ndamuke”!

Igicuku kinishye ndazanzamuka
Ndiyumvira bishyira kera
Numva ikinya umutima usobetse
Amalira atemba ntawe unkubise
Nyobera byose ndiruhutsa
Mpabura n’umwe imbuzakurahira
Uwashishoza agafindura
Ako kanyafu ko kubakebura!

Mwene muntu yarikijije
Imana Rurema ayita iyo Gihera
Iyi si dutuye y’ibygomeke
Irenze ihaniro, ibuze uruvugiro!

Nyirimpuhwe iteka niwe utugoboka
Ubugirakenshi yatumye Mariya
Amanuka mw’ijuru aradusanga
Adusaba guhinduka nta guteba
Amaherezo yacu ataba kurohama
Tugaca ukubiri n’inzira ikwiye
Tukicira urwo mu nyenga.

Imana ishimwe yo ibidushoboza
Tuyakire itwiyoborere
Ufite aho anenga yikosore
Maze tuberwe no kuyinogera

Muragatunga ishya n’ihirwe
Ndavuga mwe mwese
Ingabo zirwana zidakomeretsa
Nimucurere imitima ituse
Umugaba araje agabe ibitero

Nyina wa Jambo arabahamagaye,
Mbe mu “legio” wumvise
Ijwi ry’umubyeyi wiyeguriye?
Umva izina ryawe ugire uti “Karama”
Ndaje Mwamikazi nayobotse
Mbwira Mawe nguteze yombi

*Ati: “Bana banjye ndabashimye
Munyegere mbatume hose
Mugabe amashami iyo mirenge
No mu mibande ntimuhazigame
Abo muhuje n’abandwanya
No mi mitamenwa muhakomange
Muhumurize abafite intimba
Bagiri icyanga cyo kuba bariho
Bamenye umukiro utanga ihirwe*

*“Yaba njyewe, nawe n’undi
Utabara abakiristu aduhora hafi
Niwe uduhuza ataretse n’umwe
Niwe udutoza ingendo iboneye
Niwe dukeshya bwa butwali
Amanywa y’ihangu ntadukange
No mu mwumbi tukibakura
Intwari igarara aho rukomeye!”*

*Tuti: “Mubyeyi wacu tunyuzwe twese
Tuzagutumikira tudasobanya
Tuzahabura abayobye inzira
Tuzakomeza ab’intege nkeya
Bose twishyire hamwe twese
Tukwisunze hamwe twese
Tukwisunze tuzatsinda
Tukwizihize muziranenge
Tubye igisingizo cya Rurema*

*“Tuzatahe tukugaragiye
Twese imihigo imbere ya Jambo
Imana Data na Roho Muhoza
Ab’ijuru bose tubizihire
Ijoro rikeshe tuvuga imyato
Utaba nk’aha, yaba hehe?”*

**The Battlefield Is Calling for You (*translation of
"Urugamba rurarese"*)**

I went around the world.
I was sleeping but I saw it all:
My world in turmoil and disarray,

Storms with human names
Moving at an unforgiving speed,
Floods with no rivers in sight
Sinking houses and memories alike,

Once tall and fierce buildings
Crumbling to dust,
Leaving no survivors
But ghosts with no one to go to,
Trying to make sense of the senseless,
Isolated in a hole of silence
With hopelessness as sole companion!

In other parts, fires bursting in the wild,
Stones turned deadly weapons of desperation,
Rivers of blood flowing from everywhere,
Leaving bodies and lamentations all along their way!

I heard loud screams
Coming from America, aspiring empire,
And China, the new kid on the economic block,
Even echoed in Europe, yesterday's proud first world,
All losing their minds as they discover
That poverty had set foot in their house!

Powerful leaders of masses
Calling for the world to come together
To repair broken bridges
Already halfway under water!

I turned to my restless Africa,
Plagued with disease and never-ending wars,
Home of chronic illiteracy and poverty,
Blindly walking into this modern crisis
Instead of avoiding it,
The rich locking out the poor,
Holding hard to their country's wealth,
Their hearts wrapped in barbed wires of selfishness,
Giving a new face to the old song "Betray to Stay"!

I abruptly awoke in the middle of the night,
My mind filled with questions without answers,
Feeling a lingering pain in my tortured heart,
Crying as though someone beat me up,
Not knowing what to do, I sat there motionless,
Not seeing anyone wise enough
To see in those troubling signs
The hand of a worried God
Trying to have us change our ways.

Humankind playing God
And God thrown to the curb:
Is this self-centred world we live in
Beyond redemption?

Don't you know God the Merciful
Is your only way out?
The Everlasting Love sent us Mary
Down from Heaven
To change our ways with no delay
So we don't all end up drowning
As we walk away from the Truth
And condemn ourselves to perdition.

God is the only source of strength.
Surrender and He will lead you.
Let's change our ways to God's delight.

Blessed are you.
I am talking about you
Warriors who fight wars without spilling blood.
Be at peace,
Your Commander will lead you to the fight.

The Mother of the Word is calling you.
Warrior, do you hear her voice?
If you hear your name, just say *"I am here,
I am coming, my Queen.
Give me my marching orders.
I am all ears for you."*

*She will say: "My children, I am pleased with you.
Come near me so I can send you to save the World.
Branch out in every village and every hamlet.
Do not even leave the valley unvisited.
Talk to those with God and those without.
Knock at the doors of those castles.
Appease the fearful.
Teach them to count their blessings
And embrace the wealth of everlasting love.*

*"He will be with all of us,
The One who gave us his Son.
He is never too far.
His embrace pulls us all together with no exception.
He is the Only Way,
The source of invincibility.
Fear no blinding light, no pitch-black rain;
True heroes are those who defy the darkest of times."*

You will humbly bow and say:
*"We will bring back those who lost their ways.
We will take care of the weak.
We will unite in a common purpose*

*To devote our lives to you.
With you by our side, we fear no defeat.
We will sing your name,
The One without Sin.
Our actions will be a tribute to the Creator.*

*We will walk in your footsteps,
Singing praises for the Lord,
God the Father and the Holy Spirit.
We will celebrate all celestial beings.
Morning will find us in celebrations.
Where else can anyone be if not here?"*

