



FROM RED EARTH



A Rwandan Story of
Healing and Forgiveness



Denise Uwimana



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Plough Publishing House

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*In memory of my beloved husband Charles and all
my family, friends, neighbors, and fellow Rwandans
who perished in the genocide against the Tutsi.*

Contents

1	Plane Crash	<i>1</i>
2	Roots	<i>8</i>
3	Refugee Childhood	<i>12</i>
4	Wakening	<i>22</i>
5	Charles	<i>29</i>
6	Trouble	<i>40</i>
7	Tightening Net	<i>52</i>
8	April 16	<i>61</i>
9	Haven	<i>78</i>
10	Alone	<i>91</i>
11	Survivors	<i>104</i>
12	Peace with Bugarama	<i>120</i>
13	Mukoma	<i>128</i>
14	The Sisterhood	<i>135</i>
15	Beata	<i>147</i>
16	A Time to Heal	<i>158</i>
17	Antoine	<i>171</i>
18	A Wellspring	<i>183</i>
19	Cancelde and Emmanuel	<i>191</i>
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>202</i>
	<i>Iriba Shalom Center</i>	<i>203</i>

I

Plane Crash



I HAVE HEARD that in the United States, people remember exactly what they were doing when planes hit the Twin Towers. In my country, too, we remember a plane crash that way. There is this difference: On September 11, nearly three thousand people died. In Rwanda, smaller in size and population than Ohio, the number was three times that many every day – for a hundred days.

Or think of it this way: if you stacked fifteen copies of this book, every word would represent one man, woman, or child murdered during the genocide against the Tutsi.

I'm trying to help people grasp what happened, because no one can picture a million human beings killed. Not even we who survived.

MY FIRST AWARENESS, when I woke on Thursday, April 7, 1994, was a too-familiar sense that the other side of the bed was flat, cold, empty. In the two and a half years since my husband had moved out, I never got used to his absence. I felt it most keenly after one of his clandestine visits, like the one the previous weekend.

I missed Charles now more than ever. For the last six months, tension had been mounting in our town, Bugarama. With all the bad news and rumors, a heavy dread had been growing within me. This was bad, because a child was growing within me too. Our baby was due to be born in just two weeks.

I yearned to put my head under the pillow, pretend life was normal, and go back to sleep. But that was not an option. My two little sons relied on me. So did two young cousins – Aline, fifteen, and Thérèse, sixteen – who had been sent by my uncles to keep me company. Our houseboy, Samuel, lived with us as well; in Rwandan society, every middleclass family had a teenage boy or girl to help with chores and shopping. I could count on him to make breakfast, yet he too seemed an overgrown child.

An internal poke – my baby’s elbow? or heel? – was the nudge I needed to pull myself out of bed and get going with the day. Standing at the window, combing my hair into a frizz around my head, I looked over our front yard, edged by its high fence and iron gate, to Cimerwa’s cement plant – our factory town’s reason for existence – across the road.

Lifting my eyes from the industrial scene, I rested them on the hazy mountains bounding my view. Charles was beyond that horizon. Doing my hair the way he liked it was my tiny act of defiance against the company directors who had forced him to leave home.

The sky was lightening above the hills. I put down my pick and switched on the radio to catch the six o’clock news. But all I got this time was classical music. It droned on and on . . . no news, no announcements, not even the recent vitriol about “exterminating cockroaches.”

Something was weird, and my uneasiness increased when the music continued to whine while I dressed. As the only adult in our home, I had to know what was up. I would ask Goretti, I decided.

Plane Crash

Her husband Viateur was Cimerwa's head mechanic, and he might have heard something.

I had known Goretti since soon after my arrival in Bugarama as a bride, seven years earlier. When I later moved into the house next to hers, she and I became best friends. Now she too was about to have a baby – it was eleven years since her last – and we had both taken our bassinets out of storage, in anticipation, and packed our suitcases for the hospital. Goretti liked to knit, so she'd made sweaters for our infants while I appliqued traditional designs on their *ingobyi*, the cloths we African mothers use for carrying young children on our backs. Everything was ready . . . But now?

Before leaving the house, I peeked into my children's room. Christian lay sprawled on his back, snoring softly. He looked so peaceful, asleep; it would be a different story the moment he woke. At eighteen months, he had a toddler's knack for bumps and tumbles. Charles-Vital was curled protectively beside him in the bed they shared. A serious little thinker, my four-year-old was interested in everything, asking "why?" all day long. Normally, I savored gazing at my sleeping sons. Today, I gave them scarcely a glance before slipping out the back door.

As every morning, cocks were crowing and the dawn breeze carried the wood smoke tang of breakfast fires. But I heard no exchange of cheery greetings, no banter, no snatches of song. I hurried through my backyard toward my neighbor's, calling her name.

Goretti appeared immediately at her back door and hastened to meet me. As she leaned on the fence separating our places, I was alarmed at the hopeless expression in her eyes. Seeing the question in mine, she took a shuddering breath.

