

SCREAMING IN SILENCE

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FOREWORD

I will never be able to truly understand what the Rwandan people who lived through this war feel because I was not there and I did not experience the violence first hand; nor did I lose loved ones as a result of the senseless massacre. However, I hope this book will raise awareness about the Rwandan Civil War and the horrors of the genocide that took place.

This book is dedicated to those who lived through the atrocities that occurred in Rwanda from April 7 - July 15, 1994, and the memory of those who were killed during the Rwandan genocide in which an estimated 500,000 to 662,000 members of the Tutsi minority ethnic group were killed by armed Hutu militias.

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Thank you, Ms. Towers.

SCREAMING IN SILENCE

JULY 1989

Those were happy days. It was just Mama and me, living in our small village, and we worked hard for the little we had. Although we were poor in terms of money, we were rich with good friends and neighbors and a strong sense of community.

Our village was very tight-knit, and though Mama and I had been on our own since my father left before I can even remember, we never felt alone because we had the love and support of our community – our extended family.

One thing that brought me joy was spending time with animals. Everyone in our village had responsibilities, and since I was very young, my main responsibility was tending to the animals. I loved all animals – but goats were my favorite.

I hated working the cattle, especially when it was hot. It would take me hours to clean their pen, unpack the day's hay ration, portion out the solid food if any was available, trek to the lake and back several times to collect enough fresh water

for our village's cattle, and finally, milk the cows.

I like cows, but I grew to resent them because the work involved in caring for them could be backbreaking at times - especially for a young girl. By the time my cattle-tending duties were complete, my body would be exhausted but I didn't have it in me to disappoint Mama. She's worked harder than anyone I've ever seen to provide for me.

Our village was located in the very south of Rwanda, close to the border of Burundi, but more importantly, near Lake Sake. Having lived there my whole life, I knew the lake and the surrounding area like the back of my hand, and Mama relied on me to do the fishing...or at least she said she did. Maybe she just said that because she knew how I loved being out in the canoe on the lake and the thrill of catching a blue-spotted tilapia for dinner.





I don't have any memories of my father. Mama never said where he went and I never really cared. He obviously didn't care enough to raise me, so the feeling is mutual. Plus, I never missed having a father because I was fortunate enough to have a loving father figure - Mr. Ndagijimana.

Everyone in our village loved Mr. Ndagijimana. He was the type of man who would always carry a smile no matter the weather. Mama always admired him, and said he was the backbone of our village. While we had no official government, if there were to be a vote, Mr. Ndagijimana would surely be elected Mayor. He was like a father – or perhaps a grandfather – to me. In fact, he was my best friend's grandfather.

Rita and I had been friends for as long as I can remember, and her large family always treated Mama and me like part of their family. Because of Mr. Ndagijimana's strong presence in my life, I never felt a void from my father's absence.

Rita and I were the same age, and we attended school together in our village. She lived in the biggest house in our village, on the far side opposite my house, which was on the other end, but it was still nearby because our village was small. Her home was very sturdy - made of brick and mortar. Compared to the home Mama and I shared, it was a fortress. Our house could have blown away with a strong wind, as it was made with wattle and daub – soil combined with straw and water and molded by hand. It wasn't fancy, but since it was just the two of us, it was all we needed.

Ms. Uwera, our next door neighbor, lived in a house just like ours, and she had three kids! They were packed in there like sardines, but she didn't seem to mind. She, like Mama, was a single mother but she was raising three young children. Mama and I helped Ms. Uwera whenever we could, and they



helped us too. Ms. Uwera was Mama's best friend, probably because they had so much in common.

Rita's mama, Ms. Yvonne, was our teacher when we were little. She taught us about the Tutsis and the Hutus. Rita's family was Hutu and Mama and I were Tutsi. Ms. Yvonne taught us that in our village, it was important to know whether you were Tutsi or Hutu, only because it is part of your heritage, but beyond that it didn't matter because what was most important was that everyone in our village formed our community, and as a community, we take care of each other, regardless of the tribe from which we descend.

I always thought it was funny how people thought Rita was my sister because we looked so much alike. Other people always that Hutus and Tutsis looked different. I figured somebody didn't know what they were talking about but I wasn't sure who had their story wrong. I wanted to think that Rita and I looked alike, though, because she was so pretty.

Mama told me the truth about the Hutus and the Tutsis – the stuff Ms. Yvonne didn't teach us in school. Mama said that there aren't any real differences when it comes to language or religion, and they often live among each other in the same communities – just like our village.

The division between the tribes dates back to before Rwanda was colonized by Germany and Belgium in the early 20th Century, when the region was ruled by a kingdom. Most of the ruling class was Tutsi and the lower class was Hutu.

Before colonization, nobody seemed to care whether one was Tutsi or Hutu, but after World War I, the Belgians controlled the region and for the first time, allowed Hutus to form the government. When the power shifted from the Tutsis to the Hutus, the conflict began.



Mama said that the Hutus were angry because they had never had any power, so as soon as they were given the chance to rule, they took the opportunity for revenge against the Tutsis.

I thought the history was interesting, but it was nothing more than that – history. I mean, World War I was so long ago! And there were many Hutus in our village, and they were all like family to me. Whatever had gone on back then was definitely ancient history. At least that’s how it appeared to me.

We had a deal, Mr. Ndagijimana and me. It started one blistering hot summer day when I was out tending to the cattle. I was so tired, and ready to be done with my chores, but the cows didn’t feel like cooperating with me. As I attempted to move the most stubborn cow into the stable, I looked back at it and tugged her, but she didn’t move.

“Inyana y’im-”

“Looks like you’re struggling, need some help?” The sound of his voice relieved me.

“Mr. Ndagijimana!” I exclaimed. He grinned as he approached me.

“Better not let your mother hear you using that language.

Damn, he heard me. As he tugged the cattle, I fell to the floor, relaxing my body. Every muscle in my body ached and the intense sun was piercing my skin.

“I know tending to the Ankole is your least favorite task. Why don’t you go inside, Neze. Allow me to handle the rest,” Mr. Ndagijimana kindly offered.



“But there is so much work to be done, and Mama will be disappointed if she finds you here tending the cattle while I’m napping. How about we trade? I’ll tend to the goats if you tend to the cattle?” I proposed.

Mr. Ndagijimana took a moment to consider my proposal, and then nodded and smiled. “That sounds good to me! And I know how you love those goats,” he responded.

I couldn’t believe my good fortune. Mr. Ndagijimana was going to finish tending to the cattle and allow me to tend to the goats, and this way Mama wouldn’t be disappointed, all of the work would get done and I’d be off the hook for cattle duty and get to spend time with the precious goats!

“Any chance we could make this arrangement permanent?” I asked Mr. Ndagijimana, with a chuckle, never expecting him to accept my outrageous proposal.

“I don’t see why not, Neze. Work is work. Cows or goats, it makes no difference to me,” he replied. “Just tell me where you left off and I’ll get to work,” Mr. Ndagijimana continued.

Before he could have time to reconsider what he had just agreed to, I quickly let him know what was left to be done with the cattle, and asked what needed to be done for the goats.

I couldn’t believe my good fortune. No more tending to the cattle! I was thrilled with my new duties. I couldn’t wait to get to work with my beloved goats.

“Ok. Inka imwe and inka bibira have been fed and watered but not milked, and inka bitatu needs to be fed, watered and milked. I’ve already raked the pen, so no need to do that. I think you just need to make one trip to the lake for water for



inka bitatu, feed him and milk all three and they will be all set.” I instructed. “What do you need me to do for Goldie, Milo, Polly, Elmer, Gigi, and Bubba?” I asked Mr. Ndagijimana.

“Wait, wait, wait. What? Let me make sure I understand. You call the cows ‘Cow 1, Cow 2 and Cow 3’ but you give the goats real names?” Mr. Ndagijimana asked.

“Of course,” I responded. “I love goats.”

Mr. Ndagijimana chuckled and said “Please milk Goldie, Polly and Gigi and give Milo, Elmer and Bubba a nice chin scratch. That’s really all they need today. But you’re welcome to spend as much time with them as you wish.”