"President Habyarimana was assassinated last night," Goretti said heavily. "His jet was shot down. He was about to land back home in Kigali."

The dread in my stomach cramped into a knot. Our president, dead in a crumpled and burning plane, had been Hutu.

I had no idea who had committed the crime. According to investigations years later, the fatal missile was almost certainly fired by Hutu extremists. But all I knew, that Thursday morning, was that – without a doubt – we Tutsi would pay.

My worst forebodings, however, did not come close to the nightmare before us. It never crossed my mind that this day, April 7, was the chosen launch date for the systematic slaughter of Rwanda's Tutsi population. Yes, this was Day One of our country's Hundred Days in Hell, which would hit Bugarama on Day Nine.

The morning was cloudless, unusual for rainy April, but no sunshine could brighten my thoughts as I stumbled home to wake the children. While I helped my little sons get dressed, my mind was far away.

What will happen next? Oh Charles, I can't even contact you! How will I get to the hospital to have the baby?

After breakfast I hid my official documents under my pillow, with money I had borrowed from Cimerwa for the upcoming birth. I had no clear idea of what to do but wanted to be ready for anything. I tried to tidy the house, but found it impossible to focus.

Hearing a commotion a few hours later, I looked out the front window to see a group of rowdy factory workers coming along the road. They stopped in front of my house, and I ducked out of sight. The men started shouting obscenities as they shook my gate, fortunately still locked from the night. I recognized one of them by his voice: Wasi Wasi, who made cement sacks with my cousin Manasseh. He had always hated Tutsi.

"Hey, Denise," Wasi Wasi bellowed, "do you think you're better than Madame Agathe? You'll meet the same fate. Your time has come!"

What was he talking about? Agathe Uwilingiyimana was our Hutu prime minister, second to the president. She had

Plane Crash

courageously condemned recent murders of Tutsi. Had something happened to her?

Around noon my husband's brother Anselm and my cousin Manasseh unexpectedly showed up. They no longer felt safe in their lodgings, they explained when I let them in, and my house had a strong gate and metal doors; might they join me? I welcomed their presence and gave them the guest room. In the event of danger, they would be more dependable than young Samuel.

The next time I turned on the radio, we six adults and teenagers clustered around it to hear the news. Every announcement compounded our fear. Tutsi had shot down the president's Falcon-50 aircraft, the radio declared, and the government was imposing a curfew: no Tutsi could travel or even leave home. There would be a month of mourning for President Habyarimana, during which all manufacture was prohibited.

That meant no work at Cimerwa. My mind flashed an alarming image of hundreds of Hutu youth loose on Bugarama's streets, instead of producing cement.

The newscaster continued. At ten o'clock this morning, Madame Agathe Uwilingiyimana and her husband had been shot to death outside their home. He did not mention what I learned later – that the ten UN peacekeepers guarding them had been killed as well, after being horribly mutilated.

I switched off the radio and looked at the people who had joined me in my home. So we were under "curfew" and could not leave the house. I had no desire to step out into the madness descending on our world anyway. I closed all the curtains. It was a relief to know I had a good supply of rice, beans, and sugar in the house. I had just stocked up the week before, preparing for my baby's arrival.

In the evening, Hutu friends stopped by to report that militia were roving the area. Dizzy with worry, yet sticking to routine for my children's sake, I tucked the two little boys into bed and locked the house for the night.

When I tuned the radio to RTLM next morning, a fanatical voice was announcing an order “from the top” that the hour had come for all “snakes and cockroaches” to die. “Look in the bushes!” the voice screamed. “Look in the swamps! Wherever you find Tutsi, kill! Kill without mercy!” He named specific “enemies and traitors” to be targeted first and ended with a shriek: “The mass graves are still half-empty! Fill them up!”

From my window, for months, I had watched young men on the factory grounds in the early mornings: running, exercising, or practicing with grenades and rifles. They belonged to Interahamwe, meaning “we who attack together.” These Hutu youth were recruited countrywide in their thousands, taught to hate, and trained to kill. Most wore no uniform, and many were unemployed; yet they were organized and powerful, and they had links to the national army. So I knew the crazy words coming from the radio were no empty threat.

I did not know, however, that the trained Interahamwe were now being joined countrywide by volunteer militias consisting of thugs, volunteers from nearby countries, and our own neighbors and coworkers – any Hutu who would join the massacre.

Their plan was efficient. Working from locally compiled lists, they hunted from one Tutsi home to the next, searching under beds, above ceilings, in closets and cupboards. Even dresser drawers were checked for infants. They set guards on every road and pathway to prevent escape. They scoured fields, plantations, woods, marshes, streambeds, wasteland, inside vehicles. It was the swiftest genocide in history.

Ten years later, in her book *Conspiracy to Murder*, Linda Melvern would write that “Rwanda, one of the poorest countries in the world, became the third largest importer of weapons in Africa, spending an estimated US\$112 million.” Interahamwe were armed with these weapons from France, Israel, Belgium, China, Egypt, South Africa, and possibly other countries as well. Many

Plane Crash

secrets remain hidden to this day. Unhidden, however, were preparations in the streets and markets. I had seen my Hutu neighbors get their machetes, in broad daylight, from the company canteen across the road.