“Thanks Mr. Ndagijimana! I’ll take good care of them! See you soon!” I said, as I made my way to his family’s home. In that moment, genuine happiness flowed through my veins.

Happiness isn’t forever.



APRIL 1994

Years passed in our small village. New life was brought into our community, except it didn't feel the same. Nothing at all felt the same. Mama insisted that the broadcasts coming from Kigali meant nothing. She said the big men were having disagreements, though nothing that would affect us.

But the broadcasts became significantly worse. We knew we were Tutsi but it didn't matter. People in the village didn't view themselves as Tutsi or Hutu. We all lived together; the ethnic group we belonged to never mattered before.

The atmosphere of the village grew darker every day. People started to not come out as much. Interactions were kept at a minimum. I was not allowed to go to Rita's house after school anymore, and Mama wouldn't tell me why.

Here I was, a 13-year old girl, longing to spend time with my friends, but suddenly there was this strange tension in the village and people who had been lifelong friends were ignoring each other.

Of course many members of the village tried to initiate conversations but none of them lasted. Not even Mama wanted to interact with people outside of the household.

You could feel the tension as you walked out of the house. The air felt tight, like it had been holding its breath.



MAY 13, 1994

I walked over to the radio station eager to hear what non-sense was playing today. As soon as I reached over to turn it on -

“Neze!” I turn abruptly to see mama glaring at me.

“Mama, I was just curious!” Before I knew it her left arm swung at my face.

SLAP.

I stumbled back in utter disbelief and confusion. Mama has hit me before but this was different. She had a look of fear in her eyes. No, not even fear, pure terror. She immediately wrapped her arms around me. Tears emerged from her eyes.

“I’m sorry I –” Mama couldn’t finish her sentence. The sobbing consumed her words. My mouth couldn’t work either. The feeling that I was experiencing paralyzed me.

Knock. Knock.

That was enough to move us. Both of our heads sharply turned in the direction of the door. “Stay here,” Mama whispered. She slowly walked towards the door and opened it slightly. “Oh.” She said in a surprising manner. I walked over and was surprised to see Ms. Uwera and her three young children. Ms. Uwera barged past my mother.



“Watch it!” I yelled. Ms. Uwera cupped her hands around my mouth and shushed me. I tried to escape her grip but she wouldn’t move.

“Is it just you two in here?” Ms. Uwera asked. Mama nodded silently.

“I’m sorry.” She said in a soft tone. “We cannot risk anything and I think you know that.” Mama didn’t reply.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

Ms. Uwera slowly released me from her grip as she apologized again. She began to speak softly, her voice quivering, “I am here with news from my brother. His village has been raided by Hutus and they are heading our way. We must prepare...NOW. But we must not share our plans with anyone. We cannot trust anyone.” I had never seen Ms. Uwera so shaken.

“What did your brother tell you? What happened in his village?” I asked. “There is no time to share details of the atrocities. We must act quickly,” Ms. Uwera responded in a whisper.

Ms. Uwera asked me to take her children back to her home and put them to bed so she could discuss preparations with Mama. I glanced at Mama, who nodded at me approvingly, so I gathered Ms. Uwera’s children – a boy of 8 and a girl of 7, along with her toddler, a girl of no more than 2 years, and quietly retreated to her house under the cover of darkness to tuck them in to bed and wait for Ms. Uwera to return.



MAY 14, 1994

The next day, Mama asked me to listen to the radio with her... confusing because yesterday she slapped me for doing exactly the same thing. But since speaking to Ms. Uwera, everything had changed. I walked over to Mama slowly.

Although she had blatantly contradicted herself, I wasn't going to take the chance of talking back to her. She turned the radio on and flipped through a couple channels. "The security zone is due to be set by the French so as to save the Hutu's threatened with extermination by the Inyenzi-Inkotanyi."

I immediately started grinding my teeth. "Inyenzi huh? Surprised by anger I was the one who turned the radio off this time. "We're being compared to cockroaches Mama?"