People may wonder why we didn't try to escape, with death looming over us. They may as well ask why the mouse cowers, quivering, under scanty grass blades while the bird of prey hovers overhead. Why doesn't the little creature make a dash for safety? Maybe he knows the razor talons and flesh-tearing beak are waiting for just that, daring him to come into the open . . . Maybe he doesn't want to exchange fear in familiar surroundings for unknown terror.

We stayed where we were, my mind replaying its despairing reel: I had no way to protect my children from impending peril, nowhere safe for my baby to be born.

April 16



CIMERWA IS A MASSIVE BUSINESS to this day. The company produces 600,000 tons of cement per year, supplying all of Rwanda and exporting to other African nations as well. Its Bugarama plant is still the biggest employer in the region.

Viewers checking the website's timeline will notice something odd, however. Among various years' achievements, the 1994 entry reads, "Operations suspended during genocide which saw 58 Cimerwa team members lose their lives." It does not state how many of those fifty-eight lost their lives at the hands of other Cimerwa team members. I knew a number of the victims—and their killers.

In all, 342 Tutsi were murdered in Bugarama during the genocide. But numbers never tell the whole story; they can't convey that each of these people was a unique individual with loves and hurts, sorrows and joys, disappointments and yearnings. Some had lived long years; some were babies. Some died quickly; others were tortured.

The killing reached Bugarama on April 16. How gladly I would forget all I saw that day, but – as war veterans can confirm – such images are seared into the brain as if by a camera’s flash.

Why revisit that day’s events, then, if they were so horrific? I feel I owe it to the people who died; if I don’t tell, who will even know that they lived? Also, I write for the sake of history. If a nation’s shameful deeds are not to be repeated, they must be recognized and remembered – not swept under the rug. As harsh as it is, American youth need to learn how Native American peoples were exterminated, Germans have to know what their country did to the Jews, and Turks must acknowledge the Armenian genocide. Mass evil can break out anywhere that one group despises another. In Bosnia, people who had previously lived peaceably as neighbors carried out the 1995 massacre of Muslims at Srebrenica. And in 2017, ethnic cleansing in Myanmar claimed around ten thousand Rohingya lives.

So, as a witness to the genocide against the Tutsi, I must tell what happened, no matter how painful it is for me to write. I hope my account will help ensure that nothing like this ever happens again, anywhere on earth. But I also write because genocide is not the end of the story – not for me and not for my beloved country.

IT IS STILL hard for me to believe that the sun rose as usual on April 16, but in fact it was a beautiful Saturday morning. Since the factory was silent, I could hear birds singing. The sky had cleared again, with no sign of rain.

If it hadn’t been for the dread weighing me down, this would have been the perfect day for scrubbing my floors and for washing and hanging out the laundry. I had always been an energetic mother and liked a clean house, especially with a baby on the way. Thérèse and Aline were willing helpers; two of my uncles had sent them some weeks earlier, so my children and I would not be alone without Charles.

April 16

But with all the recent happenings, I woke feeling overwhelmed, my mind tuned to an inner vibration – or was it a distant drumbeat? In this state, I could face only the most basic tasks. I tried to fix my mind on feeding eighteen-month Christian, four-year-old Charles-Vital, and the others in my apartment, and then on cleaning up after breakfast. I felt strung tight – listening, watching – and kept glancing out the window.

It was a relief, around eight o'clock, to see my friend Faina approaching, an empty basket on her head. She was a Hutu woman I had often prayed with. Her family was poorer than ours, yet she had a generous nature, and she came now to ask if I needed anything from the market in Nyakabuye. Touched by Faina's offer, I gave her enough money to buy cabbage, plums, bananas, and *lenga lenga*, a spinach-like vegetable. My heart lifted a little at her thoughtfulness – and at knowing that my household would have fresh food through the weekend.

Three hours later, Thomas, the Hutu leader of our prayer group, appeared at the gate. He told me he wanted to help out in these difficult times. After hesitating and shuffling his feet, he added that he would gladly hide any valuables for me, just in case there were . . . problems. His eyes never met mine, however, and his voice seemed unnaturally high-pitched. I thanked him but declined his offer.

At noon, it was time to prepare lunch, but, surprisingly, Faina had not yet returned with the fruit and vegetables. Twice I glanced up the road to see if she was coming. The third time I stepped out, I saw a figure in the distance, running our direction. It looked like Faina, but I had never known her to run, and this woman was empty-handed. As she came closer, I saw that it was indeed Faina – but she was almost unrecognizable. I hurried to meet her at the gate.

She was so upset and breathless, I could hardly make out her words: “Denise . . . your Aunt Priscilla . . . her two children . . . her

father-in-law . . . terrible . . . in a ditch . . . Priscilla still alive . . . asked for water . . . said to warn . . . killers coming . . . destroy all Tutsi!” Turning, Faina fled toward her own home.