I didn't expect a response from her. The content that had been broadcasting recently felt surreal. Mama placed a hand on my shoulder.

"Tonight we're going to meet with Ms. Uwera again."

"Why?" I exclaimed. "Why do you keep seeing her late at night?"

"You'll be informed tonight Neze." She replied.

"I need a favor from you."

"Anything Mama."



“I need you not to speak a word about this to anyone.”

I nodded, but with hesitation. “Not even Mr. Ndagi-”

“NO!” She cried out. “What we’ll discuss tonight stays between you and I.”

Waiting for night to come felt like an eternity. Every other day I was in the house cleaning clothes ... except it wasn’t every other day. I was dreading the conversation to come. “Neze, come here.”

I got up and trudged over to her. The house smelled delicious. She was cooking Matoke, one of my favorites. Whenever we got our hands on bananas, Matoke was our go-to dish. The sweet taste and soft texture of it was like nothing else.

“From now on, going outside will have to be permitted by me. Is that clear?” I nodded.

“What about the Inka?” I asked quietly.

“I will feed and milk it, I don’t want you going anywhere near it.”

Knock Knock.

“Stay here,” instructed Mama. As she walked over to get the door I dipped my finger into the Matoke paste and licked it. The sweet, buttery taste was enough to occupy my mind for a few seconds – a brief distraction before my life changed forever.

As the door opened, Ms. Uwera rushed in with her children. Shema and Sonia were covered in a blanket, and she held



Ruth, the toddler, in her arms.

“Umeze neza?” My mother asked urgently.

“We’re okay, don’t worry.” Ms. Uwera replied reassuringly.

“Shema, Sonia.” I said excitedly. Mama scolded me as she signaled to me to keep the volume down. “Matoke Matoke.” Sonia giggled as she ran over to me. I hugged her and kissed her head.

“Come, I will prepare the food.” I grabbed two plates and emptied a generous portion onto both of their plates. As I handed them their plates, I glanced over in Mama’s direction. She was in the corner quietly conversing with Ms. Uwera. I decided not to interrupt and instead I made two more plates for them once they were finished.

“Let’s play hide and seek!” Shema shouted, despite having a mouth full of food. “Mama told us we can’t go out, remember?” Ms. Uwera is restricting them from going outdoors as well.

“Booooooringggggg.” Shema sighed.

Mama and Ms. Uwera seated themselves at the table. I picked Ruth up and attempted to feed her. NOPE. Though I was angry for a fleeting moment when she spit her food all over the table, my heart sank as she started to cry. “Shhh, it’s okay Ruth.” I rocked her back and forth before handing her to Ms. Uwera.

“You have to give her a smaller portion or else she wouldn’t be able to swallow it,” advised Ms. Uwera. I observed the way she handled the baby. Her touch instantly hushed the baby. I watched in disbelief as she fed the baby with no problem.



“You’re going to need to know how to handle Ruth, Neze.” Mama said out of nowhere. I watched as the smile on Ms. Uwera’s face slowly faded.

“We should eat first, Carine...”

“No! We cannot put this off any longer.” Mama exclaimed.

Everyone at the table was silent. “Things are getting really bad near Kigali.”

“Bad in what way?” Shema asked.

“There’s been ongoing violence between people in our country.”

I knew what she was talking about. I’d listen to the radio talk about the RPF and their attempt to democratize Rwanda but I thought it was only up north. Is the war going to make its way down here?

“There is a strong possibility that bad people could come for us in the near future.” Mama stated. She was trying to simplify the situation for Shema and Sonia and it worked.

“Who are the bad people?” Sonia asked softly. “Did we do something wrong?”

“Of course not sweetie.” Mama replied, trying not to scare Sonia.

“But just in case they do come we need to make sure we’re safe.”

“If Neze is with us, we’re always safe.” Shema said, smiling at me. I smiled back and held him close.



“We’re going to establish a safe spot, somewhere to hide.”
Ms. Uwera said.

“Where?” I asked. Mama pointed past me.

“Behind the house in the vegetation.” That’s impossible. How would we all fit back there?

As I racked my brain for alternative places to hide, I realized this was really the only plausible choice. The terrain around the village was grasslands for miles. There were no other natural hiding spots. “How long will we have to stay in the bush?” I asked.

“Until we come and get you.” Mama replied sternly.

“You won’t be in there with us?” Shema asked, his voice trembling.

“Keep your voice down, boy!” Ms. Uwera said, raising her voice in contradiction.

“I’m sorry, mama,” he replied. “But why will you not be there with us?” he continued. My heart was racing in response to the thought of hiding in the bushes alone with only Ms. Uwera’s young children. What will they be doing when the militia comes?

“Nothing will happen to us.” Mama said confidently. Ms. Uwera looked at her with surprise.

“We will be hidden elsewhere.”

“But why can’t we hide with you?” I inquired with a slight attitude.



“Because we will be safer if we split up. If the militia finds me or Ms. U, we will be forced to show them our cards, but children don’t have cards. If you’re with us, they will assume you are Tutsi and you’ll be in danger,” she blustered whilst slamming her fist into the table.

“But we are Tutsi,” I responded, with confusion.

“Not anymore, you’re not. You don’t have a card, so from today forward...or until this bloody war is over, if ANYONE asks you, you tell them you are HUTU. Do you understand?” Mama commanded.

“But we are not...” I started.

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND?” Mama repeated, desperately. I almost snapped back but managed to stop myself, considering the danger it could put us in if I was to raise my voice as well.

“Yes, Mama,” I conceded, quietly.

“You must promise me! I need you to promise. Please.” Mama pleaded.

“I promise, Mama. I understand.”

“Thank you, Neze. You are a smart, strong girl. “Ibi nabyo bizashira.” This, too, shall pass. A saying that I’ve grown up with. A saying I’ve heard Mama say at least a thousand times, but somehow, this time it took on real meaning. “Thank you,” Mama sniffled, with tears in her eyes.

She embraced me like she had never embraced me before. Only then did I realize the true gravity of our situation.



Mama and Ms. Uwera sat at the table and discussed the details of the plan. Ms. Uwera told Mama about her brother, Jean, and how we would be waiting for them in Burundi. Jean had escaped the Hutu militia and fled to Burundi where he was staying in a refugee camp just on the other side of the border. It was not far from our village, but it would be a dangerous journey.

Ms. Uwera told Mama that the militias would reach our village too soon for us to flee, and that our only option was to hide until they swept through the village. We could begin our trek to Burundi once the militia came through, because they were headed from Kigali and moving southeast, toward Tanzania, so it would be safest for us to hide and wait for them to leave before we travel south toward Burundi. It would be our best chance to avoid encountering them as we make our way to the refugee camp.

By then it was almost midnight. I figured we'd rise early and get to work preparing our hiding place, and wished everyone a good night.

Mama asked, "What do you think you're doing? It's time to get to work!"

"Now?" I asked.

"Yes, right now. We must make all preparations under the cover of darkness. Nobody in our village can know about our plans. NOBODY. Not even Rita. Our lives depend on it." Mama replied, exasperated.

No rest for the weary.

I went outside and began collecting grasses and branches from the bushes near our house. Mama gathered string and



wire, and Ms. Uwera returned home to put her children to bed and begin packing supplies to stock our hideout. As I cut away branches from the scrub, I brought them inside to Mama, who tied them together with wire, building a makeshift door for the hideout.

The branches that I removed allowed me to make a small cave-like clearing in the bushes. I worked all night long clearing out as much vegetation as I could to make enough space to hide myself and Ms. Uwera's children. It was tedious, tiring work. My body finally gave out just before the sun rose, and I was forced to call it a night so that I could get some rest, knowing that there was much work left to be done in the coming days.



MAY 15, 1994

When the morning came I was quick to rise from my slumber. I turned to see Mama asleep next to me. I rubbed my eyes and for a split second, the realization of our current situation wasn't present. As I stood up it all hit me. Ms. Uwera, the Bad Guys, working tirelessly last night.