I froze at her news. But I had to raise the alarm. Dashing through my house and out the back door, I cried, “Goretti, we all are about to die!”

She came running, and we met at the same spot where she had told me of the plane crash, nine days earlier. She was Catholic, I was Protestant, but such differences meant nothing – especially now. We embraced across the fence, saying goodbye, asking forgiveness for any way we might have hurt each other as neighbors.

Meanwhile, a confused hubbub was growing in the street as everyone in Bugarama – Tutsi and Hutu alike – rushed for home. Voices were shouting, “Interahamwe are coming! Interahamwe are coming!”

Darting inside and locking our doors, I called my household together in the corridor, where I hoped we might be safe from grenades.

“I sense that some of us will die today,” I said, to a background of far-off shots and yells. “For those who are killed, *Rendez-vous au ciel* – we will meet in heaven.” Kneeling in the hallway, we prayed aloud, asking God and each other for forgiveness.

Suddenly I heard a frenzied pounding at the gate. Had the attackers reached us so soon? But no, I could hear their shouts still at some distance.

Creeping to a window, I peeked between the drawn curtains. Flailing frantically was a boy I had never seen before. I hurried out and opened the gate, just enough for him to fit through, before relocking it. He and I hurried into the house and I relocked the front door.

The stranger stood panting in my corridor, the whites of his eyes betraying his fear – which only increased my own. Our group surrounded the boy, looking questioningly at him. Catching his

April 16

breath, he said his name was Epa. He was seventeen. He had come to Bugarama to seek refuge with his aunt, down the street. But her Hutu husband had just ordered him to leave, pointing out my house as the nearest Tutsi home.

Epa was just in time. During our hasty exchange, the malicious shrieks had intensified. They were close . . . Then I heard Goret-ti's daughter Diane crying next door, and I knew the killers were upon us.

The terrifying noise of splintering wood and metal told me our iron-clad back door had given way. At their roar of entry, we scattered. I leapt for the bathroom, Christian on my back in his ingobyi.

The sounds that came through the bathroom door in the next minutes were unutterably horrible – savage roars, slashing metal, thumps, thuds, screams . . . I knew Christian and I, and my unborn child, would be next.

Where, oh where, is Charles-Vital? What is happening to him?

Crouching in the bathroom, I hurled a desperate prayer at God: “You promised to protect! You didn’t tell the truth! You have totally failed me!”

At that moment, the locked doorknob rattled and a triumphant bellow burst through the thin wooden door. It took only seconds for the steel axe to crash through. Then five Interahamwe were crowding into the small space, getting in each other’s way, peering at me. At that instant, my fear departed. I felt strong, ready to die. Crossing my arms, I stepped toward them.

One of the killers raised a dripping red blade. Contempt twisted his features, and his body gleamed with sweat. Grenades, hanging from his belt, clicked with every move, and strips of ammunition crossed his naked chest. But these fiends did not need bullets – they worked with steel.

“I’m going to kill you!” he gloated.

“Why?” I challenged.

“You Tutsi killed Burundi’s president last year!” His accent told me he was Burundian.

“I had no part in that,” I replied.

Another shoved forward, demanding, “Give us money!”

“It’s in my bedroom.”

Cursing, and tripping over each other, the five pushed their way back into the corridor. I passed between them, and they followed.

I entered my room. Anselm was curled on the floor behind the half-open door. His head was split open, and the wall behind was splashed with his blood. Beside him lay the girls. Aline looked dead, though I saw no wounds. Thérèse’s body quivered and jerked. She was bleeding from deep gashes.

Under my pillow was the wallet that saved Christian and me, containing papers and 170,000 Rwandan francs, about \$400. I gave it to the leader, who lost no time dividing the cash.

“Don’t bother with her,” he scoffed. “Let’s get going!”

“She’s a Tutsi – kill her!” another retorted, raising his machete. But the leader grasped his arm, pulling him out to continue their hunt. The others followed. Christian had remained motionless on my back.

I fainted to the floor.

When I came to, I had a split-second reprieve – thinking I was waking from a nightmare. But the sights and smells were all too real. I felt an instant’s shocked amazement that I was alive. Then my thoughts flew to my four-year-old – where was he?

Charles-Vital was not among the dead and dying. Frantically, I searched the rooms for my child.

Stepping outdoors, I saw my houseboy, Samuel – and at his side stood my son. I swayed and almost collapsed again, from sheer relief at seeing him alive and unhurt.

Samuel, however, gestured madly, crying, “Go back inside! They said they would come back for you. I don’t want to see them kill you!”

April 16

Swiftly passing little Christian to Samuel, I fled back indoors. Leaving my children tore me in two, but they had a better chance with my Hutu houseboy than with me.

I glanced around the apartment, but there was no adequate hiding place. Then I heard Manasseh's urgent whisper from my room, "Denise, here – crawl under the bed!"

It was dark down there. I tried to wedge myself sideways between the concrete floor and mattress board, but there was not enough space. My arm felt wet – and I realized I was lying in my relatives' blood. With the strength of desperation, I squeezed under the bed. I could feel every bone in my trembling body. The baby within kicked in protest.

Oh little one, will you live before you die? If only I could fly like a bird, airlifting my children to safety. . . .

I was breathing blood; its odor filled my mouth and nostrils. Horror, around and within me, was swamping clear thought. How I yearned for Charles, his reassurance, his common sense. What was happening to him? He could swim, I recalled, with my first twinge of hope in hours. Maybe he would escape across Lake Kivu, join my parents in the Congo . . .

Manasseh's back was pressed against mine, and I sensed his terror. He had seen and heard even more than I had. His teeth were chattering, and occasional spasms convulsed his body. Like him, I knew the killers would return. Without doubt they would find us in their macabre game of hide-and-seek, and then . . .

But I mustn't panic, can't let fear paralyze my mind. For my children's sake, I must collect my wits.

Where were my sons now? I had given them to Samuel's care; with his childish ways, he had seemed almost a third son to me, and I had always trusted him with my boys. But in this crazy new world, might even he turn against us?

I was tempted to sneak outdoors, to reunite with my children and escape this trap – but Manasseh insisted that leaving the house would be suicide. Interahamwe were swarming the area like wasps.

“Jesus of Nazareth, help me!”

Thérèse’s voice . . . Oh God, she is still alive! This is terrible . . . What can I do? Death is encircling us, constricting, tightening . . . I feel its breath, hear its hiss.

“Jesus of Nazareth, come help!” Thérèse’s repeated cry turned to a moan, then faded away . . . Silence.

Suddenly I detected a faint jangling sound – or had I imagined it? “What’s that?” I asked in alarm.

“It’s Epa, in the closet,” Manasseh whispered. “They didn’t find him.”

Epa . . . I had forgotten him.

I felt a brief stab of relief that I had refused to shelter Francine – otherwise she and her children too would now be lying, mangled, on my floor.

Hours passed. Darkness came, hiding the ghastly tableau in my home and in countless Tutsi homes throughout our town – and across Rwanda.

With nightfall, Interahamwe took a break from their gruesome labor. I could hear their bragging from the bar across the road. Some were voices I heard every Saturday night; others were strange. With a fresh pang of fear, I recognized the Burundi accent I had heard at noon. Was it the killer I had confronted?

From my awkward position under the bed, I caught fragments of their boasts. Cockroach was the word I heard most: I slit *inyenzi’s* throat . . . cut her in pieces . . . stuck him up on a pole . . . hung him . . . clubbed her to death . . .

Occasionally a snatch of drunken singing reached my ears; RTLM’s catchy hate songs matched the killers’ mood. They must have been consuming immense quantities of beer, but I had no doubt that next day they would be sober enough to carry on.

April 16

They don't drink to work up nerve to kill – they drink to celebrate how systematically they've done it.

One man was so loud, his remarks carried distinctly across the road: “We will exterminate every last cockroach, no matter where they hide! Our children will ask, ‘What’s a Tutsi?’ and we will tell of an extinct tribe, a people of the past!”

The raucous cheers and rough laughter continued hour after hour. Exhausted, I finally dozed off.

I snapped awake. I had heard my name. “. . . Denise Uwimana. Manasseh must be somewhere too. We’ll find them both, no problem. Tomorrow they die!”

Now that I was alert, I realized with dismay that something besides their words had wakened me. My discomfort was more than my strained position; the wetness I felt was more than the blood on the floor. My waters had broken.

Within me, strong steady pressure was building, then receding . . . and again. I had to face the fact that I was in labor – that in a matter of hours, my baby would be born.

Oh little one, you could not have chosen a worse moment in the entire history of the world . . .

With effort, I pulled myself from under the bed and managed to stand upright. The pale bedside clock told me it was three o’clock in the morning.

“Manasseh, help me,” I called. “I need to get out of here!”

I begged him to fetch Marcel, the clinic director living next door. Surely he would come to assist with the birth.

Cautiously Manasseh crept outside, but he returned immediately, whispering, “Denise, I can’t reach Marcel without being seen. There are Interahamwe all around his house.”

Creeping to a window, I saw with shock that all the lights were on in Goretti and Viateur’s half of the next-door duplex, their windows bare of curtains. Their apartment was being ransacked. At that moment, a fellow employee walked out their door, a

mattress balanced on his head. Where were Goretti and Viateur and their three children, Fiston, Kim, and Diane?

I realized Manasseh was right about the danger, and I knew from the militants' words that they were hunting him. Many were his coworkers. If they sighted him, it would be the end.

On Friday—less than two days previous, but seeming eons ago—Manasseh had cut a hole in the fence dividing my backyard from the Chinese employees' property. Since their departure, their grounds were no longer patrolled. We two now crept through this opening to hide in their banana grove.

But this was no place to give birth—outside, in the dark, with no one to help! Then Madame Kibuye sprang to mind, in the other half of my own duplex. She and her husband were Hutu . . . but he was probably outdoors, with all the other Hutu men; perhaps she would have pity. It was a drastic risk, but she was my only hope.