I walked over to grab a leftover banana. I assumed it was at least noon considering I was working all night. I made my way to the door to peek out. Sniff. The fresh damp air told me otherwise. Still early, huh. I looked back at Mama. I hated going against her will, but it's been so long since I've been outside beyond our house.

What's the harm in a quick walk? I'll be back before she wakes.

Cautiously, I slipped out the door and walked out. There was no one I could see so I continued towards the village. I had no destination, it just felt nice to be out.

The Goats! The thought of interacting with them filled me with excitement. I changed route towards Mr. Ndagijimana's house but suddenly stopped in my tracks.

Hutu, he's a Hutu.

Chills ran down my spine as that thought crossed my mind. I haven't seen Mr. Ndagijimana in close to a month but my perspective on him was different. Everything that's been broadcasted on the radio. Everything Mama has informed me about. No, that isn't him. I resumed walking after convincing myself there was nothing to worry about.



As I approached his residence I was confused to see only Goldie and Polly. Where were the other goats? I glanced around trying to locate them when suddenly someone spoke from behind me. “Mwaramutse.” I turned around in shock to see Mr. Ndagijimana standing behind me. “G-Good morning to you as well Mr. Ndagijimana.”

He stared at me. His clothes were dirty and ripped. His arm was covered in cuts and scabs. I didn’t know what to say. I stood there regretting every single decision I made this morning. “Is Rita home?” I asked softly, attempting to break his stare. “No, she is not,” he replied in a stoic manner, his stare growing more intense. I found myself at a complete loss for words as shivers crawled up my spine.

“Why are you here, Neze?” he asked, sounding genuinely curious. Before I could answer I heard screaming from his household.

“Please, I don’t want to!” I heard Rita plead. Mr. Ndagijimana immediately turned around and went inside. I wasn’t going to wait around for him to come back. I sprinted back the way I came, with fear fueling my every step. I’d never ran so fast in my life. The adrenaline coursing through my veins made me feel like I could run forever.

Perhaps I should have.



May 17, 1994

Our hiding space was complete, but I can't say I felt a sense of accomplishment. Should I take pride in something that I built as a means to survive a bloody massacre?

The last several days had been the same. Wake up and stay inside. Discuss the logistics of the day that none of us wanted to come. Then when night came, Ms. Uwera, her kids, Mama and I would work by candlelight to ensure that the hiding spot was adequately stocked with food, water and all the necessary supplies to make it sustainable for as long as possible.

I made sure we had lots of water in case we needed to hide for a long time, and as much food as we could gather and store. I stocked our hideout with beans, bananas, sweet potatoes, corn and peas. I also stowed away a fishing pole, rucksacks, a compass and map to take with us when we felt like it was safe to begin our trek to Burundi to meet up with Ms. Uwera's brother, Jean. I grabbed several sharp knives from the kitchen, as well as an ax and a hatchet and from the garden stored them in our hiding place – just in case.

From the outside, our hideout looked like bushes; no one could tell that the scrub behind it had been hollowed out. Or at least that's what I wanted to believe. Mama was preparing food when an ear-piercing shriek abruptly sounded from outside. My heart dropped. Mama immediately stopped what she was doing and hurried to look out the door. She cupped her mouth in horror as she looked back at me.

Is today the day?

Mama ran over to the kitchen and armed herself with a bread knife. She positioned herself in the blind spot of the door,



readying herself for possible intruders. I scurried under the table as Mama instructed. More yells came from the inner village. Tears developed in my eyes soon turning into a quiet sob.

Knock Knock Knock Knock.

The door swung open against Mama's will. To our relief it was Ms. Uwera and the children. All three of the children were sobbing uncontrollably. "C-Carine they're here." Ms. Uwera whimpered.

I rushed over to Shema and Sonia and hugged them in order to silence the crying. "Shhhh...Shhhh. It's okay, I'm here." Before I could grasp the situation Mama pulled me away and placed her hands on my shoulders.

"Neze, it's time to gather the children and take them to the bush. NOW," she instructed, her eyes were full of panic. I've never seen her so scared. Is it already happening? I held Shema and Sonia while mama took Ruth from Ms. Uwera. Mama looked me in my eye and gestured at the door. I nodded, I knew what I had to do.