Manasseh and I squeezed back into my backyard. Since the Kibuyes shared our building, there was only a light reed fence separating my yard from theirs, and Manasseh now lifted this partition. Stooping once more, I crept into the Kibuyes' yard and stole to their back door. I gave a sharp rap, then another.

“Who's there?” Madame Kibuye sounded alarmed.

My heart pounding, I identified myself.

“Denise! You're alive? After that racket through the wall?” Her words came fast. “But I can't let you in—Interahamwe would kill me!”

With the last dim hope extinguished, my mind went blank. I could not think. I could not reply. I did not move.

Moments passed. Then the door opened a crack. Madame Kibuye peered out. “Is the baby coming?”

I nodded dumbly. She hesitated a moment longer, then leaned out and yanked me inside.

April 16

“They’re looking for you,” she hissed. “If they find you here, they’ll kill me too!” She pushed me into her guest room, where I dropped to the bed.

During the next hour, Madame Kibuye darted in and out several times, wringing her hands, entreating me to go. I did not respond. My contractions had become insistent, urgent. Holding in my screams took all my willpower.

Around 4:30, I started hearing the unmistakable voices of militants from the street. Madame Kibuye dashed back into the room once more, now almost crazy with fear.

“Get out of my house!” she implored.

“I can’t!” My pains were excruciating, nearing the climax.

Suddenly she grabbed three or four stools, stacking them in the corridor beneath a ceiling trapdoor.

“Quick, hide in the attic!”

I stared at her in disbelief.

“Look at me,” I gasped. “My child is coming!”

Madame Kibuye knew I was right, but she was beside herself, repeating, “They will kill me! They will kill me!”

Through the wall, from my apartment, I heard voices and scraping, dragging sounds; looters had moved in. My neighbors, helping themselves . . . We had gotten out just in time.

Then everything happened fast. Madame Kibuye did her best to help. In a matter of minutes, my baby was born. My physical agony was over.

As if sensing the danger, my newborn son cried just once, to open his lungs – but not long or loud enough to attract the killers, already busy this early Sunday morning.

Madame Kibuye ran out to her kitchen hut and returned with a knife, its blade sticky from trimming banana bunches. Not pausing to clean it, she cut the cord.

“Now go!” she whispered. “Quick!”

I tried to stand. But I was dizzy and had to sit down.

Just then the back door opened, and Manasseh slipped in. With the dawning of day, he had left his scant hiding place among the banana trees. Glancing around, he saw the stacked stools. Like a monkey, he disappeared into the attic.

But what could I do? I could not climb up there with my baby. And from the sounds in the street, I believed the militia would enter any moment.

Then I had an idea. The Kibuyes' apartment mirrored my own. Stumbling into their storeroom, I hid behind the door – pulling it open, as wide as possible, behind me. Crouched behind the partially open door, I nursed my infant to keep him still.

From this cramped position, I could hear Cimerwa's gardener, Harorimana, addressing a crowd outside.

"Who do these children belong to?" he was asking.

My heart skipped a beat as I heard the answering chorus: "Those are Denise Uwimana's boys!"

"Keep an eye on those two," Harorimana commanded. Then he continued, "Has anyone hidden in Kibuye's house?"

"No, no one," came the response.

Seemingly dissatisfied, Harorimana repeated, "Does anybody know if a Tutsi has hidden in this apartment?"

Silence. Then I heard a woman's voice: "I saw Manasseh disappear inside."

In seconds, militia and others forced their way in. They piled past the storeroom, blind to my baby and me behind the door.

From the guest room, someone exclaimed, "What happened here?"

None of the people who had entered seemed able or willing to answer.

The hunt continued. Then came a triumphant whoop. One of the men had noticed the stools stacked beneath the attic trapdoor.

"Somebody climbed up here! Who's up there?"

April 16

“It must be Manasseh!” another yelled. “Manasseh, come down!”
Silence.

A hubbub of disputing voices broke out, interrupted by a terse command: “Everyone out!”

When they had all left the building, a grenade was tossed in. From my hiding place, I saw it hit and bounce across the floor. Shielding my child with my body, I held my breath, waiting for the explosion.

Seconds passed.

Then came a disgusted outburst. “Don’t you even know how to set off a grenade?”

The retort was equally annoyed. “Shut up! Sometimes they don’t work. I’ll try another.”

A second grenade flew through the air and landed with a thud. My eyes were shut tight, as I clutched my son, but I heard its rattle as it rolled toward us. Again I waited, waited . . . but this too was a dud.

People started shouting, some blaming the thrower, others demanding that Manasseh be forcibly taken from the attic.

A strident voice instructed, “Madame Kibuye, don’t let Manasseh escape. We’re getting more equipment.”

I heard the tramp and scuffle of feet, the clamor retreating.