The plan was for me to take Ruth into the hiding spot first in order to quiet her down. As Mama tried to hand Ruth to me, Ms. Uwera stepped in between us and kissed Ruth's head. "Mama loves you, Neze will take good care of you." *Stop it.*

This isn't my responsibility.

There was no time to think; I grabbed Ruth and opened the door enough to peek out. The air was crisp panic and the metallic smell of blood. Screams rang throughout the village but I could not see anyone. I nodded at Mama and quickly moved to the hiding spot as we had practiced. Ruth was sob-



bing in my arms louder than ever before. I removed the door of brush and scrubs and crawled in. I sat down and tried to get Ruth settled, and did my best to zone out the blood-curdling screams surrounding us. Now I wait for Shema and Sonia.

11:43 AM

It felt like we had been bunkered down in our hiding place waiting for Shema and Sonia for hours, but in fact we had only been there for several minutes. I rocked Ruth back and forth in an attempt to calm her down but to no avail. What am I doing wrong? As I was about to give up, in came Shema and Sonia. Sonia crawled over to me. “You have to sing Kabuye Kanjye,” she whispered. “It’s what mama sings to her every night.” Shema nodded in agreement. “Kabuye Kanjye.”

“Kabuye Kanjye ni keza pe,” I sang quietly and watched in astonishment as Ruth’s eyes slowly closed. Her crying began to fade as I kept singing. In fact, she even managed to crack a smile. A wave of relief swept through my body. It was a small victory.

The screams continued throughout the night. “NO, STOP!” “Please! Have mercy! I have children!”

Who is that? Mama? No, that isn’t her voice.

Every single scream got under my skin. Each and every one felt like a gut punch. I was dreading the moment when I would hear Mama. I couldn’t - “PLEASE STOP!”

I knew the militia was getting closer as the screams grew louder. Then, our bad situation got worse when the screams caused Ruth to wake up. Naturally, she was frightened by the



screams, and she wanted her mother, and this caused her to scream. Shut up shut up shut up. I cupped my hand around her mouth trying to suppress the noise. *They're going to find us, this is it.*

There was a momentary lapse in the screams from outside, but Ruth's crying continued. Shema and Sonia were trembling, as the sense of panic in the air was palpable. "Shema, grab a banana and peel it. NOW!" I demanded.

He dug deep into the bush and pulled a banana from our rations. As Shema passed me the banana, I peeled it and broke off a piece. I put the piece of banana on my finger and tried to feed it to Ruth. *Come on. Eat it and be happy.*

SPLAT.

The whole piece shot out of her mouth and onto my face. I sighed in anger. *Remember what Ms. Uwera said.* I proceeded to rip another piece off and mush it into a portion edible for a baby. Finally, she ate the banana, which silenced her for a few seconds.

3:31 PM

By this point we were all drenched in sweat. While we had no way to keep track of time, I was sure that several hours had passed. It became relatively quiet, but that wasn't too surprising considering that we were on the outskirts of the village.

Shema and Sonia somehow managed to fall asleep after hours of silently sobbing. Even if I wanted to, I refused to sleep under any circumstances. I had a responsibility to uphold. Ruth had been significantly quieter than earlier which reassured me. Now we had to wait. Mama said when it was



over she'd come and get us.

Suddenly, **RAT-TAT-TAT**. Gunshots echoed throughout the village.

Shema and Sonia rose immediately with confusion on their faces. "Shhh." I whispered. "It's okay, don't worry."

The curiosity was killing me. I had to know what was going on out there. I crawled forward slightly and peeked out the bush.

I could make out a few figures coming up the road. I made sure that I wasn't visible as they advanced up the road. As my eyes focused on the people my stomach turned. It felt like a spiky pole impaled my stomach.

There she was, Mama.

My breathing became heavy which drew the attention of the kids. I didn't have it in me to lie to them. "I think we'll be able to leave soon guys." I whispered. Their faces lit up. I turned back around to watch what was happening.