Madame Kibuye appeared immediately at my hiding place. Frantically, she whispered that the crowd had gone but would be back – and she didn’t know what to do with me. I realized she was too distraught to think clearly. It was up to me to forge a plan.

“Can you let me into your kitchen hut?” I asked. “And please, may I have some clean clothes?”

Passing me her shabbiest *kitenge*, she stepped out to make sure the militia and mob were really gone. By the time I was dressed, she was back.

“No one’s watching – all the stragglers are busy looting your apartment. Come!”

She led me quickly out the back door and into her kitchen hut, where she spread a plastic sack over the ashes in the fire pit. “Lie there,” she said.

My baby slept, a picture of peace. But I could not relax, exhausted though I was. Fear kept me on high alert, my ears strained to identify any noise, while tormenting thoughts and images whirled through my mind.

From a crack in the hut’s wall, I could see what was happening in the road; and I helplessly watched the gang return after half an hour, with weapons, ladder, and flashlight, determined to flush my cousin from the attic.

Excited onlookers milled around, including Madame Kibuye and all the Hutu neighbors. Then I noticed a knot of women to one side. They were whispering and glancing toward the kitchen hut. My friend Josephine was among them – except I no longer knew if I had any friends. Abruptly, she left the cluster and walked up to the mayor.

“Denise Uwimana has just had her baby,” Josephine said boldly. “Do not kill her!”

“What? Denise is alive?” He sounded incredulous. Then, inexplicably, he asked a soldier to take me and my newborn to Cimerwa’s clinic around the corner.

Josephine and several others marched up to my hiding place. The kitchen door swung open.

“Come!” the soldier commanded.

I did not know what would happen next. I knew only that I was in their hands, at their mercy. I was too fatigued, physically and mentally, to even think about attempting escape.

Out on the road, I found myself facing a noisy throng of colleagues and neighbors, mingled with outsiders. And in front stood Charles-Vital and Christian, holding Samuel’s hands.

Seeing me the same instant, they called, “Mama, Mama!”

April 16

“Hey,” a stranger suggested, “let’s shoot them in front of their mother!”

“Yes, yes,” others agreed lustily. “Shoot them in front of their mother!”

An argument broke out: Were the boys really mine, or did they belong to Josephine or one of the other Hutu ladies standing around?

A shout diverted their attention. Interahamwe were dragging Manasseh from the Kibuyes’ house. My sons took that moment to dash to my side.

The men were armed with rifles, machetes, axes, hammers, pickaxes, and nail-studded clubs. They made Manasseh remove his watch. Then they told him to take off his shirt. His shaking hands could hardly undo the buttons.

As soon as his shirt and watch had been passed to one killer, another knocked Manasseh to the ground with a cruel cudgel blow. Then, with a swift, practiced stroke, another cut off his head.

Blackness threatened my vision.

Manasseh! You and I played together as kids; you sang with me in the church choir; you walked with Charles to protect him from harm . . . I never dreamed I would see you killed . . .

My legs buckled. Firmly, Josephine took the baby from my arms, while two women grabbed my elbows.

Following the soldier, our group set off toward the health center, about two hundred yards’ walk. Did my children and I stand a chance of survival, I wondered as we stumbled along with our captors, or had our death been merely postponed?

Suddenly half a dozen Interahamwe, some disguised with banana leaves, broke from the brush beside the road. Dusty from the hunt, they yelled exultantly and swung their weapons in grim gestures of victory – for they were pulling Francine, her baby on her back and her older child clutching her hand. The wild band had

ferreted these three from a cassava field and were clearly aching for the kill as they steered Francine toward us.

Francine – your husband begged me to shelter you and your little ones!

The same instant, Celestin appeared along the road from the opposite direction. Broad and muscular, formerly active in MRND, he had left politics and become a confessing Christian.

Confronting the leader of the young militants, he asked, “What are you doing with that woman?”

“We found her and her little cockroaches hiding in a field. Now we’ll execute them, like the others!”

“Why didn’t you kill them in the field?” Celestin demanded.

“We were going to, but when we saw this soldier with these others, we thought . . .”

“You thought nothing at all!” Celestin interrupted. “You can’t kill them here! Leave it to me. Your captives are coming with us.”

His authority must have impressed them. Resentfully, the young men shoved Francine toward us and disappeared into the trees to continue their grisly search.

I was flooded with relief – but just then, I heard a vicious uproar behind us. The horde had discovered seventeen-year-old Epa in my bedroom closet. Shouting that they knew he was Tutsi from the ID card they had found in his shoe, they dragged him into the street.

I pressed my children’s faces against myself. I could not bear for them to see Epa beheaded.

THIS IS ONLY a tiny window into the genocide against the Tutsi, a few hours from one personal perspective.

How could ordinary people veer from a normal life – looking for work, studying at college, or earning a living – to butchering others?

I can only answer that demons from hell were unleashed like seething lava over our land. Not the comic-scary hobgoblins of my

April 16

mother's legends, but cosmic forces before which human beings are dust specks in a volcanic explosion.

That's not to say that individuals don't count. I believe that each one murdered was welcomed into the next world, just as I believe that each who survived was saved for a reason.

We who lived faced a harsher task; I often felt death would have been preferable. How hard it has been, through grueling years: to overcome the loss, battle to forgive, and then bring healing to others – yes, even to killers. They too were specks of dust.

In the West, many people scoff at the idea of invisible spiritual powers. I'm sure some of these skeptics would acknowledge the reality of such powers, however, if they had been caught in a firestorm like ours. United Nations general Roméo Dallaire wrote, "In Rwanda I shook hands with the devil. I have seen him, I have smelled him, and I have touched him. I know the devil exists, and therefore I know there is a God."

I believe each of us plays a role in this spiritual war, and each soul decides to serve life or death. There is no neutral. Death had a grip on Rwanda in 1994, but it has a grip in other places, too, and has other weapons besides machetes and grenades.

Also, although a plummeting plane ignited our inferno, the tinder had been accumulating a long time: division, envy, hatred, and the labeling of Tutsi as vermin. For the rest of my life, I will protest the least insinuation that any person or group of people is less than human.



Charles and me on our wedding day, December 26, 1987



Visiting my parents in the Congo, August 1993. This is the only photo I have showing me (left), Charles (third from left), and our two young sons (front row).

This is a preview. Get the entire book here.



Charles' mother and father (third and fifth from left) received a cow as dowry at the wedding of their daughter Bellancille in August 1992. Charles is at the far right.

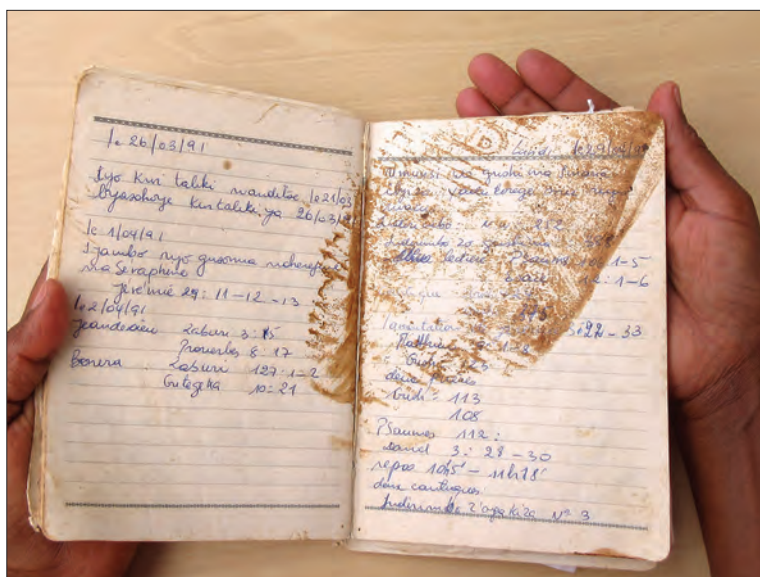


My paternal grandparents, Ephraim and Damaris, with family. Of the people in this photo only Uncle Eli (in black jacket) and his wife, Judith, (in pink blouse) survived.

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The house to the left is where we lived at the time of the genocide. This is the hole in the fence that I crawled through on April 16.



I found my journal with a footprint in dried blood.

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Cimerwa Health Center, where we found refuge during the genocide



At the Gisozi memorial where Drocella's and Goretti's husbands are buried. With me are Goretti, Ruth, Mapendo, Pascasie, and other Bugarama survivors.

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Charles-Vital, Petit, and Christian with me, October 1994

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I was presented with a lamp when I left Bugarama, January 1999



Survivors live with the effects of the genocide. Rukundo, whose arm was cut off when she was a baby, lost her parents and all her relatives.

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Sisterhood: Beata, me, and Drocella, 2018



Lautharie

This is a preview. Get the entire book here.



Jeanne, a Solace coworker, lost her husband and five children in the genocide.

This is a preview. Get the entire book here.



Antoine Rutayisire



A cow given to a former-Tutsi widow had a calf. Now Drocella is giving the calf to a former-Hutu woman.

This is a preview. Get the entire book here.



Dancing for joy



Peacemaker women of Shalom Ministries – women work side by side to prepare earth for planting.

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Theresie (right), and another Mukoma mother show me the site where seventy-three baby boys were massacred.



Visiting Gaudence, who lost eight of nine children, and her granddaughter in Mukoma, 2018

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Comforting a Mukoma widow on a home visit

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Outside the makeshift tent the Mukoma widows built for their gatherings,
August 2011



With my mother-in-law, Consoletia

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Learning love instead of hate – children at the Iriba Shalom center in Mukoma



At the opening ceremony for the Iriba Shalom center, in background, Consoletia and four other widows received a cow, August 2018.

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Cancelde, left, and others who have forgiven their families' killers, April 2015



With Cancelde, Emmanuel, and Wolfgang, August 2015

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Mukoma widows and orphans build a house for a widow.



Children of reconciliation, Mukoma.

This is a preview. Get the entire book here.