My eyes widened in horror as I made out the person behind Mama. It was Mr. Ndagijimana, holding a machete to her back as she walked. "Where are they Carine?" he yelled.

Mama didn't reply. I watched in terror as he slashed her back. A gut-wrenching scream came out. I almost sprinted out of the bush in shock but something stopped me. The baby, the damn baby. "WAAAA." Ruth's crying resumed.

Shut up, shut up shut up!

I forced my hands down on the baby's mouth so hard I



thought I was going to kill her. “Please be quiet Ruth.” I pleaded.

This is it. We’re dead.

I glanced out the bush to see Mr. Ndagijimana slowly approaching our hiding place. My hands were pressed against Ruth’s mouth so hard that it frightened the other children. Shema and Sonia, in tears, tugged at me silently, trying to pull me away from Ruth.

As I closed my eyes, ready for certain death, I heard Mama yell out, “WOULD RITA BE PROUD OF YOU? YOU DAMN MONSTER, WHO ARE YOU?”

Mr. Ndagijimana turned around in anger and walked toward her. “That’s right, you don’t know the answer.” Mama said.

“SHUT UP!” Mr. Ndagijimana exclaimed. “YOU are the real monster here,” he yelled in her face. “I have a God-given duty and nothing will stop that. You and your family are COCK-ROACHES,” Mr. Ndagijimana continued. He spit on Mama and kicked her.

I could not comprehend what was happening. Stop antagonizing, him Mama. Please stop! Right there and then it clicked. Mama was making a scene in order to hide Ruth’s screams.

She was doing this to protect us.

Never before had I experienced this feeling of rage and absolute indignation. The desire to run out there and attack Mr. Ndagijimana was overwhelming – I felt it in every bone in my body. I had visions of standing on top of him and smashing his head in with a large stone until he was completely



unrecognizable. This is a man I loved. A man that was like a father to me.

Is this really happening?

“Rot in hell you son of a bitch!” Mama spit out. My eyes were glued on Mr. Ndagijimana as he raised his machete toward Mama.

SLIT.

I closed my eyes before the machete dropped. Afterwards there was silence; I knew it was a clean chop.

Surprisingly, I had no emotional response to what I had just witnessed. I didn’t scream. I didn’t cry. I was completely paralyzed with fear and totally overwhelmed with the shock of all I had just been through. I don’t know how much time passed, but for quite a while I just stood there, like a statue. It all felt like a dream – a nightmare. The worst nightmare of my life.

By nightfall, I began to emerge from my state of shock and realized that I still have the responsibility of caring for not only myself, but also Ms. Uwera’s three children. I could not think about Mama – not yet. I needed to be strong and responsible and keep my composure so that I could care for the children. *Now, it’s up to me. I must carry on.*

Ibi nabyo bizashira. This, too, shall pass.

I reached for the compass entrusted to me by Ms. Uwera. We were told that if they never came to get us, we must travel south until we reached Lake Rweru, where her brother would meet us.



“We’re leaving now.” I declared to Shema and Sonia. “Gather the rations, it’s time to go.” Neither of them moved.

“W-w-what about Mama?” Sonia whimpered. I turned around and slapped her.

“From now on, you both listen to me. Word for word. Is that clear?” I asked.

Shema and Sonia nodded in unison, tears in their eyes. I looked out the bush once more but Mr. Ndagijimana had vanished. The monster of our village had vanished.

As we exited the bush, my body felt numb. Nothing could faze me at this given moment. I had a mission and I wouldn’t rest until it was accomplished. I grabbed the Inka and placed loaded it with our rations. Shema was holding Ruth and I was holding Sonia’s hand.

As we walked away, I turned back and stared at my village one last time. The person I once was is gone. The path and future I thought I would walk is gone.

Everything is gone.

I looked down at Sonia who was squeezing my hand tightly. Just because something is lost doesn’t mean it’ll never be found.

Unhappiness isn’t forever either.

SSS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Washington, DC, **Beck Stettler** is a high school senior attending Templeton Academy. After graduation, Beck plans to attend James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia where he will pursue a degree in political science.